Crimson Rivers

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Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Categories:	M/M, Other
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Regulus Black/James Potter, Sirius Black/Remus Lupin, Minor or Background Relationship(s)
Characters:	Regulus Black, James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Marlene McKinnon, Dorcas Meadowes, Pandora Lovegood, Bartemius Crouch Jr., Fabian Prewett, Gideon Prewett (Harry Potter), Peter Pettigrew, Evan Rosier, Euphemia Potter, Fleamont Potter, Mary Macdonald, Tom Riddle, Albus Dumbledore, Horace Slughorn, Minerva McGonagall, Lily Evans, various OCs, some others im probably forgetting to list
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Hunger Games Setting, Murder, injuries, Descriptions of Blood, Heavy Themes about Death, Minor Character Death, People will die be warned, its a hunger games au so there's really no way around that sorry, but rest assured that no one who gets a POV will die, Mentor Sirius Black, James and Regulus as Tributes, Romance despite all the angst, Complex Family Dynamics, Complex Friendship Dynamics, Complex...Everything pretty much, this is going to be a long one and a lot happens so i can't possibly tag it all, But overall, Angst, Jealousy, Death, depictions of mental illness, depictions of ptsd, Flirting, Fluff, Humor, sometimes Dark Humor, Falling In Love, Hurt/Comfort, Angst with a Happy Ending, good friendships, good family dynamics, basically you're gonna suffer but you'll be happy about it, Semi-Explicit sexual content, depictions of war, Depictions of grief, heavy uses of foreshadowing, repeated use of metaphors (i will beat you over the head with them), medical and technological inaccuracies (we're blaming it on hp world stuff shhh go with it), i just needed to update these tags, more in depth warnings for each chapter still used i promise, i took some tags away bc they got so long but they still apply!, victory but in a pyrrhic victory type of way, Do Not Re-upload or Repost Anywhere
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Crimson Rivers

by bizarrestars

Summary

Regulus Black was fifteen the first time his name was called at a reaping. He's twenty-five when it happens to him again. A lot has changed in that time, and one of them is that he's ready to do whatever it takes to make it home. Nothing or no one will stop him, not even James Potter.

James Potter has no plans to stop Regulus Black from making it home. In fact, his plans revolve around the opposite. He has his reasons, but he's made his choice to get Regulus out of the arena, even knowing it'll be the last thing he ever does.

Sirius Black was sixteen when he volunteered to take his little brother's place in the arena. At twenty-six, without the option to do it again, he has no choice but to be a mentor to his brother and best friend, knowing that only one of them can make it back out.

Two names called, a mentor on the verge of falling apart, and more secrets and grief between all of them than they know how to handle. None of them are prepared for what comes next, or how far they'll go to make it through.

Notes

Alright, so this one is going to be heavy, and long. You're gonna want to strap in for this one. So, let's get into it.

Firstly, you don't technically need to have read the Hunger Games trilogy, or watched the movies, to be able to read this. There are some similarities, but I've changed a lot of things. If you have read or watched it, then you'll see the similarities and differences with ease; if not, then it won't really change much for you.

To be clear, I haven't read the books in years, and it's been a while since I watched the movies myself, so it won't exactly be the same. I basically just took the plot and loosely used it for these characters and their dynamics. For example, I can't remember the exact ages for people being reaped in the books, but in this fic, it's set between thirteen and twenty-five. Another thing is, it's not divided up by gender, and I have gender neutral characters in this as well. Men, women, and anyone of any gender can be (and are) reaped.

In this, Sirius is a mentor because he's already been to the arena. Because we see his POV, we see how this affected him, dealing with things such as PTSD, mental illness, and references to past addiction.

This fic deals with themes of death in every way there is to depict it, up to and including murder (referenced and described), suicide (referenced and described), mercy killing (referenced and described), and just as a background part of the story because of, ya know, the whole thing where people are thrown into an arena and forced to kill each other.

There's also in-depth explorations of power dynamics, grief, and complicated relationships. This fic can get dark and heavy at times, and it will, but I will always provide proper warnings to the best of my abilities for every chapter. However, that being said, there are a lot of light and fluffy moments, as well as a lot of humor, despite the setting. And this fic WILL have a happy ending, because I really can't write anything else.

I didn't tag for Major Character Death because no character that gets a POV will die. I DID tag for Minor Character Death because people will, in fact, die in this fic. Characters that you will recognize, and probably some that you'll even like, and even those that you won't like. Not everyone will die, obviously, but not everyone will survive either.

This fic isn't for everyone, and that's okay. Absolutely do not read it if you're expecting a happy story from start to finish. I have a happy, long fic with queer characters and no death, but this isn't going to be that. This will be angsty, and complicated, and there will be gallows humor that not everyone will be comfortable with, as well as rough relationships and harsh realities paired with this setting. It gets brutal at times, so just be warned and prepared for that. Take care of yourselves first and foremost.

Warnings for this first chapter: references to death, references to murder, references to child abuse (yeah, Walburga and Orion are shit in any universe), a very brief reference to suicide (blink and you miss it), references to addiction, and plenty of angst.

If it's any comfort to you at all, this chapter has Regulus, James, and Sirius POV, so at least you know they won't be dying. Hope that helps!

Enjoy???

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See the end of the work for more notes

Misfortune

The 84th annual reaping is supposed to be Regulus' last.

He's twenty-five, and he'll be twenty-six before the next, which means he'll age out. His birthday takes place two days before the reaping each year, so he has a rather fortunate stroke of luck in that regard.

James Potter doesn't, as it turns out. He's only two months away from twenty-six, and if only he was born just a few months earlier, he could have escaped his fate.

His name is the first that's called, and Regulus can't stop himself from looking through the crowd to watch James slowly push out into the open. His parents are quietly weeping. A lump forms in Regulus' throat as he drags his gaze from James to the stage, where Sirius is already standing, his jaw clenched as he nods at James when he climbs the steps up.

There is no doubt in Regulus' mind that Sirius is going to do everything in his power to make sure James survives the arena. He'll beg, borrow, and steal; he'll teach James everything he needs to know; he'll be the best mentor their district has ever seen, and he'll get his best friend home. Whoever the other tribute turns out to be, Regulus preemptively feels sorry for them, because there is no life Sirius will put above James'.

"Regulus Black!"

That's the second time Regulus has heard his name called at a reaping—and here he was, daring to think he was lucky.

The first time he heard it, he was fifteen, only just, and he'd felt his whole body go cold as soon as he did. He hadn't even moved at first, too terrified to, unable to fathom how it had happened to him. It had to happen to someone, but no one ever thinks it's going to be them, until it is.

Regulus had gotten two steps out of the line when Sirius burst out and volunteered in his stead, only sixteen and ready to throw himself on the pyre so Regulus wouldn't have to.

Sirius had gone to the arena, and Regulus didn't think he was going to come home. He watched, day after day, as his brother fought for his life. He watched, day after day, as Sirius ran, starved, and murdered just to make it back. He watched, on that last day, as Sirius broke down when he was announced the Victor, laughing like a madman on the screens.

He was never the same after that.

Ten years later, and it's happening again. There is no one to volunteer in his stead this time, because Sirius is a Victor, and he can't. No one else would, and maybe even if he could, all these years later, neither would Sirius.

Regulus—just like last time—finds himself frozen, a horrible dread crawling through his veins like ice. The only thought he has is *why, why me, why this?* Whispers break out through the entire courtyard, and Regulus knows the reason behind it, what they're all saying. It's no secret that James is Sirius' best friend, and no one could ever forget that Regulus is his little brother. Oh, they're going to love this in the Hallow.

Next to him, Barty nudges his shoulder, looking at him with his lips pressed into a thin line, and so Regulus moves. He forces himself to, putting one foot in front of the other, feeling untethered from his body as he makes his way to the stage. As he climbs the steps, his gaze lifts to meet Sirius', and Sirius looks back for all of five seconds before his eyes sink shut, like if he's not looking, then it's not real.

Regulus wishes it was that simple.

It isn't.

He looks away from his brother, and he finds his gaze crawling to James next. For a long moment, they just stare at each other, and then they both look away all at once.

~•~

James is pretty sure he's about to throw up. The only reason he doesn't, he thinks, is because his parents are here. Despite all of this, Effie's hands cradling his face grounds him.

"Oh, love," Effie whispers, her mouth twisting.

"Mum," James croaks, his eyes stinging. He drinks the sight of her in, as well as his dad, darting his gaze between them both. He's never going to see them again, after this.

Effie swallows harshly. "Don't look like that, James. You can win. Do you understand? You can."

She would know. As the winner of the 44th hunger games forty years ago, at the age of a mere thirteen years old, she *would* know. It was her first reaping, one slip in the bowl, and no one thought she would survive—but she did. She doesn't talk about it, she never talks about it, and Sirius knows more about it than James does. Effie was his mentor, after all, and she helped him get home. And then, when he was eighteen, her duties as a mentor could be over, if Sirius stepped up to take her place, which he did.

James has lived in the Victor's Village his entire life, and Sirius has been his best friend since he was eleven, when he snuck over the wall behind the village and tumbled down an incline, right into Sirius. They had seen each before, of course, from afar, but they lived different lives at the time. James had personal tutors—a perk of being in the Victor's Village—and Sirius went to school. When they properly met, the first thing they did as children was fight (because they both snuck out and thought the other would get them in trouble), and less than twenty minutes later, they promised to be best friends forever—and it's a promise neither of them have broken.

When Sirius volunteered for Regulus at only sixteen years old, James had felt like something in him shriveled and broke off, never to be found again. He remembers that, remembers fighting so hard to see Sirius before he left, and he only got a few seconds to hug him before he was being dragged away, right out of James' arms. The last thing Sirius had said to him was a plea. *Take care of Regulus, James, please,* he'd begged.

James tried to, but Regulus was a hard person to take care of then at fifteen, and still is at twenty-five, James presumes. He's not sure what it is, but Regulus stopped liking him at fifteen. James didn't need him to like him, not to look after him, but Regulus dodged him at every turn. He took care of himself, mostly, no matter how much James tried. Really, there was only so much James could do. The only time Regulus didn't avoid him was the days they gathered together in the courtyard to watch Sirius in the arena. Just once, James remembers that Regulus had reached out to grab his hand, clinging to it as they both watched Sirius get attacked and then brutally murder his attacker.

When Sirius and his family moved into the Victor's Village after he returned from the arena, sixteen years old with war in his bones and ghosts in his eyes, James was the one who took care of him. Certainly not his parents, who have only ever been neglectful and abusive. Regulus—well, he couldn't take care of Sirius. It wasn't that simple. Sirius wasn't the same as he was before he went into the arena, and it was James who was talking him through the hallucinations; it was James who got him to laugh for the first time after he made it home; it was James who made sure he ate, who pulled him back from the brink of addiction, who held him when he was falling apart.

James is his best friend, and he made a promise, and that's only part of the reason he looks at his mother and smiles sadly before whispering, "I'm not coming home, Mum."

"James," Monty says gruffly, his eyes shining. James' dad is a quiet man, despite his stature. A gentle giant, Effie has always called him, when she's not calling him *Flea* to tease him, purely for the irony. Fleas are tiny; Fleamont Potter is the opposite. He's a simple man, overall, a homebody and a scholar, happy to be with his family, a loving husband, and the best dad James could ask for. He looks heartbroken. "Son, don't—don't say that. If you fight —"

"I'll fight," James cuts in quietly. "I will fight. But, when it's the end, and it's me and him… I won't fight him."

Effie's eyes sink shut, her lips trembling before she tucks them in and ducks her head. She slides her hands from his cheeks to grip his shoulders, squeezing them. A horrible sound escapes her throat, and she sounds broken as she whispers, *"Please."*

"I'm sorry," James breathes out, swallowing harshly. Monty looks away, his jaw working as his tears fall. A shuddering breath leaves Effie, and she lifts her head to stare at him, her face

sagging with sadness. James tries for a smile, but it trembles on his face. "Mum, Dad, I'm sorry. I can't do it. I won't do that to Sirius. I'm going to make sure Regulus gets out. That's what I'm going to be fighting to do."

"There are—countless ways to die in the arena, James," Effie says hoarsely. "You want to fight to get Regulus out? Fine, but if—just *if* he doesn't make it, if something happens, you fight with everything you have in you to get home, do you understand? Your heart—you have such a big heart, so full of love, and I never want you to lose that, but in there? You can't let that get in the way of your survival."

James nods tentatively. "Alright, Mum. Alright, but that's not going to happen, because I'm getting him out, even if it kills me." He pauses, then cracks a weak smile. "Well, it will kill me, actually, so really—"

"James, don't make jokes right now," Monty cuts in.

"This is how I want you to remember me," James whispers, and they stare at him, stricken. "This, right here, because what happens in there, before I'm gone… That's not what I want you to remember. Would it be too much to ask to not watch?"

"Yes," Effie says firmly. "You're our son, James. There is nothing you could do in that arena that would change how we see you, or how much we love you. We—we love you so much."

"I love you too, Mum. I love both of you," James rasps, feeling like he hasn't explained enough, like his words are inadequate to properly express how grateful he is to have them.

Effie draws him into a tight hug, and Monty moves over to wrap his arms around them both, and James closes his eyes and lets his parents hold him. Most people don't know when they'll get to hug their parents for the last time.

James does.

~•~

Sirius paces back and forth, listening to the quiet murmurs of his parents through the door. He can't hear Regulus respond, which means he isn't. Sirius can guess what their parents are saying without having to hear it, just clipped orders to come home, or not die a death that shames the family. No different than they told Sirius ten years ago.

Sirius came home, after doing shameful things to get back, things that still live under his fingernails and behind his eyelids to this day. He didn't die a death to shame the family, but since coming back, he's lived a life that sure has.

Well, that's how his parents see it, in any case. Sometimes it's hard coming from an extended family of Victors, only more so when you're a Victor yourself. Sirius finds it ridiculous, really, because it's not as if Walburga or Orion have ever been to the arena. Just Alphard, Cygnus, Bellatrix, and Narcissa—all who were Victors. Alphard hadn't handled the aftermath of the arena well and made many public scenes before eventually, essentially killing himself on booze and bad health. Cygnus had handled it well and raised three daughters who would too, if they ever found themselves in that situation. And, when Bellatrix and Narcissa did, they proved it.

After her games, Narcissa went off to marry someone in the first district, closest to the Hallow. Being a Victor, she could, and she could also take her sisters with her when she went. Bellatrix left with her, but Andromeda did not. She stayed behind to settle down with a man named Ted, who the family didn't approve of at all. She's estranged from the family now, but not Sirius, who is always sneaking off to go see her and little Nymphadora, the cutest baby he's ever met. Walburga and Orion gave up on Sirius years ago now, and they haven't spoken to him or acknowledged him for a long time, despite happily using the benefits they get because he's a Victor. They still control Regulus, though, so they forbid him from seeing Andromeda, and Regulus listens.

Of course Regulus listens, because if he doesn't, it never ends well. Sirius can understand that, even if it drives him mental, because *he* never listened. Expecting the same out of Regulus is pointless. Regulus only does what he's willing to do.

It's going to get him killed.

Sirius' stomach twists. He remembers when he volunteered for his little brother, the first person to volunteer in decades, at least in their district. He had to, though, because as soon as he heard Regulus' name called, he knew his little brother would die. Regulus—at that age—would never survive the arena.

Frankly, Sirius wasn't sure *he* would survive the arena, but he did. Sometimes he wishes he hadn't. Sometimes he hates Regulus for being someone he loves so much that he would go for him. But never—not once—has Sirius regretted it. He will never regret saving his little brother's life.

This feels like being spit in the face. Like he was just putting off the inevitable. Because here Regulus is, his name still echoing in Sirius' ears, and Sirius can't save him this time.

And then there's James.

Just thinking about it makes Sirius' stomach lurch. His best friend. Fuck, his *best friend* is going to the arena, too, and Sirius can't take his place either. James is—he's Sirius' whole world, honestly. Without him, Sirius wouldn't be alive right now. Without him, Sirius wouldn't know what to do.

James is going into the arena with Regulus. How is that fair? What does Sirius even do with that? It makes him want to scream, to bang against the walls of some inner enclosure, to collide his fist into whatever is closest until his mind is quiet. He can't do this. He can't—he doesn't know how he's going to do this. He doesn't have a fucking choice.

Sirius is meant to train them. To prepare them. To teach them. He's meant to give them every trick, tip, and tool to survive, then watch them go face down death. Sirius has never brought a tribute home, not once in the last eight years, and now his little brother and best friend are going to be looking to him for help. He doesn't know how to tell them that there's no help for them, that really, at the end of the day, it comes down to a person's desperate need to survive.

He can put weapons in their hands, teach them how to keep from dying of dehydration or starvation, make them memorize poisonous plants, and give them the general do's and do not's to better their chances—but the truth is, they'll only survive if they want to badly enough. Sirius won his games by strangling a man to death with his bare hands—not his first kill, or even his most gruesome—but he was starved out of his mind, halfway dead from

dehydration, and bleeding out. The man had a knife, and Sirius had a stab wound. The man had the upper hand, and Sirius had the will to survive.

The man should have lived, and Sirius made sure he didn't.

It's strange, because Sirius thinks—and has always thought, since winning—that dying in the arena is a kindness, really. But that was before people he loved became tributes. Maybe it's selfish, because whether it's a kindness or not, he wants them both to survive anyway, and they can't. Not both.

This is like trying to ask Sirius to choose between his heart and his lungs. The heart stops beating if the lungs won't work, and the lungs won't work if the heart stops beating. They have to coexist; he can't survive the loss of either.

The door opens up as Walburga and Orion step out, and they both pause to look at him for a moment as he wrenches to a halt. All his mother says is an order, "Bring him home."

With that, and nothing else, they leave.

Taking a deep breath, Sirius moves forward and slips through the door, his heart clenching when he sees Regulus. He looks so small, despite being twenty-five, but maybe that's because Sirius is looking at him and seeing him as he was when he was only fifteen. Just his little brother. Always his little brother.

They don't talk the way they used to. They're too different, and at the same time, too much alike. Sirius has been through too much, and Regulus has distanced himself. Regulus is still in that house with their overbearing parents, and maybe they don't beat either of them now that they're older, but that doesn't mean their parenting has improved. Sirius hasn't been back home since he was sixteen, since he properly left and moved in with the Potters just up the street. He'd asked Regulus to come with him once. Regulus refused.

"I have the worst luck," Regulus declares dryly, and Sirius stares at him for a long moment before huffing out a weak laugh and shutting the door. To anyone else, Regulus would likely look unruffled, just vaguely annoyed, but Sirius can see the fear flickering dimly in his eyes.

He's trying to cover it, but Sirius has seen too much of that in his life to miss it now, no matter how distant they are. "I mean, I'm literally the only person in the world who has been reaped twice."

"Yeah, that's just shit," Sirius admits. He leans back against the door and lets his head hit it with a dull thunk.

Silence falls between them, heavy and thick. Sirius remembers when it was him as a tribute. Regulus had waited until they were alone before holding onto him and crying, begging him not to go, *begging* him to come back. Sirius remembers when he did come back, and everything felt—warped. The entire world was, and he thinks Regulus may have hugged him again when he returned, but he can't remember that. His memories are like a kaleidoscope, just fractured light, sometimes impossible to make out, and always shifting.

The memories set before the arena are faint, and they feel like something directly from another life. The memories set right after the arena, even a year after, are like wisps; he can barely make them out, and he doesn't know what's there. That's an entire year of his life, at least, that he can't even recall. If not for James, he likely would have lived that way forever.

The thing is, Sirius went into the arena and fought so hard to come home, completely unaware of what he would be bringing back with him when did. You bring pieces of the arena with you if you live long enough to get out, and those pieces still stay with Sirius to this day. James or Regulus will understand that, if they survive. One or the other, but it can't be both.

Sirius doesn't know how he's supposed to live with that.

"Have you been to see James?" Regulus murmurs. His voice it quiet, stilted with some unspoken tension. Most likely has something to do with James, if Sirius had to guess. There was a time, years ago, when Regulus didn't despise James, but Sirius can't really remember it. Not fully. Not completely. That tenderness has been fractured by time, too.

"He's with his parents," Sirius replies, blinking at some fixed point over Regulus' shoulder. "I wanted to give them time."

Regulus scoffs. "So you came to see me first. What an honor."

"Don't," Sirius says firmly, snapping his gaze to Regulus, meeting his eyes. "Don't do that, Regulus. Your resentment, your bitterness, whatever it is—that can't matter anymore, do you understand? There's no space for anything else but your will to survive. Listen to me—no, shut up." Regulus' mouth snaps shut from where he started to speak, to protest no doubt, but Sirius has never been more serious in his fucking life. "You leave all of that here. Anything that could make you falter, that could get in the way of your survival, you let it go right here and now. It can't exist in the games."

"The games haven't started yet," Regulus whispers.

"The games started the moment your name was called, and they don't end until you're dead," Sirius corrects bluntly.

"Do you think I'm going to die?" Regulus asks.

Sirius' breath catches, his heart clenching violently in his chest at the mere *thought.* Regulus holds his gaze steadily, waiting, and Sirius doesn't know. He doesn't know if his little brother is going to die. He doesn't know if his best friend is going to die. He doesn't know how he's going to try to help them survive, knowing only one will.

Exhaling shakily, Sirius can only say, "You have a one in twenty-four chance, Regulus."

"Your best friend is one of those twenty-four," Regulus reminds him. "Are you going to ask me not to kill him?" He waits again, but Sirius doesn't know how to answer that. He doesn't know what he's doing. "Because I will, if I have to. I'm not going to spare his life and sacrifice my own just because he matters to you. I might not go out of my way to kill him, but if that's what it comes to, Sirius, I won't hesitate."

And, if it were anyone else other than James, Sirius would be relieved to hear that, to know that Regulus plans to fight to survive. But it is James, so Sirius' lungs feel like they're being *squeezed,* and dread sinks down in his stomach like lead.

"Are you planning on coming home, Reggie?" Sirius rasps.

"Yes," Regulus says firmly.

"Well," Sirius whispers, working his jaw, then he gives a tight nod and reaches for the door, "I suppose I should go see him, then, since you're so willing to send him to his grave."

"Are you willing to send me to mine, for him?" Regulus retorts sharply, a muscle in his cheek twitching as he clenches his jaw. His eyes are cold. They always are, these days.

Sirius turns around, opens the door, and walks out.

James isn't too far away, and Sirius arrives just as Effie and Monty are being escorted out. They've both been crying profusely, that much is obvious, and Sirius wants to go to them, call out for their attention, and find some way to make this better. He can't, though, so he stays back, letting them sweep away without noticing him.

As soon as James looks up to see Sirius, he moves forward to snatch him into a hug. It takes everything in Sirius not to break down crying, but he refuses, because it's not him about to be thrown into the arena—just two of the people he loves most in this world. James holds onto him like he'll never get another chance, and Sirius… Sirius knows what that means.

"No," Sirius croaks as he backs away, as if he's been stung. He shakes his head, unwilling to face it. "No, James, don't you fucking dare. Don't—"

"Stop," James cuts in gently, reaching out to grab his shoulders and meet his gaze. "It's not up for debate, Sirius. I'm going to get him home, do you understand?"

Sirius hears the whimper that falls out of his mouth, and the worst part is, this isn't even all that surprising. Of course James would do this. *Of course* he would, because he's selfless and

golden, because he's *good.* Not necessarily out of the kindness of his heart—even if there's plenty in there—but just because he knows what he will and won't be able to live with. His morals, his sense of what's right—he'll die for them.

In the arena, there is no sense of what's right, or morals. It's survival, and that's it. You have to do what it takes to survive, even when what it takes is the worst thing you can imagine. One split second of hesitation because you want to be good is how you die in the arena. Good doesn't exist there, and if it tries to, it's quickly snuffed out. James isn't—he isn't cut out for things like that. He's bright and loving, despite this shithole of a world, and he cares about things and people more than anyone Sirius has ever known.

That's going to get him killed.

Helplessly, Sirius thinks about the difference between James and Regulus, how one didn't hesitate to tell him that he wouldn't sacrifice himself, while the other didn't hesitate to tell him the exact opposite. Sirius can't stomach it.

"James," Sirius chokes out.

"I said it wasn't a debate, and don't—" James takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "He's your little brother."

"You're my best friend."

"Exactly. It's one of the reasons I've made this decision."

Sirius flinches. "You can't—"

"I said *one,"* James interrupts, holding his gaze. "Just one among many, Sirius. This isn't on you, alright? And we're not going to talk about it. You're going to get me ready, and I'm going to go in there and get Regulus home, and that's it. Don't for a second think I'll regret this. It's

my choice, and you're going to respect it, do you understand? That's all I'm asking you to do. Just respect it."

I can't, Sirius thinks. *Thank you,* Sirius thinks. *I want both of you to come home,* Sirius thinks. *I don't know how I'm supposed to do this,* Sirius thinks. And, in the end, Sirius says nothing.

James pulls him back into a hug until, for the second time in a role-reversal Sirius could have never prepared himself for, he's being yanked right out of James' arms.

The Hallow

Chapter Notes

hello again!

warnings for this chapter: general themes and topics of death (considering the whole arena thing), references to torture, and im pretty sure that's it. this chapter is fairly mild and mostly just character introductions. you're about to see some familiar faces ;)

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Well, at least there are perks," James says with faux cheer, reaching out to pluck a tiny lemon tart off the table that's full of food that's surely exquisite.

Regulus resists the urge to roll his eyes. Of course James would try to look on the bright side. He's so annoyingly positive, Regulus hates him. He's hated him for years.

Not all of them, admittedly, but years nonetheless.

Sirius looks tired. He's not eating, and neither is Regulus. The train continues on, and the only one who has spoken is James. Regulus looks at him and wonders how he can manage to act like things are fine. Does he look at Regulus and wonder if he'll have to kill him, the way Regulus looks at him and wonders if he even can? Nothing about this is fine.

"No, really, you have to have one of these," James declares with his mouth full, eyes wide as he waves the tart at them.

"Well, this is all very...somber," Pandora says as she comes sweeping into the train car, her lips pursing. She's a Hallow through and through, her eccentric style loud and dramatic. Her voice, despite being the one to call his name at the reaping—the reaper, if you will—is very soothing.

Regulus leans back in his chair and says, flatly, "Well, death is a somber subject, generally, except to the Hallows, I suppose. James and I are going to be knocking on death's door soon enough, so you'll forgive us for being a bit...maudlin."

"Death is a somber subject to us, too," Pandora tells him with a frown, her eyebrows tugging together, clearly affronted by the insinuation that it's not.

"Oh, how shocking," Regulus replies, tilting his head in mock confusion. "I thought you Hallows thrived on that sort of thing, but only when it's people like us, right?"

Pandora presses her lips into a thin line, looking ridiculously hurt, and Regulus doesn't regret it. She sniffs in offense and narrows her eyes at him. "You know, with your attitude, I don't really expect you to get many sponsors, Regulus."

"Well, that's more Sirius' job than mine," Regulus mutters.

"You have to give me something to work with, Reg," Sirius says wearily, his gaze fixed on the window as he watches the world outside whip past them. "I can't present something to the sponsors if you won't give them something to like."

"I don't really care," Regulus admits, because he doesn't.

Sirius' gaze snaps over to him. "You need to care. Sponsors can save your life in the arena. I would be dead if it wasn't for the sponsors I had and Effie's brilliant management of them, but I was charismatic. You…" Sirius makes a face, and Regulus scowls. Sirius snaps his fingers and points at James. "Now, him? It'll be easy to get sponsors for him. He's charming, he's kind, he knows how to make people like him. It'll be like taking candy from a baby. But *you?* I mean, you never smile, and you're just—you're really fucking mean, and grumpy, and miserable. People aren't going to like that."

"So, what I'm hearing is, to get sponsors, I'm not allowed to be...myself?" Regulus asks in disbelief.

"Yes, exactly," Sirius replies promptly, the prick. "Be like James."

Regulus glares at him. "I'm *nothing* like James."

"Yes, as we've established, which is the problem," Sirius tells him, utterly oblivious to the way those words are a knife sinking into Regulus' gut. Regulus knows that already. Regulus has known that for a long time.

"I think—I don't know," James mumbles, looking down at the plate of tarts. "I mean, *I* would sponsor him."

"You would sponsor everyone," Sirius says, heaving a sigh. He tips his head towards Regulus. "Even the least desirable ones."

"Oh, and *James* is desirable?" Regulus retorts sardonically.

James plants his elbow on the table and leans closer to Regulus, lips curling up. "Are you claiming I'm not? You wouldn't say I'm desirable?"

"I'd say the only desire I feel is for you to go away," Regulus tells him, arching an eyebrow.

"Well, that's not very nice."

"As we've just established, I'm not a very nice person."

"That's not a very desirable trait, you know," James says.

Regulus hums. "And yet, you'd sponsor me."

"Yes, well, I'm biased," James murmurs, lazily reaching down to pluck up another tart, holding it out to Regulus. "Here. It's sour and bitter, just like you."

Regulus takes the tart, then—without looking—flicks his wrist and lobs it directly at Sirius' head. By the yelp that follows, his aim is still true. James proceeds to bust out laughing so hard that he's wheezing, and even Pandora releases a giggle as Sirius starts complaining about the tart getting in his hair.

For one moment, the inevitability of what's ahead doesn't feel so crushing, and Regulus would like to exist here forever. It's a childish notion, wanting to wrap himself up in one moment and hide away from the world, but he can't shake the urge.

It shakes him, though, because James' laughter fades as he looks out the window with a quiet, "Shit, look at that."

Following his gaze, Regulus can see the Hallow coming into view over the hill as they rise on the tracks, so much closer than he was prepared for it to be. It's a fortress, frankly. A city, yes, but an impenetrable one nonetheless. At the center, the largest building is a castle, rising high above every other building with slanted rooftops and towers that come to a point. James slowly stands up and approaches the window to stare in wonder, but Regulus refuses to be moved.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Pandora murmurs.

It is, but Regulus would rather bite his tongue off than admit that. He's never felt it so starkly before, the utter misfortune of not being born in the Hallow, but it strikes him now just how genuinely unfortunate it is. Anyone born inside the Hallow is protected, forever safe, never living in fear of being always so close to impending doom or under the Hallow's control, at least not so obviously. His eyes crawl to Sirius.

Sirius is looking at the Hallow with a bitter twist to his lips, a haunted echo of the past flashing in his eyes. The most beautiful place anyone has ever seen, and Sirius looks at it as if

it's made from evil. Regulus is and has always been influenced by his brother, no matter how much he's fought that instinct, but it's no use, especially not here and now. Just from that, from the look in Sirius' eyes, Regulus doesn't trust it. He comforts himself with the fact that he wouldn't have either way, but Sirius' reaction does cement the feeling.

"Oh!" James blurts out, surprised, and Regulus swivels his head to see that the train has slowed down quite a bit and there are people outside it, running along it, screaming and cheering like new celebrities are being brought in.

They're all Hallows, there's no denying that. The sheer disconnect from the underlying horror of all this is the real finalizing factor on that, but it's the odd mixture of styles that mostly gives it away. People in cloaks, robes, strange hats, gaudy colors—it's all enough to make Regulus' stomach churn. The smiles and muffled shouts of praise only makes that sensation worse, and Regulus resists the urge to snap at James to come sit down, especially when he starts *waving at them.*

"Don't look so agitated," Sirius murmurs, his expression smoothed out as Regulus meets his eyes. He inclines his head towards James. "The games are on, remember? And it looks like he knows how to play."

"I don't want to play this part," Regulus grits out.

"Then die," Sirius replies.

Regulus grinds his teeth, but Sirius doesn't waver, not one bit. Finally, with a harsh exhale through his nose, Regulus shoves his chair back and moves over to approach the window next to James with his arms crossed. No matter how he tries, he can't get his expression to fix into something even vaguely open and warm, only just managing to make his face blank.

"How can you stand yourself, doing that?" Regulus asks quietly, flicking his gaze to James.

"They don't know," James replies, his smile never faltering as he waves like he's eager to make new friends. "Just as we've been conditioned, so have they, Regulus. It's not really their fault, if you think about it. They didn't make the games."

"They watch them. They love them."

"Yes, just as they were taught to. Just as we watch them. Just as we were taught to dread them."

Regulus shakes his head. "How can you care about them? Even *them?* They'll love us, then weep when we die, then forget we ever existed when the next comes along."

"Well, if the goal is to not die, then there's not much of a problem, is there?" James asks lightly, briefly glancing at him.

"Is that your goal, then?"

"Isn't that everyone's?"

"Do you expect to live to the end?" Regulus murmurs.

James just keeps waving as he says, "I intend to."

"I have unfortunate news for you," Regulus informs him, keeping his voice low as he turns his gaze back to the crowds they go past. "You're not going to make it to the end, even if it's by my hand, James. No matter how important to Sirius you are, I'll do what needs to be done."

"Oh, will you?" James says, his hand pressing up against the glass as he gives up all pretense and turns his head to look directly at Regulus. There's a sparkle in his eyes, and his grin doesn't fade even in an inch. If anything, Regulus can see it becoming more genuine. "So will I, you know. That's exactly my plan—to do what needs to be done."

"I won't hesitate," Regulus warns him.

"Not even for a second?" James challenges, his smile softening until it's more sad than anything else, and Regulus…

Regulus hesitates for a second, one too long, and James' smile grows again as he turns to start waving once more.

Heart sinking, Regulus goes back to sit down.

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"You'll be fine," Sirius assures James. "They're just going to get you cleaned up and pretty to parade you around as an introduction. I think—well, Pandora says we've got a good team this year, so I'll take her word for it. I need to go do some snooping, but I'll see you and Reggie later, yeah?"

James, who feels very out of his depth, and like things are going too fast for him to keep up with, only manages to blurt out, "Er, yeah," before Sirius is darting off.

James feels rather like his safety vest has been taken from him.

He hardly gets to fret for long before he and Regulus are being led away in separate directions. James looks back over his shoulder and is surprised to find Regulus also glancing back at him. Of course, as soon as he catches James catching him, he turns away and doesn't look back again.

"Ah, marvelous," a cheerful voice chirps as James is led into a room. There's a man there with bright red hair styled into a mullet-mohawk fusion that looks quite good, actually. "The name's Fabian. You're my doll, and the other tribute is my brother's, Gideon. Come, come, get naked."

"What?" James blurts out, eyes bulging.

"Oh, no need for modesty," Fabian assures him. "You're clearly giving me plenty to work with." He pauses, then reaches up and smacks his forehead. "Goodness, sorry, I'm rushing the whole process. You're hardly comfortable with me yet, are you? Sorry, sorry, it's just that I don't get a lot of time with you, sadly. Here, I promise I won't be looking. Well, no, that's a lie; it's literally my job to look, but I assure you, it's nothing untoward. I'm just going to help you look nicer than you already do. Trust me, you'll enjoy the process."

"Um," James mumbles, "can I keep my pants on?"

"Well, at least until you get in the bath, sure," Fabian allows, waving his hand and turning away.

Fabian is a liar. James does not, in fact, enjoy the process. It's very strange having someone present when you bathe, even if they're not watching you (and Fabian doesn't, thankfully). He allows James to put a towel around his waist when he gets out, but that's where the whole process becomes a bit like torture.

There's an unfortunate amount of waxing, hair-plucking, poking, and prodding. At one point, Fabian is chattering away casually as he holds up James' arm and forcefully yanks the hair at his armpit out right from the root. He clicks his tongue every time James yelps, patting his shoulder and speaking in a soothing tone before doing it all over again.

Fabian does do things that James finds himself enjoying, like an entire face massage, which is honestly brilliant. Sadly, there is more to it than that. There's exfoliating, and moisturizing, and more hair-plucking, now at his eyebrows, which makes his eyes water—but curiously, the opposite eye of whichever eyebrow is actually being plucked. James is also uncomfortable because Fabian takes his glasses and makes him put in contacts, then listens calmly as James rants for nearly ten minutes straight about why he should be able to wear his glasses, only to then make James put in the contacts anyway. He ends up having to help, because James doesn't know how, and James gets poked in the eye (thrice) because he keeps flinching, unable to hold still.

But, honestly and truly, James draws the line at his hair. Fabian washes it and does a lovely little scalp massage that nearly puts James to sleep, but when he sees scissors out of the corner of his eye, he's fully awake. James has never come out of a chair so fast in his life.

"No," James states firmly, pointing at Fabian, who looks baffled. "Absolutely not. If you come anywhere near me with those scissors, I'm going to start practicing for the arena, and the next person getting violently poked in the eye will be *you."*

Fabian's mouth hangs open. "But—but your hair is—"

"I'm perfectly aware of what my hair is, but you're right to say that it's *mine,* Fabian."

"James, please, it's a *wreck."*

"No," James insists firmly.

"Can't I just—"

"No."

"But what if I—"

"No."

"I—" Fabian stares at him, stricken, then heaves a sigh and lowers his hand. He looks really sad, actually, which would make James feel bad if it wasn't his hair. Fabian slowly puts the scissors aside and nods. "Yes, well, fine. I had so many plans for it, you know. Can I at least style it a bit?"

James purses his lips, but the hope in Fabian's eyes is what gets him, really. He relaxes a little. "As long as you don't cut it, or make it lay flat, you can do what you like."

"I...can work with that," Fabian says decisively, squinting as he tilts his head at James and waves him back over to the chair.

Hesitantly, James moves over.

Fabian stays true to his word, and following the styling of James' hair (victoriously not cut, thank you very much), there's being forced into a surprisingly tight suit. It's an odd suit like James has never seen before, very Hallow-esque; a red so dark that it's borderline black with various gold accents. He doesn't know how he feels about it when Fabian plants him in front of the full-length mirror and asks for a review.

Realistically, James knows that he looks good. He can *see* that he looks good. He's always been good-looking, and he's not shy about acknowledging that, but this is… Well, it's *really* enhanced now, that's all. He doesn't look very different, but at the same time, he almost doesn't recognize himself. The suit doesn't look too loud, or overbearing, but it's more stylish and eye-catching than anything he's ever worn. His hair is slightly different, more...full, somehow, and effortless? Alright, James may have to ask Fabian how he did that. But, mostly, it's very strange to see himself without his glasses. It feels like his face is naked, oddly enough. His eyes seem bigger.

"It's...ah…" James clears his throat and glances at Fabian, who is waiting with a bated breath for his response. Helplessly, James gives him a crooked smile. "It's lovely. You did lovely."

Fabian's face absolutely lights up. "Thank you! I'm glad you love it. Come, Gideon should be finished now."

James spares one second to think about what this poor Gideon bloke had to put up with if he was working with Regulus, trying to do all the things that Fabian just did with him, and he has to stifle a laugh as he follows Fabian out. That laughter promptly does in James' throat when he sees Regulus.

Regulus does a visible double-take when he sees him, blinking harshly, but James doesn't have the capacity to wonder about what that means, because he's too busy staring at Regulus. It's just—well, Regulus is always in black, generally, and he's… So, yes, he's undeniably beautiful. There is no denying that, and James has never bothered to try. He knows it, Regulus surely knows it, their entire fucking *district* knows it.

But this is… Well, Regulus has been cleaned up, too. There's a pampered flush to his cheeks, a shine to his hair (which *has* been cut), and a suit on him that matches James' perfectly, except it's a green so dark it's almost black with silver accents. His haircut isn't a drastic change, but whatever Gideon did to it gave him an absolute mass of waves and curls that fall around his face and ears to make him look impossibly sweeter than he always does. Ironic, really, because Regulus hasn't really been *sweet* since before Sirius went into the games.

"Where the fuck are your glasses?" Regulus blurts out, sounding downright *appalled,* borderline horrified.

James immediately feels vindicated by this. He jerks his hands out and yells, "Thank you! I have to wear contacts, Reg. I really don't want to wear them. Do I look very strange?"

"You look—" Regulus falls silent, then clears his throat and narrows his eyes at Fabian. "Give him his glasses back."

"I won't," Fabian says firmly. "I've already compromised on not cutting his hair."

Regulus' eyes bulge. "You were going to *cut his hair?"*

"Thank you!" James bursts out yet again, feeling so supported right now. He gestures frantically at Regulus as he stares at Fabian. "Do you see? He gets it!"

"A stubborn pair, aren't they?" Gideon says wryly, looking at Fabian with his eyebrows raised. It takes James a second to realize that he and Fabian are twins, because for all that their faces are the same with very minor, nearly invisible differences to the eye, their hair styles and clothes are *vastly* different.

"You let them cut your hair," James mumbles, turning his gaze back to Regulus, who scowls.

"I couldn't get out of it. How did you get out of it?"

"Threatened to kill him with the scissors."

"You would...literally never."

"Well, he didn't know that, did he?"

"Now, why didn't I think of that?" Regulus grumbles with a grimace. "Gideon had to strap me to the chair."

"You tried to *bite me,"* Gideon sputters.

"I'll *still* bite you," Regulus warns, glaring at him, and Gideon looks at Fabian as if he's exhausted.

"Fab, I'm beginning to rethink our current career path."

"Gid, I was just thinking the same thing."

James jolts when an alarm goes off, and Fabian immediately claps his hands together. "Right, yes, time to get you two to the carriages. Now, they're pulled by thestrals, so you won't be able to see them unless you've witnessed death in person—not just through a screen, of course. We hear they're very gentle creatures, though, so don't stress about them."

"You'll be meeting with Dorcas sometime very soon. She's the head of the team and the creator of all themes and designs for your outfits," Gideon explains, ushering them along.

"All you have to do is ride the carriage through," Fabian explains. "You may be a bit overwhelmed by the crowds, but it'll be over before you know it. Sirius will be waiting for you by the end, once it's over. Go on, go, stand tall, there you go…"

Again, things feel so fast that James can hardly keep up with them. He and Regulus are led into a tunnel with a lone carriage that seems to be holding itself up. They're both wary to climb into the back and stand, but they don't really have much of a choice. They've barely gotten into place before the carriage jolts, making them both snap their hands out to hold onto the edge of it, trying to remain steady.

The gap of light at the end of the tunnel grows, and with it, the distant sound of muffled screams of delight get louder. James' heart races for reasons he can't explain, and he's tense all over, anticipation—and not the good kind—rising in him until he almost can't breathe. The light starts pouring over them as they're pulled out into the middle of an arena with stands of people screaming and cheering, throwing flowers as fireworks pop and sizzle loudly over their heads.

James immediately feels oversensitized, unsure where to look, having nothing to focus on. His eyes dart around almost frantically, and he doesn't even have the comfort of his own glasses. His head swivels like it's on a stick, the world a rush of colors and faces jumping out at him until he feels a little sick. He has to squeeze his eyes shut, then just gives up and looks over at Regulus, the only thing that makes sense in all of this.

The thing is, Regulus is nice to look at. As previously mentioned, he's always been beautiful, so this is not really a new thing. The slight changes to his appearance haven't changed much, only highlighting what was already obvious. That's not the only thing James gets out of looking at him, though. It's also just *comforting.* In all this, when he feels like he's lost and shrinking, locking his gaze on Regulus is what comforts him. It genuinely helps him breathe.

"Why are you looking at me?" Regulus asks without even turning his head towards him. His voice is raised slightly, and still, it's hard to hear him over the crowd.

"I'm just—I mean, you look different," James blurts out, because he doesn't think Regulus would appreciate knowing that James draws comfort just from the sight of him. Regulus hates him. James knows that.

"Different," Regulus repeats.

"Good different," James rushes to clarify.

"Did I not look good before the Hallows got ahold of me?"

"What? No, you—that's not what I was saying. I just meant—"

Regulus does look at him, then. "You look different, too."

"Good different?" James asks, blinking at him.

"No," Regulus says, looking away again. His voice is quieter when he speaks next, so much so that James almost misses what he says altogether, which is a soft, "I miss your glasses."

James starts to reply, but he stops when Regulus tilts his face up as their carriage comes to a halt. He follows his gaze up to the tower that holds people of clear importance. Up there is none other than Riddle, Master of the Hallow. He's the one really behind the games, and if James were to place any blame on anyone for the state of the world, it would be him.

He's an older man, though he wears his age well. His hair is grey with only a light smattering of dark brown threaded through, just the same as his cleanly shaped beard. He's pale, but not in a sickly way. Actually, he's quite handsome—clearly distinguished. He's wearing what can only be expensive robes, the sort that are cut to be tailored to his body, a silver pocket watch chain hanging visibly over his vest from where his robes hang open. Even from here, James can tell he's the type of man that eyes turn to when he enters a room, refined and poise and intimidating. His dark brown eyes sweep over them, critical and sharp, not a scrap of warmth in them.

For a second, he's looking right at Regulus, so intent in studying him that James feels a chill go down his spine. Then, just as easily, Riddle flicks his gaze away, as if he's bored, as if they're meaningless to him, like they're already dead. More so than the Hallows themselves, the people of the Hallow, James despises their Master. *That's* who James takes issue with.

The carriage jolts as they continue on, and James drags his gaze away to go back to looking at Regulus again.

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"Alright, home sweet home," Pandora declares brightly as she pushes open the door and leads them all in.

Sirius remembers his own response to stepping into the accommodations the Hallow provides for the first time. The pure disbelief and helpless wonder, overly aware of how truly *ridiculous* everything is. It's so starkly obvious that no district should be living in poverty or starving with all the blatant frivolities that exist within the Hallow. Sirius, after ten years of being exposed to it, has blown past bitter and settled firmly into exhaustion. Reality is a bitch.

"Now, we each have our own rooms," Pandora continues, turning to walk backwards to keep addressing them. She nearly trips on the steps, so Sirius snaps his hand out to steady her, helplessly fond of her. Sirius isn't fond of many Hallows, but he's been working with her for two years, and she's a good person, *despite* being a Hallow. It's a hard pill to swallow, but some of them genuinely are. "Dinner is within the hour, so you have time to explore your rooms, and your closet, change out of your lovely suits into something more comfortable. Go on, off with you all. We meet back here in forty-five minutes sharp, and do *not* make me drag you out by your ears. I will."

"She will," Sirius confirms.

James and Regulus share a brief look, and then they split off, no doubt needing time to themselves. They've both been quiet since being paraded out in front of the Hallows. Sirius gets it. He remembers what that was like, too.

Sirius also needs some time to acclimate. It's never easy for him, being back within the Hallow, especially as a mentor. It's just a different version of the games; he's less likely to die, admittedly, but that doesn't make it much better.

Inside his own room, Sirius sits down on the edge of his bed and releases a deep breath as his eyes sink shut. It feels like he's shedding a mask he's been wearing as soon as he entered the city, the arena he's been forced into over and over since his victory. Already, he's been running around to meet up with various mentors and known sponsors, trying to get a layout of what's to be expected and what James and Regulus will find themselves at the mercy of, both in competition and support.

Sirius has made a name for himself in the Hallow, he knows that. He's charismatic when he wants to be, and every year, he tries everything he can to see at least one tribute home, which means he's made himself likeable. Despite this, he knows he's too out-spoken at times, too rebellious, doing things that he shouldn't, that could get him into a lot of trouble. Moody, a fellow mentor for a different district, had told him to be more careful. Despite being a paranoid bastard, Sirius took his advice enough to walk a fine line.

He makes himself just loved enough that he can get away with things that most do not, but he's careful not to push too far, not when lives that aren't his are on the line. He presents himself as the dashing young man everyone wants to be, or be with, charming everyone with his grin and grand words, and then he comes to the seclusion of his room and hates himself for it. But what can he do? If he *doesn't,* then he's not trying everything in his power to save at least one of his tributes, and that guilt would kill him.

When they inevitably die, the guilt nearly kills him anyway.

This year, things are already looking bleak. Regulus really doesn't realize the impact of how he presents himself. It's already noticeable, the people that are turning sour just at the mere mention of his name, because of his demeanor. *He doesn't look happy to be here at all,* one sponsor had said, and it took everything in Sirius not to fucking claw his eyes out for it. *Of course he's not happy to be here, you fucking idiot,* Sirius had wanted to scream, and yet, miraculously, he didn't. He'd kept his smile fixed on his face and painted Regulus as the strong, silent type when he's literally anything but. He's genuinely just a brooding, little shit who doesn't like many people, which Sirius has always found secretly endearing.

But here? That's going to get him killed.

It doesn't help that people are already invigorated by pitting Regulus and James against each other. Picking sides. Making them out to be enemies at direct war with each other. People are thriving on it, bloodthirsty from the drama of Sirius' best friend and little brother being on opposite sides, and it's clear who has their favor already.

James. Of course it's James. He stood up and waved. He smiled. He's physically bigger than Regulus—which honestly doesn't mean much, frankly. After all, Sirius killed people three times his size in the arena. Size doesn't fucking *matter,* and people are underestimating Regulus because of it, and because they don't know anything about his skills.

Sirius, of course, has been doing his best to dispel this notion, because it's ideal to get sponsors for *both* tributes, and if they're seen as competing, that will be nigh impossible. It's just not working. No matter what he says, people are so focused on who he thinks will kill the other, on who he *wants* to win, who he's actually rooting for, as if it never even crosses their mind to think that this isn't fun for him, that he's not fucking sickened by the mere thought, as if he's just like them.

Fuck, Sirius doesn't know how he's going to do this.

Sighing, he drags himself up and shuffles to the closet, barely even glancing at what's been provided for him. It's usually the same, and he knows exactly where to look for a soft shirt and loose joggers, something to relax in while he eats dinner. But first, he needs a shower to scrub away how filthy this day has made him feel, so he goes to do exactly that.

By the time he gets out, it's nearly time for dinner, and Pandora really *will* drag him out by his ear if he's late (she has before), so he half-dries his hair, leaving it mostly damp and curling over his shoulder, wetting the collar, and then he leaves. He's not surprised to see that James and Regulus have also gotten showers, despite Fabian and Gideon working on them today. He knows how being paraded in front of the Hallows like pieces of meat feels, and that's filthy, too.

The table is already set, a spread of lavish food in front of them. Regulus and James stare at it like they're not even sure they can touch it, or want to, but Pandora promptly starts filling her

plate while humming under her breath. Sirius gives James and Regulus a tiny nod, filling his own plate, and that prompts them to do the same.

Seconds later, someone sweeps out with a trolley of wine bottles to choose from. Sirius looks up as it stops next to him, and oh no, he doesn't do this. He never stands for it, and Pandora is used to this defiance by now.

"Excuse me, sorry, just—" Sirius raises up out of his seat and reaches out to the man at the trolley, pushing his hand to the back of his head to find the clasp for the mask on his face. His head snaps up in alarm, light brown eyes widening, and Sirius' fingers fumble on the clasp as their eyes meet.

For a beat, Sirius is frozen in place, despite the fact that this is generally a quick affair for him, removing these masks. In this moment, he becomes so starkly aware of how he holds this man's life in his hands. The man must feel the same, because he's equally frozen, so stiff that he looks like stone.

The mask is fitted to his face up to the tip of his nose, made of black, unforgiving metal with three slits above his mouth, just barely showing small peeks of his lips. The way the mask fits to the jaw is purposeful to make sure whoever has them won't let them open their mouth to speak. His eyes are visible, as is the light smattering of freckles just below them, but that's it. A criminal to the Hallow—this is their fate, being muzzled or experimented on, or both, all in the name of the games, finding new things to introduce each year, and then sentenced to a life of servitude in the Hallow.

Sirius—when he learned about it—had hated it. He'd never been sickened by the Hallow so strongly before that moment when he learned that those in the districts that defied the Hallow in some way, or even simply tried to run away, were caught and captured and put through this. The first servant he met with a mask had been when he was sixteen, and he'd begged her to remove it, only for Effie to inform him that if she was caught removing it, or anyone found out she did, then she would be killed. So, he'd taken to removing it *for them.*

The thing is, it's still a risk. They have to put them back on when they leave to return to their cells at night, *but* Sirius has always made it clear that they can go without it when they're in here. Pandora had been startlingly calm when he informed her of this, and she'd promised to never breathe a word of it, even after he threatened to kill her if she did, promising her that it

would be his word against hers, and he had made himself important enough that they'd believe him first. She hadn't even batted an eye and just simply agreed.

The way this goes, Sirius has to take the masks off, because they won't do it themselves. If he was very lucky, some of them would get so comfortable that they would come to him first thing so he could remove it for them, but that was as close as he could get to them doing it themselves. He gets why. They'll literally die if they take it off, and this is only really a loophole that no one has dared to test out in the open. None of them, him included, have ever felt the need to take the risk of seeing what would happen if anyone found out that their masks were removed, but *they* didn't remove them.

Usually, Sirius just pulls the mask off before they can do anything. He's learned the hard way that some will panic and fling themselves back, even possibly injure themselves, and he never wants that to happen. He just takes the mask off quickly and explains they don't have to wear it, not in here, that they're safe here, with him.

"It's alright," Sirius murmurs. "You're alright."

That shouldn't work. The man should be leaning away and going back to his job, but he isn't. He just—stays right where he is, staring at Sirius with those wide eyes of his.

"I was going to remove it," Sirius explains, and that gaze sharpens on his face, studying him more intently. "You don't have to wear that here. I don't—we don't require it. When you're here, you're safe. No one will ever know, I promise. I'm not trying to get you killed; I'm just letting you breathe."

Slowly, the man leans away, and for the first time since Sirius was a tribute, he fails to take the mask off the servant assigned to their suite. His hand falls to his side slowly, and he's left disappointed, a lump forming in his throat because it's just—it's *wrong.* It's not fair. No one deserves this, and it's genuinely sickening that they're so conditioned to fear for their lives that they feel they have to live this way.

The wine bottle that the man was holding plonks back on the trolley, and his eyes are still on Sirius when he lifts his hand to the back of his head removes the mask on his own.

Sirius' breath quite literally catches in his throat as the mask slips away from the man's face, revealing the rest. His freckles don't span down the rest of his face, and his mouth is pink and full, but ridiculously chapped. Sirius watches those lips part, and the man releases a soft exhale, his eyelashes fluttering.

"Oh," Sirius breathes out, staring at him, and he can't figure out what to say next. His mind is completely blank.

Pandora, thankfully, knows his routine enough by now to pick it for him by asking, "What's your name?"

Now, in most cases, the servants won't speak even without the mask. Only two out of the eight years Sirius has been here did, and one of them only spoke when spoken to—Ryanair, his name was—and the other did speak, quite a bit. She practically never shut up, actually, as soon as she realized that she was free to talk—Myrtle was her name, and as many times as Sirius *wanted* to tell her to shut up, he never once did. But, in general, it takes time for them to actually work up to it. No one has ever given their name the first time they were asked.

This man does. "Remus Lupin."

"Are you—are you hungry?" Sirius asks, still just staring at him. He gestures distractedly to the table, never taking his eyes off Remus. "You could just sit the wine on the table and we can pour it for ourselves. Join us. We have plenty."

In all the years Sirius has done this, not one servant would do that, no matter how comfortable they got with him and his tributes. He asked at every meal, and they never agreed.

Remus turns his gaze to the table, then flicks it back to Sirius again. His lips curl up as he says, "I could eat."

Sirius' heart is racing, and he doesn't know why.

Casually, Remus sits the mask down on the table, pulls out a chair, and settles in it. Sirius just keeps standing there, staring at him, oddly dazed, and Regulus has to kick him sharply under the table to get him moving again.

When Sirius pours his wine, he pours *a lot.*

Chapter End Notes

i saw some of you asking about remus. here he is. not what anyone was expecting, ill bet, but trust the process. there's a reason for all of this, i promise. we do get to see more of him.

also, pandora, fabian, gideon!!! and a dorcas mention! oh and tom riddle, he's here, too. if you're booing him, you're absolutely right to.

thoughts, theories, comments, or concerns?

Training Day One

Chapter Notes

hello, all! 👋

warnings for this chapter:

-references to children dying in the arena (nothing explicit, just mentioned)
-references to past substance abuse, and recovery from it
-a brief, blink-and-you-miss-it reference to suicide through substance abuse (about Alpard)
-vague reference to torture (not explicit with zero details and likely subtle enough that you won't pick up on it, but still, just in case)
-mentions of murder (forced murder, due to the arena)
-references to blatant mistreatment to servants
-brief reference to someone being objectified, even as a minor (kind of like a watered down version of finnick without the forced prostitution (if you've read the books), because i simply do not have it in my heart to do that, but the sentiment behind it is still terrible and not unlike the sexualization that many young actors have had to face, i.e. millie bobby brown, finn wolfhard, etc etc, as examples. i don't dive into it much, it's just mentioned in passing, because it makes me uncomfortable and i hate it)

and im pretty sure that's it. the warnings make it seem really bad, but this is actually a fairly cute chapter. enjoy that while it lasts. we've got some fun tension, as well as adorable, awkward bumbling, and a suprise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Now, remember," Sirius says as he leads them towards the training center, "the next three days are really important. Not only are you going to be showing the others what you're capable of, you're also going to be seeing what *they're* capable of. If you listen to nothing else I tell you, listen to this." He turns and comes to a halt, swiveling to face them, eyes oddly intense. "Regulus, stay away from the daggers."

"What?" Regulus sputters, mouth falling open. He feels betrayed instantly, because frankly, this is unfair. He'd even say it's targeted. "But that's—"

"Listen to me, you utter twat," Sirius cuts in harshly. "You don't understand, there *will* be eyes on you, and I expect your eyes to be on the others as well. The problem is, you're my little brother, and you're from a family of Victors. That makes you a threat, and you *can't* let them

know that you actually are, do you understand? They'll want to get you out of the way early if they think you'll be a problem."

"Wait, you're good with daggers?" James mumbles, glancing over at him with his eyebrows raised.

Regulus purses his lips and pointedly looks away, which makes Sirius snort. Yes, so Regulus is good with daggers. Sirius made *sure* he was good with daggers, and even after Sirius stopped having him practice with them, Regulus continued on his own.

It was partially just a game as children, at first. Shamefully, they used to leave school and sneak out of the district to go play-fight with sticks, like they were in the arena before they ever were, back before they could fully grasp why it was something to be genuinely afraid of, back before their names were ever in the reaping and it became a possibility—and now, a reality. As they got older, though, the tone changed to the point that it became unspoken preparation *just in case,* which is coming in handy now, at least.

Sirius used to make daggers for Regulus out of stone. He would work for months to chip them and shape them, then give them handles. Sometimes, he would find broken glass or discarded metal and find ways to turn them into daggers, too. Sirius stopped making them when he came out of the arena, so Regulus had to learn how. He did, but never as good as Sirius.

But yes, Regulus is good with them. *Very* good with them, actually, above all else. The fact that Sirius is asking him to make himself look weak is—annoying. It goes against every single one of Regulus' instincts, but he'll do it. He will, because Sirius is asking him to.

"You, James," Sirius says, focusing on him, "you're not going to do any showing off either."

"And what are *you* good at?" Regulus asks, turning to arch an eyebrow at him.

James chuckles. "That's a long list."

"I'm listening," Regulus says dryly.

"Well, I'm good with my hands," James starts, a smile twitching at the corners of his lips. *"Really* good, in fact."

Sirius snorts again. "James is strong, but he has precisely zero skills with a weapon of any kind, which is a huge oversight on mine and Effie's part, I'm now realizing. So, James, you're to do some *light* practicing with any weapon you come across. Long range is preferable, or anything interchangeable, but you'd be surprised how much of the arena is hand-to-hand. Brute strength can get you far, but it doesn't mean you can't be killed. So, try things, get a feel for what works, but *do not* make a spectacle of yourself. If you turn out to be a god with a sword, then you make sure you drop it a few times so you look like a fucking idiot, do you understand?"

"Shouldn't be too hard for him," Regulus mutters.

James ducks his head forward, shoulders shaking with laughter. Sirius looks exasperated, and Regulus resists the urge to heave a sigh. Insulting James has never worked. He always thinks it's so fucking funny.

"Right," James chokes out. "Got it, Sirius. Understood."

"Focus mainly on swords, axes, and maces. Sadly, you're not going to be able to learn to use a bow or crossbow in just three days," Sirius tells him, then flicks his finger between them both. "You two need to train hand-to-hand together. Do *not* train with anyone else. Don't let them know the weight of your body, or any of your tells, if you have any. They'll unfortunately be able to watch, but you'll also be able to watch them. Pay attention. I *mean* that."

"Wait, why does James get to know the weight of my body?" Regulus protests. "He's *also* the competition."

Sirius glances at James, who holds his gaze for a second before looking down at his hands. Sirius' face twitches, lips pressing into a thin line, and then he looks at Regulus. "He's less of

a problem than everyone else, trust me. This is—I know you don't like it, but you'll need allies in the arena, Reggie."

"You're asking me to trust people who are going to be trying to kill me at some point?"

"I'm asking you to trust James. Everyone else? No. Just find the ones you'll trust enough not to hunt you down and try to play nice, yes? You don't want to make enemies; you want to make reluctant allies, in that they'll look the other way if you happen to run past them, rather than chase you."

"I—" Regulus exhales sharply, then grumbles, *"Fine."*

For a moment, Sirius looks at him more fondly than he has in years, and then that expression fades into worry.

"So, I do get to know the weight of your body?" James speaks up, a tiny quirk to the corner of his mouth that makes Regulus want to hit him.

"I'm literally going to kill you," Regulus informs him flatly.

James' smile grows wider. "Well, you know, if you're on top, that might not be the worst way to go."

"Are you—flirting with my brother?" Sirius asks, baffled, and then he reaches out and swats James over the head. "Stop that. Don't do that."

"Sorry," James mumbles, reaching up to rub the back of his head, coughing. "Just—nerves, you know."

Sirius' face softens, and he looks at Regulus, completely missing the way James raises his head and waggles his eyebrows at Regulus with a wink. Regulus doesn't want to laugh. He

refuses to laugh. He fights so hard not to laugh, only just succeeding, but losing the battle against the smile that tugs at his lips. Seeing it, James looks away with a grin.

Utterly oblivious, Sirius continues. "Today, I don't want either of you doing too much of anything. Regulus, you focus on all things environmental. You're good at remembering things, so learn the plants that will kill you, and the ones that won't. Learn what to do if you're too cold, or too hot. Learn how to tie a knot and start a fire and find water. Learn as much as you can as if your life depends on it, because it does."

"Is there any way of knowing what conditions we'll be in when we get to the arena *before* we get there?"

"No. The gamemakers will be building the arena around all the tributes, what skills you have and also those that you don't. They want a good show, not something too hard that you all die too quickly, but still a challenge. Now, when the evaluation comes up at the end of these three training days, *that's* when you'll show off your dagger skills, so they know to put them in there for you. Still, you need to be prepared for anything."

"Er, what will I be doing?" James asks, waving a hand.

"Try out a few weapons, but learn the same things Regulus is learning as well," Sirius tells him. "Both of you need to be observant. Watch the others. Pay attention to the allies that form, and find the death eaters."

James blinks. "The what?"

"Death eaters," Sirius repeats. "Every year, the strongest, most skilled tributes will gravitate towards each other and form something of an alliance. They're known as death eaters because —well, the name implies why. They're usually the ones doing the hunting of the others, and I've seen it happen enough times to know that they will pick everyone else off until the end, then turn on each other. You do *not* want to be their target, because they're ruthless, and they will stop at nothing to find you and kill you."

"Charming," Regulus says under his breath.

"And when we find them...what?" James asks.

"Stay off their radar," Sirius replies simply, "but take note of what they're capable of. That goes for everyone, really. Learning their strengths and weaknesses is ideal, but do your best not to reveal your own. Don't provoke the death eaters, avoid them at all costs, and—and be smart. *Look* stupid, but *be* smart. Alright? Say alright."

"Alright," James says immediately, and then he joins Sirius in staring at Regulus expectantly.

Regulus rolls his eyes. "Alright."

So, with that, James and Regulus are set loose in the training room, which is, quite frankly, more intimidating than Regulus was expecting it to be. There are countless mats all over the floor; racks of weapons all throughout the room; different ranges for various bows, axe-throwing, and dagger-throwing; a section for rope climbing; and different places to go to learn about survival skills, bugs, plants, and possible environments they may be subjected to. But that's not the most intimidating part, if Regulus is honest.

It's strange stepping into a room and becoming very intensely aware that these people are going to try to kill him, or he's going to kill some of them. He can feel the shock of it settle into his body as he sees heads swivel towards him and James.

Including him and James, there are twenty-four tributes altogether. That's twenty-two to two —or, more accurately, twenty-three to one. Regulus takes them all in slowly with James right next to him, uncomfortably aware that they're being studied in return. Regulus doesn't even know any of their names. At least six of them are young teenagers, between the ages of thirteen and sixteen.

It puts a knot of discomfort in Regulus' stomach to see them, to think that any of them—any at all—might end up dead by his hand. He doesn't… Unlike some, he's not going into the arena with the desire to kill. Some tributes actually do; they look forward to it. Regulus doesn't, and he has no plans to kill anyone unless he has no other choice.

When Sirius was in the arena, he never killed anyone who wasn't trying to kill him. He even once helped a girl escape a trap. Regulus remembers watching him cry when her name and picture played in a banner in the sky, signaling that she'd died. No, Sirius never killed just to kill; he killed when the only other option was to *be* killed. You'd think that would be mean he didn't kill very much, and yet, he killed twelve people.

Regulus knows, because he counted as he watched.

Twelve people. Literally half of his competition. It makes Regulus wonder how he handled his three days of training, and how he knows that coming from a family of Victors makes things harder for them. Thinking back, Regulus recalls that Sirius was a target. Regulus thinks he knows why now.

With a brief look exchanged between him and James, they split off and go their separate ways. For the first time, Regulus really understands what Sirius meant about the games already being started. He understands all too well.

It doesn't take long for Regulus to locate the death eaters. They're not even shy about it, clustering together and using weapons like toys. It's all loud laughter and dirty looks with them. There's two older men and one woman, clearly around Regulus' age, and one boy who's much younger, looking to be around fourteen or fifteen. Regulus does his best not to look at them, even though he can feel *them* looking at *him.*

In between what he's doing, he scans the room, mentally filing away anything of importance. There are two other people who are essentially doing the same thing as him, learning all they can about survival, so he can't really pick up anything from them. There's one teenager absolutely *demolishing* a training dummy by repeatedly beating it with a club; there's no finesse to it, so Regulus assumes she's just an angry girl.

At one point, Regulus sees James talking to someone while tossing a hatchet from one hand to the other. The guy has kind eyes and round cheeks, and he's laughing at something James is saying to him. Regulus looks away.

After a bit, Regulus has got it down. He's memorized faces, if nothing else, and he has a mental list of who can do what just based on what he's seen so far.

It's at the fire-starter station that James finds him again.

"You look focused," James whispers as he crouches down next to him and watches as Regulus spins a stick back and forth.

"Yes, well, this does take focus."

"It doesn't look like it's working."

"It also takes time and patience, James."

"You sound frustrated."

Regulus grits his teeth. "What do you want? Are you over here to learn to start a fire, or just to pester me?"

"Can't I do both?" James asks lightly, shuffling to settle next to him with the tools the station provides, which isn't very much. Just things you'd find out in the wild. There's an instructional video and a book with clear steps, as well as pictures, which he pays attention to enough to actually shut up for a while. He does eventually speak again, though. "So, take a guess as to who the death eaters are."

"I saw them."

"They have a child with them. I can't work out why, and I don't like it."

"Sirius will likely know," Regulus murmurs, his own lips tipping down. He also doesn't like it.

James hums. "They talked to me, you know. The death eaters."

"Really?"

"Yes. Tried to recruit me, since they're under the impression that I want you dead. *They* want you dead, because they're assuming you're a threat, so Sirius was right."

"Lovely," Regulus says flatly. "And?"

"And what?"

"What did you tell them?"

"Oh, I told them all to fuck off. Well, not the child; he's very quiet, as far as I can tell," James muses.

Regulus' hands halt on the stick as his head snaps up. "You *what?* James, Sirius said—oh, he's going to kill you. We're not supposed to be provoking them, you idiot."

"Well, I was polite. Mostly," James grumbles. "What was I supposed to do, Regulus? *Join them?* I'm not—I won't do that. I won't even *pretend* to do that."

"You've just put a target on your own back, you do realize?"

"Shouldn't you be relieved by such a thing? Better chances of survival for you, isn't it?"

"James," Regulus hisses, glaring at him.

Heaving a sigh, James lifts his head to stare at him, his own hands going still on his stick. "Staying off their radar is hard to do when we're already on it to begin with, yeah? They wanted to know where I stood, and they weren't going to let me avoid it, so I just… Well, I made it clear. There's no world in which I would sink low enough to align myself with people like them. They're already talking about all the killing they're going to do, Regulus, and I—I don't—I can't—"

"Alright," Regulus cuts in. "Alright, James." It's the most that Regulus has seen James lose his composure during all of this, and that's not something Regulus can stand. He looks back down at his stick and starts over. "Did you at least find a weapon that you were comfortable enough with?"

"Well, you know, I used to chop wood for the fireplace in our house, something I did so Mum and Dad didn't have to," James explains, sounding steadier again. "It turns out, doing that a lot over the years gets you comfortable with hatchets. I never really thought of them as weapons, but…I don't feel like I have no idea what I'm doing with them, so there's that."

"They're not very clean," Regulus murmurs. "I mean, killing someone with that will be brutal, James."

"Killing someone with anything is brutal, Regulus. With these, they're also long range, if you throw them."

"There's an art to throwing weapons. You can't just toss them about as you like. Well, you can, but without practice, the chances of it actually landing are very low."

"And you would know?" James asks.

Regulus huffs a weak laugh. "I'd know better than you."

"That's true, I'll give you that," James admits. "I've spoken to a few people. Have you?"

"No," Regulus says.

James sighs. "Well, it's only day one."

"So it is," Regulus agrees. "Find anyone you like enough to trust yet?"

"You," James says.

Regulus nearly falters again, but he's in no mood to start over. That one word and the tone in which James said it makes him start to rub the stick faster, and world of wonders, smoke begins to rise up. He draws the stick away and leans over, carefully blowing on the spark to get it to catch, pulling away as the fire starts to build.

"Shit, how did you do that?" James blurts out, and Regulus looks over to see him gaping at his fire.

"Well, for one thing, you're holding it all wrong," Regulus mutters, reaching out to cover James' hands and situate them properly. "You want to rotate in a downward motion, so you're creating friction that will catch. Try it now." James does not try, his hands still. "James? Just roll downward and—"

Regulus looks up and stops talking, because James isn't even paying attention. He's just looking at him, scanning his face where they're leaning close together. Regulus' fingers twitch against James' hands, and he means to pull away, but he finds it impossible to move when James is staring at him so intently.

"I do trust you, you know," James whispers.

"You shouldn't," Regulus whispers back. "I said I wouldn't hesitate, and I meant it."

"I'll believe that when you prove it."

"Are you asking me to kill you?"

"Daring you," James corrects, holding his gaze, looking at him like he knows Regulus won't, and that's what makes him so dangerous, because Regulus is afraid he's right.

Regulus jerks his hands back like he's been burned, and he shoves to his feet to march away, drawing too much attention. But it's James' gaze on him he feels when he goes.

~•~

Sirius watches Marlene raise her hand for another drink, slumped over the bar. She's looking rough, but much better than last year, and the one before it.

Four years ago, she won her games, and she's been a mentor ever since, so she's on year three now. Sirius has sort of taken her under his wing, giving her as much help as he can. He remembers her games; he remembers that she killed one of his tributes; he remembers thinking that she would be one of the first to die, then being surprised when she was the last one standing.

This year, both of Marlene's tributes are under sixteen. One is fourteen, and the other is fifteen, younger than both Sirius and Marlene when they entered their own games.

"They're going to die," Marlene murmurs, staring down into the glass that's pushed her way. "They're so—Sirius, they're so young, and they're terrified, and I don't—"

"Marlene," Sirius says gently, and she falls silent.

There's an odd understanding between mentors. Or, most of them. There are exceptions, usually the ones that are mentors of the death eaters; they generally thrive on the games as

much as their tributes, and the Hallows. Among those are Lucius Malfoy, Antonin Dolohov, and Corban Yaxley.

Despite the fact that their tributes will all be competing, most mentors spend enough time together to become friends. They're all in the same boat, really, and there's nothing like a bond formed between those that understand the same thing, especially when no one else truly can. They know that their tributes will all be slaughtering one another very soon, but that's not something they can escape, or avoid, so they have to coexist with that reality. Most of them do. Among those are Sirius himself, Marlene McKinnon, Frank Longbottom, and Emmeline Vance.

Early on, getting attached to tributes is commonplace. You grow to care for them, get to know them, and try so fucking hard to save them—and most of the time, you don't manage to. At most, you can only save one, and the chance of that is literally eight percent. Sirius has done the math. He knows.

So, watching your tributes die is never easy, especially when you've come to care for them. You have so much hope for that eight percent, but the reality is, you likely won't get it. Sirius has never gotten it. Neither has Marlene, in the two years prior that she's been a mentor. There are twelve mentors, and only one of them can bring home one Victor; the chances of that being you is also eight percent. That's what they don't tell you. The odds are never in your favor.

Sirius has learned the hard way to not get attached, to do everything he can for his tributes, but face the brutal truth that they'll likely die. It doesn't make it sting less when they do, but it's the only way he can cope with it. Marlene is still struggling to learn to cope with it. Sirius knows how hard it is.

"And the worst part is that everyone knows it," Marlene says, finally, unable to let it go. "They all know that they're not going to make it, so I have sponsors already brushing me off, and it doesn't help that my design team is complete shit. I have nothing—absolutely *nothing* — to work with, Sirius."

Wincing, Sirius reaches out and pushes her glass up from the bottom, encouraging her to drink. It's probably not the best thing for coping, especially with how easily it becomes a crutch, but sometimes—well, sometimes, there's no other way to cope other than dulling the senses. Sirius was very bad about it when he first returned from his games, before James

repeatedly dried him out, before he learned moderation. Not that James really gave him much of a choice.

He was never harsh about it. That was the worst part. He never complained, or got upset, or begged him to do better and try harder. He just took care of him without question, every single time. He didn't blame Sirius when he turned right around and did it again and again; he just picked him up, cleaned him up, and helped. It was James who kept him from choking on his own vomit; it was James who swept through his room and removed every drink and drug he had; it was James who bathed him when he couldn't bathe himself, dressed him when he was shaking too hard to do so, and believed in him every time he got better, even when Sirius had gotten worse all over again so many times before. It was James who kept him from killing himself just like his uncle Alphard.

So, through James' quiet, steady determination to take care of him, Sirius picked himself back up and did better, because he loves James enough that he wouldn't keep putting all of that on him. He knew—they both knew—that James would take care of him like that for the rest of their lives and still smile at him each day, and Sirius couldn't do that to him. He refused.

"Marlene, you're doing everything you can," Sirius tells her quietly, his lips tipping down.

"Am I?" Merlene croaks, squeezing her eyes shut as she presses her glass to her forehead.

Sirius sighs. "You are. Listen to me, you *are.* I know you, and that act you put on with the sponsors; that's not you. Who are you doing that for, if not them?"

"It's not working," Marlene whispers.

"You're doing your best."

"That's not enough."

"It has to be." Sirius reaches out and plucks the glass from her hand, waiting for her to meet his eyes. "It *has* to be, because that's all you can do. That's all you can do, Marlene."

Marlene shudders out a deep breath, looking away. "If I could go in and die for them, I would."

"I know," Sirius says softly, because he does know. He knows that even more intimately now, considering who his tributes are this year. Every cell in his body *craves* to take either of their places and die so that they don't have to.

"What about you?" Marlene mutters, glancing over at him again. "You have it rough this year. Your brother, your best friend, *and* a new design team. How's that going, then?"

Sirius hesitates. Marlene is a friend, and he trusts her more than any other mentor, but it's still not wise to reveal too much information. He won't take that risk, not with Regulus and James on the line. So, he opts for discussing the safest option, the one that Marlene has granted him. "So far, the new design team seems really quite good. Much better than the years before. The lead is Dorcas. I haven't spoken much to her, but she's gotten James and Regulus' measurements from Gideon and Fabian already, and she's working on something, so that's promising. She'll be meeting them tomorrow."

"Dorcas… Dorcas… Dorcas Meadowes?" Marlene asks, her eyebrows shooting up.

"Yes, I think so. Why? Do you know her?"

"Not personally, but… Well, she's made a name for herself as a stylist. She makes statements with her work, enough that some of the more pretentious people have sworn her off."

"Oh, I like her already," Sirius says, then pauses. "Probably."

"For a Hallow, she's…" Marlene clears her throat. "Well, you know, most of them look ridiculous. She...doesn't."

"Is that so, McKinnon?" Sirius asks, arching an eyebrow at her, and she purses her lips and averts her eyes.

Sirius would be the last person to judge her for having something with a Hallow, despite the fact that he's never done it, though no one actually knows that. Rumors drift through the Hallow, and the ones surrounding him have a lot to do with all the apparent sexual relations he's having with everyone. It's been like this since he won his games, even at sixteen years old, because he flirts and charms and teases, and he never outright denies or confirms any insinuation that people make. That's what they like—the mystery, and the little hope they have in the back of their heads that, someday, they'll get their turn with him if they do or say the right thing. He's had many propositions and bribes, but he's a master at sidestepping them and still maintaining his reputation.

Everyone thinks he's had many lovers, especially those that are Hallows, but the last thing Sirius did was kiss Mary when he was sixteen, just a few days before the reaping that ended with him volunteering for his brother. They weren't even dating. They didn't even go any farther than that, and that was as far as he'd ever gone. Becoming a sex symbol for the Hallows had left a bitter taste in his mouth, because he knows people only want him just to say that they had him, not for *him*.

"Oh, look at the time," Marlene mumbles, shooting up out of her chair. She darts her gaze to the clock on the wall. "I think training should be over now. I need to go meet with my tributes, and you should do the same."

"Mhm," Sirius hums, lips twitching, but he dutifully gets up nonetheless, because she's not wrong.

When Sirius makes it back to the suite, James and Regulus are indeed back, and they're both being lectured by Pandora. Sirius doesn't really know for what, but they seem sullen, and they *both* perk up and look relieved when he comes in.

"Whatever they did, they didn't," Sirius announces, putting a soothing hand on Pandora's shoulder, and she shoots him a cross look before plopping down in her chair with a huff. Sirius settles down across from Regulus and James, elbows on his knees as he leans forward. "So, what did we learn?"

"James is fucking *stupid,"* Regulus blurts out immediately, and James tosses his hands up. "He told the death eaters to go fuck themselves, Sirius."

"You—" Sirius darts his gaze to James, who shrinks down a little bit and drops his eyes. Sirius reaches up and pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes shut tight, a headache already forming as he whispers, "Of course you did. The very thing I told you *not* to do, of course you did it."

"I'm *sorry,"* James whines, distressed. "They tried to recruit me, Sirius! What was I supposed to do? I—I said it...nicely?"

Sirius drops his hand and sighs. "You told them *nicely* to go fuck themselves?"

"I was very polite," James mumbles.

"That doesn't—" Sirius inhales deeply, then slowly exhales, forcing himself to relax. "Alright, let's just… So, they tried to recruit you? Why? Did you do *anything?"*

James shakes his head quickly. "No, I swear I didn't. I barely even picked up a few weapons before they came over to me. Er, the main leader seems to be Mulciber, but it's also Avery, Bernice, and a younger boy named Hodge. He's—he's really young, Sirius. Tiny, really."

"Yes, that's normal for the death eaters. They take on one or two people who aren't actually all that strong. Disposable people. The weakest links that they kill first if they all reach the end. I'm assuming they wanted you to be the second?"

"I—well, I don't know. I don't *think* so. They—they wanted me because they thought I would want to help them kill Regulus."

"Ah," Sirius says softly, working to keep his expression neutral as his heart *plummets.* He'd hoped—oh how he'd hoped that Regulus wouldn't be a target just for his name. He'd hoped that there would be some chance that Regulus would escape that unscathed, because Sirius hadn't managed to.

"I didn't really have a choice other than to accept or refuse. I was put on the spot, Sirius. What should I have done? *Joined* them?" James asks, his eyes wide.

Sirius sighs. "I should have anticipated that. You and Regulus are being pitted against each other, which is less than ideal. It's like—sides. Team James versus Team Regulus. No, I would never say join the death eaters, because they're fucking awful, but this is...not good. *Very* not good. Not only is Regulus a target, but so are you now, James."

"So much for staying off their radar," Regulus mutters.

"Do *not* provoke them any further, either of you," Sirius insists, glancing between them almost desperately.

"It's too late, isn't it?" James murmurs.

"Yes," Sirius confirms, dread in his veins. "They'll be coming for both of you now, so the plan has changed. Regulus, when you go in tomorrow, you go right for the daggers. James, did you find anything you were comfortable with?"

"Ah, hatchets?" James says awkwardly.

"Practice with them," Sirius tells him. "And you two—you stay *together.* Remain within a few steps of one another at all times. Put up a united front and make sure they know that you're not going to be *easy* targets. Some people are more soft around the middle than they seem, and if you can intimidate them, you can make them think twice about targeting you first. Don't train hand-to-hand tomorrow; you'll do that on your last day. Tomorrow is about showing everyone that you *are* a threat."

"Confidence is key," Pandora says. "I've watched even the strongest and most self-assured tributes falter because another one was more certain they'd win than them. The games are more than just physical; they're mind games, too."

Regulus raises his eyebrows. "So, you *do* want us to provoke them?"

"No," Sirius counters. "I want you to intimidate them from afar. We want them wary, not angry. Continue to avoid them, and never approach them directly. You, James, I'm assuming you at least talked to other tributes, if Regulus didn't."

"Yeah, a few," James admits. "There was one man I really liked. Peter Pettigrew. He's gentle. Harmless, really. Squeamish, too, he said. He's pretty sure he's going to die very quickly, and he's terrified."

"And what can he do?" Sirius asks.

James blinks, opening his mouth, then closing it. "Er, well, I don't know. I saw him with a knife a few times, but he didn't look like he knew what to do with it."

"Anyone else?" Sirius tries, his voice strained.

"There's Vanity," James says weakly. "She's brilliant with bugs. Knew them all just by picture. She's, er, fifteen."

Sirius' eyes flutter shut. "Who else?"

"I got on well with Irene, Dylan, and Mathias."

"And what could they do?"

"Mathias is good with the crossbow. I watched them. They hit the target nine times."

"How many times did they shoot?"

"...Twenty-seven."

"Twenty-seven."

James heaves a sigh as Sirius' eyes open. "What do you want me to say, Sirius? They're the ones I got on with, alright?"

The ones who are going to die, Sirius thinks, but he won't say it. It sits like a lump in his throat anyway, and he flicks his gaze away to land on Regulus. "And you? Anyone at all?"

"There was one," Regulus says, and James looks startled by this. Sirius is also surprised. "I didn't actually speak to him, but I watched him. He mostly stayed alone, not even spending time with the other person from his district. Just—he's smart, and he can climb. He spent a lot of time at the hanging-ropes, and he ties knots quicker than I've ever seen."

"Oh, I know who you're talking about," James blurts out, his eyes wide. "Evan Rosier. I talked to him for about a minute or two. He showed me how to tie a knot out of vines. He was quiet, though, and he mostly seemed to want to be left alone."

"He goes unnoticed," Regulus adds.

"There's potential there," Sirius mutters. "See if anything comes of it, I suppose, but don't force it. You don't want to agitate him enough that he builds you a noose."

"Thank you for that lovely mental imagery, Sirius," Regulus says with a grimace, reaching up to lightly touch his throat.

"You look tired," James comments, eyebrows furrowed, because trust James to worry about him, even now.

"I'm fine," Sirius lies, smiling tightly. "I just need a shower."

Pandora reaches out to nudge his knee. "Go on, go have a shower. I'll tend to them for a bit. Dinner won't be for a few hours yet, so we have time to rest."

"Yeah, alright," Sirius mumbles, because the Hallow always makes him feel dirty, and he can never feel clean.

"Do you need towels?" Pandora asks.

"I do, yeah, thanks," Sirius says as he shuffles away, trusting her to handle it. She's one of the few Hallows he actually trusts at all. No one knows how much work she puts in, honestly.

In his room, Sirius putters around, grabbing the clothes he'll change into, still in the ones he wore to charm sponsors today. It's like putting on a uniform, and Sirius always misses his clothes back home when he's here. Everything here is just cashmere and silk and satin, things that objectively feel and look good, but it's not his patchy, beat-up leather jacket that he's worn for years. Perhaps it was ridiculous, but when he'd made it home after his games, he'd curled around that jacket and cried into it like a child. He was so scared it wouldn't fit him anymore, like he was a different person in an entirely different body, and yet it did. To this day, it still fits.

There's a knock on his door, and when he answers it, Remus is standing on the other side with a stack of white, fluffy towels. Sirius sucks in a sharp breath, blinking rapidly.

Stupidly, the first thing he blurts out is, "You're not wearing the mask."

"I was under the impression I didn't have to here," Remus replies. "Oh, and hello. I've brought your requested towels."

"You don't. I mean, hello. Hi. No, ah, you don't have to wear it, of course not," Sirius says in a rush. "I just—well, most people don't take them off. I usually have to take them off for them."

"Doesn't make much of a difference who removes it, does it? Either way, if I'm caught or found out, I'll be killed, or worse," Remus murmurs, lifting a shoulder in a half-shrug.

"We won't tell anyone, and no one will catch you here," Sirius assures him. He pauses. "Worse… Worse than dying."

"There are worse things," Remus tells him. "I know. I've experienced them."

"Me too," Sirius admits quietly, startled into honesty.

Remus looks at him for a long moment, then he nods. "Right, well, I have your towels."

"Oh! Oh, yeah, um…" Sirius clears throat and steps back. "You can come in. I'm just—I'm getting ready for a shower."

"Would you like me to hang them outside the shower for you?"

"Oh, no, no you don't have to do that. You can just sit them on the bed. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Remus says as he moves into the room to sit the towels down on the bed.

Sirius goes back into his closet, despite the fact that he's already picked his clothes. He's sort of just hiding. In his closet. Coughing, he raises his voice to ask, "So, would it be too terribly cliche of me to ask what your crime was, Remus?"

"What happens if I don't want to answer?" Remus replies.

"Well...don't?" Sirius frowns at the selection of dresses in front of him. There are so many *sequins.* "If you don't want to, you don't have to. That goes for anything, really, at least with me."

There's a long beat, then, "I don't want to answer."

"Alright," Sirius agrees promptly.

"Do you need anything else, Mr. Black?"

"Oh, don't—you don't have to call me that. Just Sirius is fine."

"Do you need anything else, Just Sirius?" Remus asks, a vague note of amusement in his voice.

Sirius briefly drops his face into his hands, then repeatedly taps the heel of his hand against his forehead. Taking a deep breath, he lifts his head and turns to step out of the closet, utterly empty-handed. "Sirius. I meant, call me Sirius."

"Sirius," Remus says softly, his lips curled up at the corners. He holds Sirius' gaze as he nods. "Do you need anything else, Sirius? Anything at all?"

"Do you?" Sirius blurts out.

Remus blinks. "Sorry?"

"Just—I mean, is there anything you need?" Sirius asks, feeling dangerously close to fidgeting. "Are you hungry? You can join us for supper again, if you like."

"Well, sure, but first I have to cook it," Remus tells him.

Sirius pauses, then murmurs, "You're using our kitchen to do it, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you need help?"

"I don't."

"Do you...want help?"

Remus stares at him for a long moment once again, and his lips twitch up further. His eyes do this thing where they soften at the corners, and it's making Sirius' stomach flip over like it's tumbling down a hill. "If you'd like."

"Would *you* like?" Sirius checks.

"I would like your company," Remus clarifies.

Sirius is not at all prepared for the effect those words have on his body. He's pretty sure he's flushing from head-to-toe, and he reaches up to swipe his hand over his mouth to hide his growing grin as he looks away. "Yeah, alright. When do you plan to start, then?"

"In an hour. You have enough time for a shower."

"Brilliant. I'll—be there."

"Alright, Sirius," Remus says with a huff of laughter. "Am I excused?"

"What?" Sirius blinks, then jolts. "Oh! Oh, yeah, of course. You don't have to ask. You can just come and go as you like and leave whenever you're ready. Or not leave. I mean, if you—just if you're not...ready. Um."

"Alright," Remus repeats, then gives him a lingering look before turning around and walking away without another word, a quiet chuckle escaping him as he goes.

Sirius' face *burns,* and he grabs the towels to muffle a groan into them as he heads to the shower. On the way, he bumps directly into a wall, because of course he does.

~•~

The thing about being a servant of the Hallows is that you get very used to going unseen, so much so that you're hyper aware of being noticed, to the point that you can *feel* eyes on you.

Remus can feel eyes on him now, in the kitchen, as he chops vegetables in the machine provided. He's slightly turned away from the door, so he can't see who's watching him, but he doesn't need three guesses to work out who it is.

Remus has never been seen before in the Hallow, until Sirius.

For a while, Remus doesn't lift his head, wondering how long Sirius is going to keep looking at him without announcing himself. No one's ever done that before; just observed him, like

there's something worth looking at. Not here, in the Hallow. Here, he's just a shadow passing through a room, completely ignored, less impactful than the fucking furniture.

Sirius had, in so many words, changed his life in a split second. For that moment when he was reaching up to remove the mask on Remus' face, Remus quite literally saw his life flash before his eyes—and it wasn't exactly a life he was proud of, at least not since he was brought to the Hallow. And what did he have to look forward to? More of the same? So, in that split second, Remus had almost welcomed it.

But that's not what it turned out to be at all. Instead, it was and is something much more peculiar than Remus could have ever prepared himself for.

People, as a rule, do *not* care about the servants. They just—don't. It doesn't matter if they're Hallows, or tributes, or mentors; there's no *point* in caring about the servants, because there's nothing to be done for them. Their fate is sealed, until death, and there's no way to help them. So, people don't try, and they don't care.

Remus can't blame them, really. That's easier, isn't it? They're all servants to the Hallow, in a way; he's just more obvious about it. Not that he has much of a choice, but alas.

Sirius cares. He cares enough to notice them, enough to give them the space and freedom to fucking *breathe* properly, to speak to them and treat them like they're actual human beings. He cares enough to repeatedly undermine the clear position he has over them, willing to let Remus address him by his name, offering choices and free will. He cares enough that he's made it the standard in his presence, to the point that everyone around him follows it, and accepts it.

And, look, Remus has heard about Sirius Black. Of course he has. The servants know everything about *everything,* because they may be silent, but they still listen. Remus has heard it all; he's just not the type of person to believe a damn thing about someone before he meets them. The only impression he trusts is his own, and Sirius—well, he's made *quite* the impression.

Remus pulls out the tray of chopped vegetables, gently sliding them into the pan. Everything in the kitchen is geared towards safety, so Remus has no access to anything sharp or hot, a failsafe in case he gets any ideas. Even the pans on the stove lock in place and self-stir,

meaning he can't actually pick anything up. It does provide a mostly hands-free cooking experience, at least, so there's that.

Sirius is still there, and Remus can't take it anymore, so he glances over to find that Sirius is watching him like every move he makes is fascinating. He's lost in doing that for a beat, and then he jolts when he seems to realize that he's caught. He straightens up and coughs.

"Hi, sorry, I was just—" Sirius makes a vague gesture with his hand in Remus' direction. "I've never seen that used, so…"

"It's fairly simple. Do you want to try?" Remus asks, motioning towards it with an onion not yet chopped.

"Oh. Sure," Sirius says, shuffling further into the kitchen. He hesitates when he gets closer to Remus, like he isn't sure he's allowed in his space. He even gestures to make sure, and Remus fights a smile as he nods.

This. This is the man that attempted to remove the mask from his face without even asking. He's so...unexpected.

His hair is curling over his shoulder in damp ringlets again, just like the first night that Remus saw him, glossy in the overhead lights. Remus can smell his shampoo, something like rosemary and mint. Sirius stares at the machine, hands limp on the counter, and then he looks at Remus, visibly lost.

Remus struggles not to laugh. He doesn't think he's struggled this much in a long time. "You were watching, weren't you?"

"Yeah, *you,"* Sirius replies, then immediately starts falling over his words. "I mean, not—I wasn't—I just meant, I was watching how you were—"

"Sirius," Remus interrupts, and he gets a thrill from doing so. He wouldn't be able to do that with anyone else, but Sirius lets him. He even snaps his mouth shut, his cheeks red. "I'll just show you again. I promise it's not complicated."

Sirius nods, his blush spreading, and Remus marvels for a second that *this* is the Sirius Black famous for being a smooth, charming man that can beguile anyone he meets. So far, Remus has learned that Sirius is a stuttering mess, mostly. A beautiful stuttering mess, but still. It's not exactly what Remus was expecting from the man rumored to have a string of satisfied lovers all throughout the Hallow. Remus likes the beautiful stuttering mess more, if he's honest.

Remus grabs the onion and knocks it down to the counter, then grips it and cracks it open right down the middle, putting one half aside for Sirius to use and showing him how to use the machine with the other. Sirius briefly goes into a coughing fit, but he bangs on his chest and blinks rapidly, muttering that he's fine as he watches intently.

When it's Sirius' turn, something goes wrong.

"I think I broke it," Sirius whispers, eyes wide.

"You didn't break it."

"Remus, I'm pretty sure I broke it. The tray won't come out."

"Hold on, let me see," Remus says, yet again struggling not to laugh at the wariness in Sirius' tone. He offers him a small smile and tugs the machine closer, lifting it to peer at it from the bottom. After a beat, he hums and drops it. "Well, you broke it. Lovely. They're going to take my fingers for this."

Sirius makes an odd choking noise. *"What?* No, that's not—"

"I'm joking," Remus cuts in with a snort, reaching out to press the maintenance button. It starts to whir. "You just held the chopper too long, so the onion got caught in the mechanism. Give it a moment, and it'll spit it out."

"Oh, don't do that. You nearly gave me a heart attack," Sirius blurts out, staring at him incredulously.

"Yes, sir," Remus says, inclining his head.

"No. No, I didn't mean—that wasn't an order, or—I mean, I don't give orders. Don't do what I say."

"Ever?"

"Well, not if you don't want to. Just—do whatever you want."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't—Remus, you don't have to call me that," Sirius tells him, a strain in his voice.

Remus can't keep a straight face anymore. Helplessly, a smile breaks out onto his face. "Yeah, still joking, Sirius."

"Oh." Sirius blinks at him. He has unfairly thick and long eyelashes. "You're fucking with me."

"Quite a bit, yes," Remus admits. Sirius huffs a startled laugh, shaking his head in awe. "Sorry, you'll have to forgive me. I don't get to fuck with anyone anymore. I miss it."

Sirius clears his throat and leans up against the counter, chewing on his lip. "How long has it been since you've gotten to? You don't have to answer, of course."

"Five years," Remus answers anyway. Knowing he doesn't have to makes him feel comfortable doing so. "I've been a servant for five years."

"Not here," Sirius declares, sounding certain. "I've never seen you here before."

"Maybe you just didn't notice me," Remus murmurs, flicking his gaze towards him, curious.

"No, I definitely would have noticed you," Sirius says, looking down at his hands where he plays restlessly with his fingers. He's still biting his lower lip. Remus hopes he never stops.

"You're right. Sort of," Remus tells him, and Sirius' head snaps up, eyebrows furrowed. "For the first three years, no, I wasn't here. The last two, yes, but I wasn't allowed to work at any gathering events, and I'd never been assigned to work with you, so that's why you never saw me."

"You weren't allowed to work events?"

"Too many penalties."

"Penalties," Sirius echoes, baffled.

Remus chuckles. "Servants gain penalties for not doing their duties properly, or any unacceptable behavior. They come from complaints. You're looking at a repeat offender of daring to roll my eyes. Oh, and once, I *accidentally* spilled wine on a government official's very nice shirt."

"Accidentally?" Sirius asks, lips curling up.

"He made a bet on someone dying in the games, and he was laughing and boasting because he won the bet, rather than reacting like anyone sane and being upset that someone had just died," Remus explains. "So, no, not accidentally."

Sirius looks at him with blatant respect. Remus can *see* it, that gleam in his eyes, something heavy and warm. "Yeah? Well, good. It's the least he deserved. What do the penalties mean?"

"Punishment. Further conditioning. Particular assignments that keep them from having the opportunity to mess up anywhere else," Remus says. "Too many penalties is death, but no one knows how many. I had four before I got my shit together enough to end up here."

"We won't complain, if that helps. You could quite literally pour an entire bottle of wine on my head, and we still wouldn't complain," Sirius tells him, and Remus laughs. It makes Sirius grin at him. "Is there a reward system, or something? What if I give you a glowing review? What do you get?"

"Nothing," Remus replies, and Sirius' grin fades. Remus doesn't like that, so he tugs on the tray, watching it pop out with the chopped onion on it. "There you are. One chopped onion. See? You didn't break it."

"Which is fortunate. You know how some people like to tinker? Like, you put things in their hands, and they'll fix them or build something out of them?"

"I suppose."

"Yeah, well, I'm the opposite," Sirius informs him sheepishly, holding up his hands. "I'm really fucking destructive, usually not even meaning to be. I just—I pick things apart. Ruin them. So, you know, if you ever need something broken, I'm your man." He sighs and puts his hands down. "Sorry, I don't think I'm going to be much help. I might *actually* break something."

Remus can see this is a sore point for him, and it makes his heart clench in his chest in a way he thought nothing in the Hallow ever could. "Well, it's good that I don't need your help, isn't it? You're here because I want your company, remember? You can't really get that wrong."

Like before, Sirius' entire face goes so red that Remus almost pities him. The flush dips all the way down his neck, too. Has no one ever wanted him for his company before, just to have him around? That's incredibly sad, Remus can't help but think. He's not a servant, not as Remus is, so why does no one see him? Remus sees him. He's looking right at him, and he has no desire to look away. That's not proper, and he *really* shouldn't, but he's not good at being proper or doing what he should.

"I really could," Sirius mumbles as he looks away. "Get it wrong, I mean. Trust me, Remus, I really could."

"I don't think so." Remus ducks his head to catch his gaze, smiling at him. "Prove me wrong. I dare you."

"Well, if you insist," Sirius breathes out, then proceeds to lift himself on the counter, swinging his legs like a child and grinning like he can't help it, like he's so pleased to be here.

Remus goes back to cooking, and Sirius starts talking, and by the time the meal is ready, the only thing Sirius has succeeded in doing is proving Remus right.

Chapter End Notes

new POV unlocked!!!!

remus, my beloved <3 i can't believe people were worried that i would kill remus off. REMUS??? the light and love of my life???? pfft, i would never recover. he may have hard times, but don't worry, remus is safe.

also marlene, my love. and we got a lot of mentions of other people we will eventually see more of.

also², im sure you recognized some names of other tributes, and on that, i have no comment.

thanks for reading <3

Final Training Days

Chapter Notes

hey-o! happy saturday, everyone! i think you're going to like this chapter :)

warnings:

-brief and vague references to sirius' struggles after he got out of the arena, but nothing too heavy
-references to murder (in self-defense) in the name of explaining weapons
-the common theme of death (because of the whole fighting to the death in the arena thing)
-some light (non-violent) sparring
-flirting. ridiculous amounts of flirting.

and yeah, im pretty sure that's it. this is surprisingly a light chapter. it's even sort of fun, actually.

enjoy <3

(EDIT: changed the chapter title because im a neurotic mess, and i hate that all my chapters EXCEPT THIS ONE, had 3 words or less for chapter titles, so i fixed it to match. anyway, carry on)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus is already tired of this, and it's only day two. He's been in the Hallow for three days altogether, and he just wants to go home, at this point. Instead, for the second time, he's walking into the training room with James and strict instructions to never stray too far from him.

Yeah, Regulus is the unluckiest sod in the world.

James, meanwhile, beams at another tribute and waves happily at her. The young girl perks up a little and waves back. Rather cheerfully, James says, "That's Vanity Clyde. She has three siblings, all younger, and a mild obsession with bugs."

"Right," Regulus mutters, struggling not to grimace. Oh, he wishes James didn't know that. He wishes James wouldn't get so invested in people; it's going to break his fucking heart when they die. "I'm going to get daggers."

"I'll come with you."

"Of course you will."

"Sirius *literally* told me to," James reminds him.

Regulus rolls his eyes as they move through the room. There are a lot of gazes on them at the moment, watching their every move. "You just do everything Sirius says, do you?"

"Well, don't you?" James challenges.

"No," Regulus snaps, as if he's not doing exactly that. He can't help it. Sirius has been through this before, and if there is anyone in this world who Regulus trusts wholeheartedly, no matter what, it's Sirius. When it comes down to life and death—and this certainly is—Sirius is who he looks to.

It's ironic, really, because with everything else… Well, in day-to-day life back home, Regulus didn't look to Sirius for anything, and Sirius didn't really give him anything to look *at.* When he returned a Victor, he'd come home lost, as if he did lose, as if parts of him died in that arena. Whatever those parts were, they were the parts that Regulus had claim to, and then they were gone. Never seen again.

James was the only one who had Sirius after that. It was *James* that Sirius needed, not Regulus. Sirius couldn't even look at him sometimes. It was equally hard for Regulus to look at Sirius, knowing that everything that happened to him was his fault. All those parts of him that died when he won, Regulus is the one who killed them, and he didn't even choose to. Sirius made that choice for him when he volunteered.

Sirius never said it. He has never said it, and Regulus thinks he will die before he ever admits it, but Regulus is sure that Sirius regrets taking his place.

But it's Regulus' turn now, and all of those issues can't exist here, as Sirius said. It's about surviving, and of course Regulus instinctively looks to Sirius for that. If not for Sirius, Regulus wouldn't have survived to make it here at all.

"So, how do you know which ones you'll like?" James whispers directly in his ear when they stop in front of an entire display of various daggers.

Regulus jerks away, the proximity of him and the warmth of his breath over Regulus' neck making his skin prickle. He huffs. "Can I just—have a little space? Sirius didn't say you need to stand on *top* of me, James. Fucking hell."

"Well, he didn't say I *couldn't,"* James replies, grinning when Regulus cuts him a sharp look, but he's dutifully stepping away, giving him the space he's asked for. "But really, how do you know which ones you'll like? There are...a lot."

There are, in fact, a lot of different daggers. There are traditional daggers, made of different metals; small, yet deadly push-daggers; karambits, with the curved, claw-like blade; stilettos with the thin, needle-like blade; and there's even a selection of balisongs, or butterfly knives, as they're known. Regulus feels like a child stepping into a sweet shop, except it's just him and a variety of pointy weapons. He would like one of each, please.

"These aren't the most efficient option, depending on the situation, even if they're fun," Regulus murmurs as he picks up a balisong. "You have to be quick and practiced to open them if they're closed, and if you're not fast enough, it could cost you your life."

"Are you fast?" James asks.

"Yes," Regulus says, then shows him. Sirius made him one of these once, quite literally building the mechanism for it. For months and months, Regulus practiced with it, walking around with small band-aids on his fingers, cuts all over his hands from where he repeatedly used it. He has a few scars on his knuckles from it even now, faint and tiny.

This one isn't really like his other one, so it takes him a few swings and rolls of his wrist to really get used to it, but once he has it, he *has it.* There's a pattern to it, influenced by weight distribution and the knowledge of what motion you've taken, where the blade is going and where it's been. In seconds, he has it open, then shut right back again.

"That's—that's really—" James stares at him, darting his gaze between Regulus' hand and face.

"These are especially good for hand-to-hand, *particularly* very close range," Regulus says as he sits the balisong down to pick up one of the push-daggers. The handle sits in his palm, fingers curled down beneath the small blade. He lifts it up in front of James' nose, watching his eyes cross. "They're not hard to use, very good for self-defense. If you find one, keep it on you. It's easy to stab someone in the throat if they're pinning you to the ground, or anywhere you can reach, really."

"Noted," James mumbles.

Regulus drops it and hovers his hand over the karambits, picking up one with a hum. "A karambit. You don't hold them with the blade held up. Your pointer finger goes through the open hole here, and the blade curves outwards like this." He grips it and turns his arm to the side so James can see. "It's good to keep a defensive stance, and then you can swing your arm out, almost like you're punching them, but aim to slit their throat instead. One in each hand is ideal, honestly, for the most effective range of motion."

"Regulus," James says quietly, "how...do you know this?"

"How does anyone know anything?" Regulus replies, swinging the blade around on his finger. James' eyes track the motion, up and over. "I have books. I've paid attention. I've even owned some like these—or as close as you can get when you're making them at home. Sirius—well, he used to make them for me before he came out of the arena. He stopped after that."

"Sirius…" James pauses, staying quiet as Regulus puts the karambit away, hovering his hand over the others with a pensive expression. "It wasn't—that had nothing to do with you, Reg. You know that, don't you? He wasn't trying to give up on you, if that's what you think. He

just—he came out feeling...wrong. Really, really wrong. He doesn't build things anymore, did you know that? Hasn't in ten years. He used to make things, fix things, and now—" James swallows harshly and looks away. "Now he just feels like he breaks things. It wasn't that he didn't want to build for you, Regulus. It was that he forgot how."

"It affected me, but I never needed that from him," Regulus whispers, hand gently sitting down on one of the more traditional daggers, one made for throwing and hand-to-hand. "I just needed him to be...him."

"He forgot that, too," James says sadly.

"He remembered eventually."

"And where were you?"

"I said he remembered himself," Regulus declares, an edge to his tone sharp enough to rival the blades in front of him. He lifts his gaze to James'. "I didn't say he remembered *me."*

"Believe it or not," James tells him, "you were never one of the things that he forgot."

Regulus shakes his head and plucks up three daggers in quick succession. "Leave it, James. I'm not talking about it anymore. I'm going to throw these. If you follow, shut up."

With that, Regulus swivels on his heel and marches off towards the stalls where he can throw his daggers. Between the conversation he and James just had and the weight of all the gazes on him that he can't escape, he feels tense and coiled tight, his hair standing on end, braced for an impact that won't come for a few more days yet. The suspense of it is making his bones ache. He wishes he could turn back time.

James does dutifully follow along, but of course, he does not shut up as requested. He does thankfully drop the subject of Sirius, though. "What about these daggers?"

"More traditional. Good for close range, but also throwing. Multipurpose enough that you can hold them however you wish to utilize them—stabbing, slicing, things such as that. You have options, and plenty," Regulus explains.

"Pretty little things, aren't they?" James muses, head cocking with a lopsided grin as Regulus swivels one of the daggers in his palm and gets into position.

"Oh, yes. Pretty," Regulus says flatly, then lifts his hand and exhales as he snaps his hand out, letting the dagger fly through the air towards the target. It lands with a loud thud, buried to the hilt right in the middle of the figure's forehead.

"Could have been luck," James hedges, eyes bright when Regulus snaps his head towards him in disbelief. James bites his lip, like he's trying not to grin. "Do it again, but aim for the left arm, just above the elbow."

"Your left or the figure's left?"

"My left."

Regulus narrows his eyes slightly, then turns back around, lazily swiveling the dagger in his palm again. After a beat, he raises his arm and sends it flying, watching in satisfaction as it lands exactly where James challenged him to put it. He turns back with his eyebrows raised, tossing the last dagger up and catching it over and over.

"Luck?" Regulus asks, lips twitching.

"If I put an apple on my head, could you—"

"Yes."

"What if I was running?"

"Yes."

"Trick question. The apple would fall."

"Oh, sorry, I thought the question was if I could still put a dagger in the side of your fucking skull."

James chokes out a laugh, his head thrown back in delight, and when he calms a moment later, he steps forward and holds out his hand. "Alright, well, maybe it's easy. Let me give it a go, yeah?"

"If you're interested in embarrassing yourself, sure, carry on," Regulus replies, tossing the dagger up to catch it by the blade to hold it out hilt-first.

"You're so mean," James whispers, like it's a secret, but the sort that you're excited to keep. He steps up when Regulus steps back, and immediately no.

"No," Regulus says, stepping forward again, reaching out to grab James by his shoulder, moving to lightly nudge at his ankles with his shoes. He grabs James by his hip and twists him a little, then steps back. "Alright, continue."

James raises his arm.

"No," Regulus interrupts again, swiveling around to stand by his arm, tapping underneath his elbow, twisting his wrist. James nearly drops the dagger because his grip is so slack, and Regulus clicks his tongue as he slides his hand up to cover James' fingers with his own, pushing them down. "You want to keep your grip light, but not *too* light when you're throwing. Stabbing requires a firm grip. The last thing you want is for it to go flying if— James, are you even listening to me?"

"What? Yes. Throw light. Firm stab. Got it, carry on. *Please* carry on," James tells him, watching him intently.

"James, this is quite literally life or death. Now is not the time to discover you have a knife kink," Regulus hisses.

"No time like the present," James corrects, grinning.

"Stop," Regulus chastises, swatting him on the shoulder, and James' grin softens into something sweeter. Regulus averts his eyes from it, because looking at it is hard, and it doesn't really feel like he deserves to see it. "I'm trying to *help you.* This applies to your hatchet as well, you know."

James sighs, growing more serious. "Alright, alright."

"Throw as you extend, not before and not after. Don't lean too hard in any direction, because that can guide the blade. You have to consider the force and direction of wind, as well as distance, and also judge the force in which you need to throw it so the blade lands instead of the hilt."

"That's—a lot."

"Seems that way, yes, but it does become instinct after enough practice. Think of it as an extension of *you.* That helps."

"Right, got it. Can I try now?"

"Sure," Regulus says, stepping back again, and to his credit, James does seem to try to follow his advice. Still, Regulus can see where he's gotten it wrong as soon as he lets go, so he's

saying, "No," before the hilt even hits the wall next to the target and lands on the floor with a dull clatter.

"You know, this is your fault," James announces.

Regulus rears back. *"My* fault? I tried to help you."

"Well, with all that unnecessary touching, I got distracted."

"Unnecessary touch—there was no unnecessary touching!"

James hums, planting his hands on his hips. "There was an excess amount of touching, Regulus. You knew what you were doing, and the joke's on you, because while it may have worked, I'm not the least bit embarrassed by it."

"James," Regulus grits out, raising his hand to point towards the targets, "go get my daggers."

"Bossy," James mutters, flashing him a grin before he winks and dutifully jogs to do as he's told.

Regulus heaves a sigh. It's going to be a long day.

He's not wrong, either. It's a long day. As much as he would like to just stand around, throwing daggers all day, that's not all he's supposed to do. James also drags him around to talk to people, as if they're not possible threats.

James and Regulus now come with more knowledge on the other tributes, things that Sirius has learned already, like who some of their mentors are—which apparently matters—but there's still more to learn. Threat levels to assess. Allies to cement.

There's Peter, who is very funny and comforting, but those aren't skills to help in the arena. He spends most of his second day on survival skills, seeming to have given up on weapons altogether. Peter talks quickly and calmly interchangeably, easy to drown out when he's speaking rapidly, but impossible to ignore when he's drawing you in with his soothing tone. Again, not a skill to save his life. He's no threat, and Regulus tries not to learn anything about him the way James does, because he's quite sure Peter's fear of being one of the first to die is going to come true. James already gets on with him so well that it actually tugs at Regulus' heartstrings.

What's interesting is that Peter's mentor is Dolohov, which Sirius had informed them with derision in his tone. It's the same mentor that Bernice has, and that would make Regulus suspicious if not for the fact that Sirius basically stated outright that Dolohov has no use for Peter. He's apparently already made it clear that Bernice is his favorite, the one he wants to win and who he plans to get sponsors for. So, not only is Peter not at all prepared for the arena, but he's essentially been abandoned by his mentor already, which is just...fucked, honestly.

There's Vanity, the young girl who really likes bugs. She spends literally all of her time at the bug station, endlessly fascinated by them. James keeps trying to encourage her to at least go to other survival stations, but she just shrugs him off. Sirius, strangely enough, didn't mention who her mentor was.

There's Dylan, who quite blatantly has a crush on James. He gets flustered every time James smiles at him, or reaches out to touch his shoulder. He's younger, but not by much at twenty-one, and he also doesn't have that many skills when it comes to weapons, but he's *very* good at starting fires. He does it faster than Regulus has seen anyone manage to yet. Threat level: low. Regulus still doesn't like him.

There's Irene, twenty-three years old, and yet another who also has a strong reaction to James. She drops countless hints about them sneaking out of the training room together, all of which go right over James' head entirely. She laughs at literally everything he says, even when he's not really making jokes, and of course James likes *that.* It pleases him, the reaction of unspoken praise; he likes to make people laugh, always has. Regulus rolls his eyes so much that it's a miracle they don't roll right out of his head. Irene's skills are *not* nonexistent, though, which she proves on the second day. She wields a sword like she's been trained for it, clearly practiced, and *clearly* a threat. Her mentor is a friend of Sirius' named Frank Longbottom. Regulus also doesn't like her.

There's Mathias, who is eighteen, and they're very friendly. They remind Regulus of James, actually, if not a bit quieter. They've improved with the crossbow, and they do take the time to go learn about surviving skills, so they're getting a variety. Threat level: medium. Regulus likes them for the most part, but he still tries not to learn too much about them. Like Irene, their mentor is also Frank.

Finally, there's Evan. On the second day, he's at the rope station yet again, repeatedly tying knots or pulling himself up, as well as swinging between them. No one really bothers him, or seems to notice him at all. His fellow tribute is a teenage girl named Juniper, the one who spent the entire day pummeling a training dummy with a club; she does it again the second day as well, like she has a lot of frustration to work through. People keep a wide berth from her, which may be the point, honestly. Regulus sympathizes with her. Their mentor is yet another friend of Sirius' named Emmeline Vance, and he warned not to underestimate her tributes.

As for Evan, he doesn't seem to really mind that James and Regulus approach him. He teaches them a few knots when they ask, and he listens when they explain some of the things they've learned at the survival station, but it's clear he's not here to make friends. There is a quiet mutual respect between them, though, for the exchange of information; a sort of 'you scratch my back, I scratch yours' situation. Regulus doesn't *think* Evan would immediately attack him if they ran into each other, but he doesn't *know* that, not for sure. Threat level: ?

The death eaters have expanded from just Mulciber, Avery, Bernice, and Hodge to now include three more people. There's Willa, Axus, and Quinn. Willa is a young girl around Hodge's age, but she's lethal with a bow and arrows, which seems to be her ticket in. Axus has crafted a fucking hook on the end of a rope that they can toss with frightening precision, repeatedly dragging various objects and training dummies across the room. Quinn is like Hodge, Regulus is sure, in that she's another disposable weak link for them to turn on first.

Mulciber and Avery share a mentor, who is—much to Regulus' discomfort—Lucius Malfoy. Technically, Regulus' cousin-in-law, which he's doing his level best not to think about. Bernice has Dolohov, like Peter, and again, Sirius warned not to underestimate her. Axus and Willa have the same mentor as well, a man named Yaxley, who generally has death eaters every year, like Lucius and Dolohov. Sirius didn't mention Hodge and Quinn's mentors at all.

The remaining ten either stick to themselves, or their fellow tributes, and that's it. They go out of their way to avoid others, to the point that they'll walk away if anyone approaches them.

By the end of the day, Regulus is tired, both physically and mentally. James has improved with his hatchet, at least a little. Enough that his chances of survival in a fight aren't so low that they make Regulus' stomach drop out from beneath him just thinking about it.

Despite his exhaustion, the time for rest is still far away, because he and James have to meet with their stylist.

Dorcas is…

Well, Regulus has never seen a Hallow look so much like a Hallow and also like no other Hallow he's ever seen, but all at once. She's striking, quite frankly. Her braids are styled on top of her head with silver clasps and ornaments weaved through, and her dark skin has a faint shimmer of silver dusting as well, but her dress looks like dripping obsidian, the sturdiness of stone while looking as if it's made of velvet. There's a necklace around her neck with three words written in small cursive letters, *Hallow is Hollow,* which is quite the statement. Her fingers are covered in rings that connect with her bracelet, and she has one of those finger armor-covers that come to a point, which she taps to the arm of the chair as she flicks her gaze between Regulus and James critically.

James, being James, eventually can't stand the silence anymore, and the first thing he blurts out is, "So, um, your necklace… Did you, er, make that, or...?"

"This?" Dorcas' hand flutters up to it. "Yes, I designed it. Do you like it?"

"It's—bold," James admits, blinking at her.

Dorcas hums. "Well, I'm a very bold person, James. Would you say the same?"

"I mean, I suppose," James replies, eyebrows furrowed.

"Yes," Regulus answers for him. "Don't let him fool you. He's one of the most audacious people you'll ever meet." James glances over at him, looking started, but visibly pleased. "That wasn't a compliment, James."

"Yes, it was," Dorcas corrects bluntly. She threads her fingers together on her crossed legs, her rings clinking together. "I design in bold. It's a compliment." She pauses, flicking her gaze between them. "I won't lie, this is my first year styling for tributes. I'd like to represent you in a way that is both meaningful and a political statement."

"By which you mean…?"

"Let's call it...thought-provoking. Everyone in the Hallow is asleep. I want to wake them up."

Regulus shares a brief look with James, then focuses back on Dorcas. "With fashion?"

"With *expression,"* Dorcas tells him. "That speaks to them, and I want to make something they can't look away from. They'll all be looking at you, so let's make sure they see something important, shall we?"

Sirius and Pandora, who have been quietly murmuring to each other off to the side, stop and look up, clearly paying attention. Again, James and Regulus share another look, a bit longer this time. When they look away, they both lean forward.

"What did you have in mind?" James asks.

Dorcas smiles.

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James isn't really sure what to expect from day three of training, but he and Regulus have their objective. Get in, practice more, learn more, and do some hand-to-hand; sounds simple enough, really.

Again, a lot of eyes are on him and Regulus as soon as they enter the room. That's getting old, at this point. It's like half of them expect them to start trouble, while the other half expect them to start fighting each other. The tension gets under his skin and makes it harder to keep focused.

"Oh, hi," James says, brightening up when Peter comes over to greet him. "How do you beat us here every time?"

"Brilliant time management, courtesy of my mentor," Peter tells him with a chuckle.

"Sirius wouldn't know time management if it jumped up and bit him," Regulus mutters, rolling his eyes.

James snorts. "This is true. The poor thing looks miserable when he has to wake up early. He's always been a bit of a night owl, if I'm honest. He used to say it was a star thing."

"A star thing," Regulus repeats, eyes narrowed.

"Being named after a star, I suppose. It only made sense, he said, because stars are awake and active in the night sky, so why shouldn't he be?" James says fondly.

Regulus scoffs. "I'm named after a star, too, you know."

"I know," James murmurs, lips curling up. "That doesn't really go against what he says, though. You *also* like to be up and about at night. I've never seen someone look as grumpy as you do when you've been woken up early, *except* for Sirius."

"Yes, well…" Regulus trails off, clearly unable to refute Sirius' claim. He doesn't so much as admit defeat as he refuses to accept it by pursing his lips and looking away.

So stubborn, James thinks, fighting a smile.

"I saw you yesterday, you know," Peter says, drawing James' attention again. "With the hatchets, I mean. You're actually quite good. I've heard whispers…" Peter glances around and steps closer, lowering his voice. "The others—Mulciber and that whole group—they've been talking about it."

James nods. "I'm sure they have."

"What have they been saying?" Regulus asks, and Peter blinks at him. "You heard them talking, so what did they say?"

Peter shrugs awkwardly. "Nothing too much, really. Just that James is more of a threat than they thought. Seemed too soft to worry about at first, they said." He pauses, reaching up to scratch his nose. "They also—well, I heard them say that you're shaping up to be exactly the threat they anticipated. You're fucking deadly with those daggers, honestly."

"I know," is all Regulus says.

"Right." Peter visibly gulps. "Right, well, I'm going to go...do something. Yeah. Bye, then."

"Lovely," James mumbles with a sigh as he watches Peter quickly shuffle away. "You're scaring our allies."

"Your allies. I don't have allies," Regulus replies, unrepentant.

"What's mine is yours," James tells him.

Regulus arches an eyebrow at him. "Do they know that?"

"They know that," James admits, because they do. He's made that very clear from day one; they're very aware that Regulus is a priority to him, and he's not to be harmed. Not that anyone James gets on with actually wants to hurt anyone at all, but that's besides the point. The point is, they know. "Come on, let's do another circuit of the survival skills portion, then practice with weapons, and we can close the day out by getting on the mat and giving everyone a show."

"Oh, is that the plan?"

"That's the plan. And also, mingling."

"Mingling," Regulus grumbles under his breath, like he detests the idea, but he doesn't complain further. Again, James has to fight a smile as he leads him away.

So, that's how they spend the day.

In between the survival skills portion, James checks in with the people he's gotten comfortable with by now. Vanity is, of course, at the bug station. She brightens as soon as she sees him, and even Regulus is a bit softer with her, likely because of her youth. James talks to her about her siblings by name (Divan, Curio, and Hoosier), listens to her chatter about bugs, and tells her a bit about his parents. Vanity gives him and Regulus a lesson on bugs to watch out for, either because they're dangerous, or because they're good for protein, which James honestly doesn't want to think about. The last thing he wants to do is eat bugs, but...well, you never know, right?

Following Vanity is Irene at the plant station, who gives up on trying to identify the poisonous ones in favor of talking to him, telling him all about her friends back home as he dutifully listens. James likes her, but it's clear that Regulus does not. He rolls his eyes and takes over at the plant station, making snide comments under his breath that Irene outright ignores. James isn't sure *why* Regulus has such an issue with her, honestly. She's really quite nice.

They meet Dylan at the fire-starting station, and he admits he likes it there because it's the one thing he's really good at. Regulus also doesn't like him, for whatever reason that James can't see. James likes Dylan; he's sweet, and a bit nervous, and he talks about his best friend back home with the same kind of ferocious devotion and love that James feels for Sirius.

James crosses paths with Peter again, pausing to smooth over Regulus frightening him before. Like with most things, James has learned, Peter bounces back easily. He and James chat for quite a bit until they're both in stitches, wheezing with laughter as they hold onto each other's shoulders so they won't fall over. Regulus stands off to the side and looks bored.

Mathias is found practicing with the crossbow, which James and Regulus learn on their way to start with weapons. As soon as they approach, Mathias looks up with a grin. They instantly launch into an excited recount of how much they've improved with the crossbow (twenty out of twenty-six shots so far), and James beams at them, genuinely proud of their progress. They talk to Regulus and James for a few minutes, but they're clearly focused—or *in the zone,* as they call it—so James and Regulus leave them to it, heading to start practicing as well.

James doesn't really like utilizing the hatchets as weapons, if he's honest, but he knows he needs to be prepared. He wants to make it through without hurting anyone, but he doubts that will be possible if his goal is to get Regulus home, which it still is. Practicing with a weapon is really just getting your body prepped with the motion memory, because there's no true preparation for the real thing—that's what Sirius said, and James believes him. He can't imagine *actually* harming another human being, can't even picture it, and yet that's the reality that's sprinting right for him at full velocity.

Meanwhile, Regulus uses his daggers like… Well, there's no hesitation whatsoever. He's confident with them, as well as *precise.* Dangerous. Deadly, even. People are smart to be wary of Regulus and his daggers; as previously established, though, James is stupid, so of course he's fascinated by it. His eyes are drawn to Regulus over and over, watching how he moves, watching the calm coil of his body as he wields his weapons. Pretty little things, indeed.

After they finish with that, towards the end of the day, James and Regulus stop by to see Evan at the rope station again. He's like Vanity in that he's clearly found his thing, and he's doing *nothing else.* All anyone knows about him is that he's good at tying knots and climbing ropes, which isn't a lot, really. James can't tell if he's friendly or not, but he doesn't ever seem upset when they speak to him. He doesn't divulge personal information or seem to care about

theirs, but he seems open to them sharing things they've learned, and every time they do, he makes sure to teach them something as well.

Regulus manages to draw a brief, quiet chuckle out of Evan, just once, and that oddly makes James feel better. It makes him worry less that Evan would take the opportunity to kill them the moment he found it, if not hunt them down. Now, at least, James *thinks* that Evan would maybe, possibly back away if they did, instead of immediately trying to fight, so there's that.

As the day starts to draw to an end, before the evaluations being held in the evening, James follows Regulus to one of the mats off to the side. It's not directly in the center of the room, but everyone will be able to see them. They both kick off their shoes, then step up.

"No damage to the face," James reminds Regulus, because Sirius had been *very* clear on that, and so had Pandora. They want no visible bruises before the upcoming interviews.

"I know," Regulus says, rolling his eyes. "I'm not going to punch you in the face, James."

"Well, you've already done it once," James teases, grinning when Regulus' face turns red.

"That was an *accident,"* Regulus mumbles, "and I thought we agreed to never talk about it."

"No, you just demanded that I never mention it."

"Which you're ignoring."

"You gave me a nosebleed."

"I was *thirteen."*

James chuckles and bounces on the balls of his feet. "A very feisty thirteen year old, going around assaulting people."

"You broke into my house through my window!" Regulus sputters. "It was the middle of the night. I thought you were an intruder. What was I supposed to do in that situation?"

"Well, I didn't expect you to scream, roll out of bed, and punch me in the face," James admits, laughing helplessly as Regulus' face glows brighter. "I thought it was Sirius' room, you know that. All I wanted to do was sneak into my best friend's room, and instead, his little brother nearly broke my nose."

"And now I'm tempted to again," Regulus grumbles.

James shakes his head and bounces some more, his chest warm at the memory. He had really been trying to sneak into Sirius' room, so he wasn't at all prepared for the fist that collided with his face as soon as he slipped through the window. As soon as Regulus realized it was him, he'd started stuttering apologies as James groaned and bent over, clutching his face because it had fucking *hurt.* He remembers that it had left him stunned, though, dazed as he'd stared at a rambling Regulus in pure disbelief, so startled because he never even saw him coming. That's a common theme with him, really.

Regulus had been so embarrassed, and he'd rushed to get a towel for James' nose, his cheeks red. He'd nearly been in tears. James remembers sitting on his bed as Regulus apologized over and over, then laughing helplessly, only to groan at the pain that caused. Regulus had held the towel to his face until James smiled at him, and then he'd turned red again and left quickly to go get Sirius. Of course, when Sirius heard what happened, he'd laughed so hard that he actually had to lay on the floor, and poor Regulus looked like he wanted to crawl under his bed and never come out again.

Those were simpler times. Back before Sirius went into the arena. Back before Regulus hated James. Back before James knew what it was to feel like a failure. They were so young.

"Are you going to stand there all day, or…?" Regulus raises his eyebrows and shifts on his feet ever so slightly.

"Best not to leave it to a tap out," James muses, lips curling up at the corners. "You're so stubborn that you'd never."

"Well, at least you know," Regulus replies, a flash of amusement passing through his eyes.

James nods, and then he moves in. He hasn't really done anything like this with anyone other than Sirius, but he *has* done it enough *with* Sirius that he knows what to do. In a way, it's like a dance, one where your partner is actually your opponent and you have to anticipate their steps while doing your best not to give your own away. You have to pay attention and focus, relying on defense and offense interchangeably, knowing which one is most efficient.

Regulus has likely never done this with anyone other than Sirius either, so this means he knows all the same things that James knows. Like James, he doesn't tense up, and he remains watchful of every move James makes.

Distantly, James knows that people are watching them, that they've gathered something of a crowd, but he doesn't care. His world narrows down to Regulus, and that's it.

There's the first few tentative shifts of their bodies circling each other like a dance, or a stand-off, and then Regulus skips backwards when James makes the first swipe for him, light on his feet. It happens again, then again, and then James picks up on how to anticipate it, catching his arm. Regulus immediately grabs James' hand and whirls around, twisting it around his back. He uses the momentum to shove James in the back, sending him stumbling forward a few steps.

When James turns back around, Regulus is still in the same place, loose and relaxed. Huffing a laugh under his breath, James shakes his head and moves in again.

"You and your evasive maneuvers," James mutters as Regulus once again dances out of range.

Regulus sends him a quick smile, there-and-gone in a flash. Oh, he's enjoying this. "Surely you didn't think I would make it *easy,* did you, James?"

"You? Never," James says. "Less fun that way anyway."

"This isn't about fun. This is about survival."

"Who says it can't be both?"

"Only you would think that way," Regulus tells him.

James grins and shifts forward, catching Regulus' elbow when he starts to lift it and hooking his foot around the back of his calf to sweep his legs right out from underneath him. Regulus goes down, hitting the mat with a thud and a soft wheeze, the breath knocked from his lungs. James peers down at him smugly. "See? That was fun."

Regulus narrows his eyes, and then James yelps when cold fingers wrap around his ankle and *yank.* Again, he doesn't see it coming, so he trips backwards, and Regulus lifts his leg and *pushes* so that James goes down. James lands pretty hard, groaning once he's there, blinking rapidly. It takes him a second to catch his breath, and then he's rolling over in just enough time to catch Regulus' wrist.

There's a brief struggle, Regulus' knee hitting James in the stomach and James twisting Regulus' arm back. They roll, then roll again, and then Regulus rolls right on top of him, gripping James by the wrists and slamming him down to the mat.

"Still having fun?" Regulus asks, somehow managing to arch an eyebrow even as his chest heaves from exertion.

"So much," James wheezes, then rolls his wrists and bucks his hips as he flings himself to the side. He weaves an arm over and under Regulus', shoving him face down as he drops his knee into the middle of Regulus' back. He could wrench Regulus' arm up, but there would be no point, seeing as he'd let James break it before he'd ever tap.

Regulus curses under his breath, letting his forehead press to the mat as he breathes hard. His body is tense, and James sees the sweat that slides over the back of his neck, disappearing into his collarbone. After a beat, Regulus relaxes all at once, then reaches back with his free hand to hook his fingers in the crook of James' bent knee. He snatches on it at the same time that he rocks his body to the side, making James sway and nearly fall over. Regulus manages to turn over underneath him, freeing his arm, but now James is just straddling his hips and frantically trying to grapple for his wrists.

It doesn't work very well, honestly. Regulus just knocks his hands away, grabs onto James' hips, and fully *tosses* him to the side, using the momentum of his own roll to counteract James' weight. Yet again, James hits the mat, flat on his back, with a grunt and muffled curse. Regulus just follows him right over.

"Fucking stay down, would you?" James groans.

"You first," Regulus gasps out. He has James' hands caught between each knee and James' own body, holding them in place while one hand presses on the middle of James' chest. The other is holding James' shoulder, keeping him pinned.

James blows out a deep breath, his mind racing. He tries to wriggle his fingers, but Regulus' knees squeeze his sides tighter, keeping James' hands trapped. Honestly, James can't move much, or he doesn't think so. It takes him a minute to remember that he can bend his knees, and then he does just that, throwing his leg up into Regulus' back hard enough to displace him just the bit he needs to get his hands free.

As Regulus balances again, James locks his hands around each of Regulus' wrists in just enough time to yank his arms back as he lifts himself up. This shifts them a bit until Regulus is just sitting on James' thighs as James sits up and pins his arms behind his back. It puts them at an impasse, because Regulus can't get his hands free, and James can't get Regulus off of him, so they're pressed chest-to-chest, panting as they stare at each other and try to come up with what to do next.

"Well," James says, finally, "what now?"

"I'm thinking," Regulus admits.

James snorts weakly. "Oh, are you? Do take your time."

"I can't headbutt you, that would damage your face," Regulus complains. He pauses, then clears his throat. "And mine."

"Nice to know which one is the priority for you."

"You know, actually, I'm rethinking that decision. At this point, it would be worth it."

"Don't be a sore loser," James teases.

Regulus scoffs. "Are you joking? If I had my dagger, you'd be dead ten times over already."

"Mm, but you don't." James grins at him, then bites his lip when Regulus lets his head roll back as he groans. "Oh, don't do that. You're giving me all sorts of filthy ideas."

"Am I?" Regulus lifts his head and narrows his eyes at him, tugging on his hands, but James keeps his wrists firmly locked behind his back. Regulus huffs. "Well, realistically, I can't do anything else, and you can't do anything else, so that's that."

"There are a lot of things we could do in this position," James corrects, then grins when Regulus glares at him. "Oh, you meant the—right, sorry, I was thinking of other things."

"Sirius told you not to flirt with me."

"Yes, he did. *You* didn't. Funny, that."

"You won't be able to flirt with me when you're dead," Regulus informs him, the flush on his face not fading in the least.

James just hums. "Suppose I'll have to live long enough to keep doing it some more."

"If you get close enough to try, you won't get the chance."

"What are you going to do? Crawl in my lap and let me hold your hands behind your back? Oh no, I'm *terrified."*

"You have two seconds to let me go, or I'll just headbutt you and let Sirius yell at us," Regulus snaps. "One—"

"Alright, alright," James concedes, dropping his hands, because that's his *I'm not fucking around* voice. James has heard it enough over the years to know it well.

"Idiot," Regulus says as he immediately, without hesitation, slams James back down to the mat by his shoulders.

"You know, I'd say you've really come a long way," James murmurs breathlessly, hands settling on Regulus' hips—and he could attempt to throw him off, but he won't.

Regulus raises his eyebrows at him, hands going slack against James' shoulders, sliding further apart like he's feeling them beneath his palms. "Have I? How so?"

"Well, we've come from you punching me in the face when you were only thirteen, and now here you are at twenty-five, using me as a seat and manhandling me as you like," James tells him, huffing out a laugh as Regulus stops leaning down over him, slowly sitting up. As he does so, his hands slip over James' shoulders and slide down his chest. James *sees* Regulus catch his bottom lip between his teeth, eyes tracking the movement of his own hands. Struggling not to laugh, James squeezes his waist gently. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Sadly, yes, at least a little," Regulus confesses, which leaves James feeling rather triumphant, actually. Regulus shakes his head and gently taps James just between his lowest ribs, the hollow of his stomach. "You are *unholy,* James, do you know that? It's not fair. You should *not* be this—this—"

"Fit? Attractive? Sexy? Irresistible?" James lists off.

"Athletically inclined," Regulus fills in with a scowl. A very cute scowl, but a scowl nonetheless.

James grins up at him. "You hate it, don't you?"

"With a burning passion."

"So you feel passion for me."

Regulus rolls his eyes and pushes his fist into James' stomach hard enough to make him grunt and curl up a little bit. With a thin smile, Regulus reaches out and pats James' cheek as he groans quietly. "Something like that."

"Brilliant. Love that for me," James wheezes as Regulus launches himself up off him. James presses both hands to his stomach, breathing hard, and then a hand is held out above him. Regulus waits, eyebrows raised, and James—after he catches his breath again—reaches up to take it.

"Again?" Regulus asks as he helps haul James to his feet.

James chuckles. "You're like a snake measuring my body to know precisely how you need to kill me." Regulus' lips twitch, but he doesn't deny it. James shakes his head and shifts on his feet. "Yeah, alright. Let's go again."

They go again, and again, and a few more times for good measure, until they're both just sprawled out on the mat, panting as they stare up at the ceiling. They've been in every position possible at this point, and each of them has won at least once. James now knows what it's like to have Regulus' thighs around his head, and when he'd made the comment that he could now die a happy man, Regulus had *squeezed* as if he was trying to pop his head like a melon. James didn't even try to get out of that one, if he's honest.

People stopped watching the show about halfway in when it became apparent that they weren't actually going to try to kill each other. Some of them even seemed surprised or amused to hear James flirting with Regulus at literally every available opportunity. Irene had asked if she could train with James, and Regulus thankfully shut her down with a simple, sharp *no, find anyone else,* which saved James from finding a way to refuse.

The training room is emptying out now, people leaving and getting ready for personal evaluations. James knows he and Regulus need to get up and leave, but neither of them do for a long moment. They remain on the mat, chests heaving as they lay side-by-side, completely worn out.

Surprisingly, it's Regulus who breaks the silence first. His voice is quiet. "Sometimes, I try to picture putting these skills to use, and it's not—it isn't clear. It won't be like this, James. Not in the arena. We'll be fighting for our lives."

I'll be fighting for yours, James doesn't say. He can't bring himself to say it, and he doesn't know why. Maybe he should. Maybe he should just tell Regulus that he plans to help him get home, but he just—he can't. It won't make Regulus hate him less. James knows it'll make Regulus hate him more.

"I know," is the response James settles for.

"You can't hesitate," Regulus whispers, sounding grave. He pushes himself on his elbow and peers down at James, his throat bobbing. "Not even for a second, not for anyone."

James gazes up at him. "Not even for you?"

"Not even for me," Regulus says softly, and then he gives James a smile. It's small and sad. "But I'm faster."

"Yes, you are," James admits, because he is. "So, as long as you don't hesitate, I won't even get the chance to."

The thing is, James doesn't believe Regulus will kill him, given the chance. It's hard for him to even conceptualize it. He's known Regulus since he was ten years old, just a young boy being carried around on his big brother's back because he wasn't feeling well, asleep on his shoulder. James thought he was younger when he first saw him, because he looked so innocent and small when he was sleeping, a wet spot of drool on Sirius' shoulder under his slack mouth. It had surprised James to learn he was a year younger—nearly two younger than Sirius. *He's just a baby,* James had thought.

James grew out of thinking that about Regulus, eventually, and Regulus stopped being sweet soon enough. That doesn't mean James doesn't remember. That doesn't mean James doesn't know he's capable of it. Regulus, with his scowls and harsh words, used to smile and stutter and default to kindness as his first instinct. He used to be *shy.* All of those things still exist within him; they just manifest differently now.

James doesn't always have Regulus figured out, not the way he used to, but he knows one thing for sure. Regulus isn't a killer. He *is* a survivor, and he'll do what it takes to survive, but he won't go out of his way to hurt anyone. Especially not James. He can say what he likes, but after all these years, Regulus' eyes are the same, if nothing else, and James needs only look in them to see who he really is.

"Then you won't get the chance to, because I'm not going to hesitate," Regulus tells him quietly, not for the first time, and James just doesn't believe that at all.

Maybe that's a risk, but James looks into Regulus' eyes, and he feels completely, entirely safe.

As if he can sense the source of his weakness, Regulus drops his gaze and pushes himself up all the way, standing to his feet. He could walk away and leave James behind, but he doesn't.

He offers his hand, holding it out to him.

James reaches up and takes it.

Chapter End Notes

quick recap:

Bernice and Peter's mentor: Antonin Dolohov
Axus and Willa's mentor: Corban Yaxley
Avery and Mulciber's mentor: Lucius Malfoy
Irene and Mathias' mentor: Frank Longbottom
Evan and Juniper's mentor: Emmeline Vance
Dylan's mentor: unknown
Quinn's mentor: unknown
Vanity's mentor: unknown
Hodge's mentor: unknown
Regulus and James' mentor: *looks into the camera like im on the office*
All other tributes and their mentors: unknown

just putting that information ^ there for your theories, because as of now, that's all you know.

regulus when he was small: im just a baby
james, upon meeting him: he's just a baby!

regulus now: i will cut you
james now: he's just a baby!

we love james being consistent. 😭😭😭

not james and regulus flirting in the middle of preparing to fight to the death. hello????
now is NOT the time, guys. get it together. lmao james really said: YOLO 🤪

also we will be seeing more of sirius and remus next chapter. i miss them :(

Evaluation Aftermath

Chapter Notes

hi, again!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-themes and references to death
-very vague references to torture (implied, really)
-an argument
-angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus knows he shouldn't. He *knows* it's a bad idea, and Sirius would be *furious* if he found out, because he made it very clear from the beginning not to antagonize the gamemakers.

The thing is, when Regulus goes into his evaluation in the afternoon of the last training day, he walks in with a plan. It's a simple plan already approved by Sirius. Go in, show off with various daggers, then leave. Very simple.

He means to do this, and he does for the most part, but…

Well, it's just that Regulus detests this entire experience, even more so when glancing up to see the various people up there watching him intently, laughing and looking excited when he shows them what he's capable of. Just a pawn for them. A character in their show. They don't understand the gravity of his situation; they don't know what's at stake; they don't know what it's like to be afraid, even for a moment.

Regulus wants them to be afraid, to come face-to-face with their own frail existence. Horace Slughorn is the head gamemaker, and he's the one Regulus aims for. It's a quick snap of his wrist, and the dagger flies through the air, burying itself in the cushion right next to Slughorn's head. Regulus aims close enough to slice off one strand of hair that drifts down to his shoulder, but not close enough to actually injure him.

They all fall silent, and Slughorn slowly turns his head to stare at the handle of the knife with wide eyes. He reaches up and pulls the hair off his shoulder, holding it up in visible disbelief, and they're all shaken. Regulus can see that it scared them, and he relishes in it. When they all look at him, he gives a mock bow and walks out with his head held high.

Yeah, Sirius can never know about this.

~•~

"You *threw* a dagger at his *head?!"* Sirius bellows, feeling dangerously close to going fully fucking mental. He raises his arms and waves them wildly. "Have you lost your *mind?!* What were you thinking?! Do you have *any* idea—"

"Can you just—not?" Regulus cuts in wearily, rubbing the side of his head with a sigh. "How did you even find out?"

"Slughorn came complaining to me about it, telling me to keep my tributes in line," Sirius snaps, his nostrils flaring. "You can't just do things like that, Reggie! You don't understand how you put not only yourself but James and also *me* at risk when you act like a selfish, unthinking *child!"*

Regulus glares at him. "That's rich, coming from you."

"This is the Hallow!" Sirius explodes, smacking the back of one hand into his other open palm. "The rules are *different* here. You can't just do whatever you want to whoever you want just because you're feeling a little angry. Breaking news, but we're *all* feeling a little fucking angry! Every move you make, every word you speak, every choice you go with—it reflects on you, and not only you, but on *us.* And that controls just how much fucking danger we're in, do you understand?"

"Well, clearly you're blowing this out of proportion," Regulus snaps defensively, gesturing to the screen. "You saw my score. It was higher than everyone else's."

Sirius could strangle him. He could *actually* strangle his stubborn, innocent little brother. He really could. "That's not a *good thing,* Regulus! That's bad! That's very, *very* bad, you fucking idiot. What do you think that score tells everyone else, hm? What do you think it tells the enemies you've *already made?* Go on." Regulus doesn't answer, choosing to look away, his jaw clenched. "It tells them that you're a threat, and not only that, but you're a bigger one than they realized. It makes them bitter and eager to hunt you down and *slaughter you."*

"They were already planning to do that anyway, and you know it," Regulus grits out.

"Can you just—can you at least fucking *try* to listen to me?" Sirius hisses, his blood pumping, pent up anger and stress and worry leaving him restless and itchy. "I need you to care. I need you to use your fucking brain. I am *responsible* for you, do you realize that? Everything you do, it falls on me as well, and that puts me in danger and makes my job to help *you* survive in that arena just a bit harder, so if you could just—"

"Alright!" Regulus shouts, throwing his hands up as shoves himself up from his seat. "Alright, I get it, just *shut up,* would you? I think you've made your point, Sirius. I can't do anything right for you, I'm not enough like James, I'm a huge fucking disappointment—right, got it, you've only been making that very blatantly obvious for last *decade."*

Regulus whirls around and marches off, and after a long beat, there's the loud slam of his door. Sirius stares after him, passing his hand over his mouth as he exhales harshly through his nose, fighting the lump that's forming in his throat. His eyes sink shut for a brief moment, and then he drops his hand and glances over at Pandora and James, who are both very still and very quiet in their chairs.

"Good talk," Sirius mumbles, heaving a sigh as he shakes his head and turns to move into the kitchen, going primarily for the liquor cabinet that's waiting in there.

"Sirius." That's James, of course, following him and speaking gently. When Sirius glances over at him, James' eyes are sad.

"I—I have to be harder on him, you know that, because he's in so much danger, James. He doesn't even realize—" Sirius chokes off, his head ducking as he stands before shelves of wine and various liquor for him to choose from.

"Sirius," James repeats, even softer this time.

Staring at the drink options is pointless when his vision is blurring with tears. Sirius swallows thickly. "That score was a punishment, and they'll punish him in the games. He's going to get himself killed. He's—he's—"

"Stop. Hey, Sirius, stop," James whispers, moving over to grab him by the shoulder, turning him so that they're looking at each other. "I'm not going to let that happen, alright?"

"You can try, we both can try, but sometimes—" Sirius inhales sharply, the tears spilling out when he blinks. "Sometimes it's not that simple, James. And—and then there's you. Because you're not—because you've decided—"

James cuts him off by pulling him into a tight hug, and Sirius' words fail him from there. He doesn't try to say anything else, unwilling to voice how unfair all of this is, how hard it is, how it's chipping at him and wearing him down until he's feeling like he's falling apart *all the time.* Instead, Sirius buries his face into James' shoulder and tries not to cry too much.

It feels wrong, in a way, to need James to comfort him now, when he's the one going into the arena. Sirius should be the one comforting him, and he knows it. He hasn't really had the time between trying to do everything he can to keep them both alive. How James is handling all of this, Sirius doesn't really know; he doesn't think James would be honest about it either.

James can act like he's settled in his choice all he likes, but Sirius knows it's not as simple as that. People aren't just at peace with their decision to die in a situation such as this. James must be scared, worried, stressed; yet, despite it all, he's the one holding Sirius right now, as steady as a rock.

Sirius pulls away, ashamed, and he shakes his head as he swipes his wrist under his eyes. He turns to compose himself, grabbing the first bottle of amber liquid he comes across and two glasses. The worst part is, Sirius still hasn't faced it, hasn't come to terms with James' choice. He knows James wants him to respect it, but how is Sirius supposed to do that? With his little brother on the other side, it's all so fucking complicated.

Sirius *still* doesn't know how he's supposed to do this, and yet here he is, doing it. Because that's all he can do.

"Regulus didn't mean that, you know," James murmurs as Sirius pours them both a glass.

"Yes, he did," Sirius rasps, sitting the bottle down. "And he's right, isn't he? When I got back from the arena—"

"When you got back from the arena, you were *hurt,* Sirius. You don't need to apologize for how you healed. How you're still healing," James says firmly. "You did nothing wrong by leaving that house and coming to mine."

"I asked him to come," Sirius confesses for the very first time, and James looks surprised. Sirius looks away. "Two years later. Two years too late."

"I asked him the day you moved in," James admits.

Sirius stares down at his drink and whispers, "He needed to hear it from me. He needed me to be the one to ask, and I—I didn't. I didn't until I knew he wouldn't come."

"You didn't until you *could,"* James corrects softly. "Sirius, don't feel guilty for what you went through. You were—you did your very best."

"James," Sirius croaks, "I couldn't even look at him."

To that, James has no reply. Sirius works his jaw, then lifts his drink to knock it back all at once, eyes sinking shut at the burn that flares as it goes down.

The truth is, Sirius couldn't look at Regulus. Couldn't be near him. Couldn't talk to him. Couldn't do anything with him, or for him, because Sirius was a fucking mess. He was broken irreparably, and he didn't know how to handle it.

Sirius couldn't figure out how he was supposed to look his little brother in the eye knowing that Regulus watched him murder in his name. Everything Sirius did—all of it—was so Regulus didn't have to, and that's a lot to put on one person, especially a fifteen year old boy who looked up to him. Sirius returned home *wrong,* and he didn't want Regulus to know, to see it. He's Regulus' older brother, the one who carried him around when he was tired and took care of him when he was sick and volunteered when his name was called.

Sirius didn't want Regulus to see what he'd become, to look at him and remember what he'd done for him. Regulus was the mirror that Sirius was avoiding, too horrified by the reflection of all that he'd done to even come close enough to catch a glimpse.

Regulus couldn't look at him either. Sirius doesn't remember much from that first year when he returned, but he does recall that Regulus was different. Harsher, colder, distant, and defensive. It only got worse as the years went by, and Sirius could only look at him and know he'd done that to him. It was his fault. Sirius went into the arena and fought to get back to his little brother, only to come back and lose him anyway.

Regulus hasn't said it. He has never said it, and Sirius thinks he will die before he ever admits it, but Sirius is sure that Regulus regrets that he ever took his place.

"You're being hard on yourself," James tells him as he swirls his drink in his glass. "You're working yourself spare trying to help Regulus *and* me. Don't think I haven't noticed."

"It's not half difficult, I'll tell you that," Sirius mutters under his breath, reaching out to swipe James' glass from his hand, drinking it if he won't. "Regulus isn't making it *easier."*

James snorts. "Well, it's *Regulus.* You know how he is, and honestly, can you blame him? As if *you* wouldn't like to make the gamemakers shit themselves out of fear." James shakes his head, ducking his head to hide his grin, though Sirius can see it anyway. "That was fucking brilliant."

"James," Sirius scolds lightly, and James gives him a *look.* Sirius tries to keep a straight face, but then he can't help it; a chuckle slips out, and then he's laughing, because it really *is* fucking brilliant. Deep down, Sirius is so proud. He wishes he could have been there to see it, if he's honest.

For a moment, despite everything, they're both just two best friends laughing at the absurdity of Regulus launching a fucking dagger at someone's head. It's so surreal, and they both laugh so hard that they're bent over wheezing, nearly in tears. The acceptable kind of tears this time. James makes everything better; he always has.

"What's worse," Sirius continues, as the laughter fades, "they all think you and Regulus are in some sort of personal battle. They're pitting you against each other, can you believe that?"

"Can't you just tell them we're friends?" James asks.

"Oh, I could, and I've tried, but that's not what they want to hear," Sirius complains. "They want *drama.* They want a story they can get invested in. All the greatest stories have fighting, so of course that's what they want to see."

"I know you're worried," James says, "but what happens will happen regardless. I know you're trying for both of us, and you're doing all that you can, but you have to take care of yourself, too. You—you have to take care of yourself, Sirius." He swallows, looking more solemn as he holds Sirius' gaze. "You have to, do you understand?"

Sirius' lungs seem to shrivel. "James."

"Even when—" James takes a shaky breath, dropping his gaze as he exhales, eyes squeezing shut. "Even when I'm not here to make sure that you do, you have to take care of yourself."

"James, don't. I can't. I—"

"Promise me."

"Stop it," Sirius chokes out, his eyes stinging again. He can't do this. He can't claw himself out of this state of denial. It's a weak, desperate thing to cling to, but he won't accept anything else. He won't do it.

James reaches out to lay his hand on Sirius' arm, chasing Sirius' gaze until he can't evade him anymore. "Please, Sirius. I need you to promise, and I need you to keep it. You have to, alright? I need you to do that for me. Will you do that, please?"

Sirius will do anything for James, but he doesn't know how he's supposed to do this. He doesn't know how he can. Yet, Sirius rasps, "I promise."

The thing is, it's a lie, because Sirius will do anything for James, but he won't be able to do this.

"Thank you," James whispers, none the wiser.

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Regulus isn't in his room when James knocks and tentatively pokes his head in. It's been over an hour now, so James is hoping he's cooled off, even just a bit. The door to his balcony is cracked, a gentle breeze flowing in. James approaches it, then hesitates, then shakes his head and keeps going.

The balcony is wide enough to hold two chairs and a small table between them, a crystal ashtray sitting in the center. James isn't surprised to see that it's empty and clean; Sirius is the one who smokes occasionally, not Regulus. As for Regulus, he's just sitting in the chair with his legs folded up under him as he peers down at the people walking on the streets, looking like strange, colorful ants from this height.

Regulus doesn't even look up as he sharply says, "What makes you think I want anything to do with *you* right now?"

"Er," James says, and Regulus sighs. There's a long beat of silence before James carefully settles in the open chair, clearing his throat. "Well, better me than anyone else, I'd assume. I mean, I can go get Sirius if you like—"

"I'd rather not be bothered by *anyone,"* Regulus clarifies.

"I just want to check on you," James murmurs.

"I'm fine," Regulus says.

James studies him and quietly asks, "Are you?"

"I have to be," Regulus tells him. "We all do."

"None of us are, and we can't be, not with all of this," James counters, turning his head to watch the people on the street with a small frown. "I don't think trying to force ourselves helps any of us, and pretending to be fine is...pointless."

Regulus doesn't say anything. He just hugs his leg closer to his chest, leaning his chin on his knee. He's had a shower. His hair is damp and curly, and he's changed into soft clothes, like he's ready for bed. He looks sleepy, actually, or maybe just tired. There's a difference; one is adorable and one is sad, and somehow, Regulus manages to be both.

"Sirius—"

"I don't want to talk about Sirius, James. I really don't."

"Right." James releases a quiet sigh, tucking his lips in and ducking his head to stare at his fingers in his lap. He pinches one of his knuckles, then glances back up, scanning the side of

Regulus' face. "Do you remember your fifteenth birthday?"

Regulus lifts his head slightly and turns it just to rest his cheek on his knee, looking at James through half-lidded eyes. There's a ghost of a smile on his face, faint and barely there. His voice is so soft when he says, "Yes, I remember."

"It snowed the night before," James recalls, lips tugging up at the corners. "Sirius dragged you all the way to my house in at least five layers and that hat you used to always wear. The lumpy one with the little frayed ball on top."

"Sirius made it for me," Regulus murmurs, his eyes drifting shut. Like this, he looks peaceful. "It used to have a bell in the ball, you know, that way Sirius could hear me coming. He used to say I moved like a ghost, too quiet. That was before you two met. By the time you came into the picture, the bell had stopped ringing. We could never work out why."

"I never knew that," James muses. "That day, your birthday… I remember we spent *hours* outside in the snow. We built that snowman on my front lawn, and you just put your hat on it. You forgot it there when we went off to make snow angels."

"Never did see it again," Regulus says softly.

"Well, you and Sirius had to leave quickly so you wouldn't get in trouble by your parents, and I—" James clears his throat when Regulus' eyes flutter open. "You just—left it, so I took it inside. I meant to give it back to you, but—"

"But, two days later, life as we knew it fell apart," Regulus fills in, huffing out a bitter laugh.

James looks down at his fingers again. "Yeah."

"Suppose it doesn't matter now," Regulus mutters, letting his eyes drift shut again.

"I still have your hat," James confesses. Regulus' eyebrows furrow, but his eyes don't open. "It's—it's, ah, in the top drawer in the stand by my bed."

"James," Regulus says slowly, "it's been ten years."

"Yeah, I know," James mumbles. "But...just in case you ever wanted it back, or...I don't know. It's—that's where it is."

"Why would you do that?" Regulus whispers, eyes finally opening again. "Why would you keep it?"

"It was important to you," James says.

Regulus stares at him for a long time, not saying a word, and there's something unbearably gentle about his eyes right now. James watches them shift from that tenderness to something much more devastating; simple grief. "Sirius told me the day before the reaping that he would make me a new one and put a bell in it for me. I never saw that one either."

James struggles to speak past the lump in his throat and finds that he can't, because it goes so much deeper than just a hat, and he knows that. For Regulus, for Sirius, it's about all that changed for them both. They were so young to have gone through so much. Neither of them deserved it. None of them deserve what they're going through now.

"That sounds stupid, doesn't it?" Regulus asks, dropping his gaze to his own fingers that pluck at the seam on his knee. There's no loose thread, but he's searching for one. "What does a hat matter in all of that, really? It doesn't. It never mattered to me more than him. James, it was never about the hat, or the daggers, or all the things he did for me."

"I know," James rasps, and Regulus closes his eyes again, not speaking for a long time. His fingers drift up and down the scrunched seam where his knee is bent; he couldn't seem to find a thread to pluck on. James focuses back on his fingers, his chest feeling tight. "I remember the snow in your hair."

"What?" Regulus mumbles, one eye cracking open lazily, almost like a cat. No, *exactly* like a cat. A very suspicious cat that wants something but won't tell you what it is.

James coughs and reaches up to scratch at the back of his neck. "Just—on your birthday, I remember the snow that got in your hair. When—just, you know, after you got up from the snow angel you made. You'd already taken your hat off, and there was a bit of snow in your hair, like a faint dusting of it. I don't know why I—well, I mean, I just remember it."

"Okay," Regulus says, both eyes open now, but not very much. He's just squinting at him, still suspicious.

"I don't know," James mutters, dropping his hand to thread his fingers together. He stares down at them, but his mind seems to rewind, casting back to that day. "You looked—really happy. I think that's the last time I saw you look that happy. I remember right after, I was laughing with Sirius, and a fucking snowball just hit me in the back of my head out of nowhere."

Regulus' face twitches, and there it is—that tiny smile that opens up his eyes a bit more, showing how warm they can be when they're filled with amusement and secret delight. "I wanted your attention."

"You got it," James replies dryly, and Regulus turns his head to press his smile against his knee. James wishes he wouldn't. He wants to see it. "Yeah, you definitely got it."

It's true. James remembers that moment in perfect clarity, because it was an impactful one. Sirius had been chattering about the snow fort they just *had* to build, speaking grandly about how magnificent it would be, and James could only laugh about each ridiculous additional idea he kept coming up with, as well as the silly names he suggested for it.

The thing is, James did hear Regulus call his name the first, second, *and* third time. He just didn't care enough to turn around, much more interested in what Sirius was saying to pay attention to his little brother. Regulus stopped calling his name, and James promptly forgot all about him—for about five seconds. Regulus, who was becoming less and less shy as he got older, launched a snowball at the back of his head so hard that Sirius had shut up mid-sentence and James had just gaped at him in pure disbelief for about two seconds.

Sirius, of course, proceeded to *roar* with laughter, literally folding in half and slapping his knee, a stream of praise for his little shit of a brother falling out of his mouth. Meanwhile, James slowly reached up to brush the clumps of snow out of his hair and pivoted on the spot, fully prepared to threaten Regulus and immediately retaliate by pelting him with snowballs, except he never quite made it that far.

Regulus was standing there with a faint dusting of snow in his dark hair, face flushed with delight, eyes bright with pure satisfaction. He was grinning and wiping his gloves together to get the snow off. It was the first time James had ever looked at him and thought of him as anything other than Sirius' little brother. His breath had caught, because that was the moment he realized Regulus was utterly, undeniably beautiful.

Regulus had fixed his face into something neutral, despite the bright gleam in his eyes, and he'd arched an eyebrow right at James as he said, "I was talking to you. Don't ignore me."

From there, James never ignored Regulus again.

But, really, nothing was the same after that. Two days later, Sirius was volunteering to go to the arena so Regulus didn't have to, and Regulus… Well, Regulus started ignoring James. He never quite stopped, and it only got worse when Sirius made it back home. Regulus' distance had shifted into hatred at some point, and James just had to live with that.

Sometimes, James wonders what would have happened if Regulus' name had never been called, if Sirius didn't volunteer for him, if the games didn't exist at all. Sometimes, James wonders what would have happened if he and Regulus had bothered to pay attention to each other at the same time. There's no point in wondering, really. He'll never know.

"That was a good day," Regulus murmurs, his face soft with fondness. "The last good day, I think. Before—everything."

"You never did tell me what you wanted," James says, which makes Regulus blink over at him. "I mean, you hit me in the back of the head with a snowball, but you never did say why."

"I just wanted you to look at me," Regulus tells him, then jolts and squeezes his eyes shut. "Wait. Wait, no, I didn't—"

"Oh, is that *so?"* James teases, leaning forward with a grin as Regulus groans and begins repeatedly tapping his forehead to his knee. His cheeks are turning red. "You wanted me to look at you? That was all? So you *hit me* in the back of—"

"I was *fifteen,"* Regulus hisses, head snapping up as he glares at James. "Only just!"

"A very violent fifteen year old. You wanted my attention enough to give me brain damage."

"Oh, *please.* I did not hit you that hard."

"It hurt, Regulus."

"It did not hurt, stop exaggerating."

"Did too."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't have ignored me, then."

James hums and braces his elbows on the table, flicking his gaze over Regulus' face—the fading red in his cheeks, the secret smile at the corners of his mouth, the flash of humor in his eyes. "That was the last time I made that mistake."

"That was the last time I cared if you did or not," Regulus informs him bluntly, fucking *ruthless* about it without even having to try that hard. In a split second, all the delight and humor has drained away, and that secret smile has flickered out of existence like a candle being blown out.

"I know," James says softly, sinking back into his seat and tucking his hands under the table again, twisting them in his lap. He watches Regulus' lips press into a thin line before he looks away to stare at his knee, and James drops his gaze to his restless fingers right after.

The silence stretches between them, heavy and stilted. James doesn't know how to break it, and Regulus clearly doesn't care to, so it remains unbroken. Even here, in the silence, James is overly aware of Regulus. It's been ten years, and James still can't find it within himself to ignore him ever again.

Maybe somewhere deep down, where that happy fifteen year old is still alive, despite everything that's tried to smother it, including the twenty-five year old that he is now—maybe there, Regulus still cares, because he eventually does break the silence to say, "Thank you for keeping my hat."

"You're welcome," James replies quietly, and he doesn't say that Regulus will see it again, but he will. He knows where it is now, and James is going to make sure he gets it back. He'll wear it again when this is all over.

James is so fucking sad that he'll never get to see it.

~•~

Remus stares at the door in front of him, the inside of his bottom lip caught as he worries it between his teeth. It's such a simple thing—just lift his hand and knock. He does it all the time, but never in the last five years has he done it of his own free will, just to show up and seek someone out.

It infuriates him that there's fear mixed up within him for doing one simple thing. He's been trained—conditioned—to *not* do this, and he hates that he's struggling with it now. A self-imposed restraint that he would have snarled at and shook off only five years ago. Now, he can't even knock on a door.

Remus takes a deep breath and slowly releases it, waiting for the anxiety-induced racing of his heart to slow. In and out, he breathes, looking down at his feet. There's trust in this, too, and it's *Sirius.* It's Sirius, who has been nothing but kind to him, who has given more reason to trust him than anyone else ever has in the last five years. Sirius even *told him* he could do this, could come and go as he pleases, so there's no need to restrain himself. The worst that happens is that Sirius turns out to be a liar, and Remus ends up dead. Or worse.

Well, that didn't help at all. Remus squeezes his eyes shut, frustrated beyond measure, and he starts to turn away before he forces himself to stop. In all of this, Remus never wanted to lose himself; he never wanted to let them win. This? This would be letting them win. The fear means they already have.

Clenching his jaw, Remus lifts his hand and holds his breath as he knocks. He only does it twice before he's snatching his hand back, his heart racing, nerves pulled tight enough to snap. He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't—

"Remus," Sirius blurts out as soon as the door swings open, his tired eyes immediately growing wider and filling with a startled spark. His hand fumbles on the doorknob, nearly making him stumble, and he violently clears his throat as he straightens up, a weak smile working onto his face.

And, just like that, Remus isn't scared anymore. It's strange what a sense of identity can do for someone, and Remus feels more real each time Sirius says his name. "Sirius. Hi."

"Hi. Hello. Hi," Sirius says, then huffs out a breathy laugh and scrunches his nose. "I—ah, I said hi twice."

"You did," Remus confirms, lips twitching.

"Right. Sorry. Hi," Sirius tells him, then squeezes his eyes shut, cheeks stained red. "Sorry. That's—um, that's probably the last one. Maybe." He coughs and lifts his head again, a sheepish, mortified half-smile on his face. "Is—did Pandora send you? I didn't request more towels."

"No, she didn't, and no, you didn't," Remus agrees, and Sirius blinks at him. Remus wavers, suddenly unsure how to even explain what he's doing. It's been too long since he's had any social interaction, honestly. He thinks, five years ago, he would have been more discreet, maybe less blunt, but now… Well, now he's a lot more direct. "I came here on my own."

Sirius blinks again, and then his whole face lights up. "Oh. You did? That's—that's great! I mean—" He rocks back on his heels, grinning broadly. "Sure, of course. Not that you can't, you can do whatever you want, but...why? Just—do you need something specific? Can I help you with anything?"

"No," Remus says, then chuckles. "I mean, unless you feel like helping me with laundry, which I doubt, so—"

"No! I mean, yes! I mean, I'd love to. Help. With that," Sirius bursts out, then inhales sharply and stares at him.

Remus struggles so hard not to smile, and then he wonders why he's fighting it. He lets it bloom on his face slowly, feeling it, the freedom of it. "You *want* to help me with laundry?"

"Well, if you're offering…" Sirius reaches up and scratches at the side of his neck, shrugging. "I've the time."

"Alright," Remus says slowly, cocking his head. Not exactly his plan, if he's honest, *but* there's something nice about that, about not knowing where he might end up, going with the flow and seeing the freedom in surprise. "Alright, come with me, then."

The laundry room is located in the back of the suite, never used by anyone but the servants. Sirius clearly never even knew it was back here, if the baffled expression on his face is anything to go by. Remus wonders what he thought happened when his clothes disappeared and reappeared in his closet, when his towels were taken and replaced. Not much thought often goes into the process when you're not the one doing it, but Remus *is* the one doing it, so it's always agitated him a bit that no one ever even stopped to think about it. Sirius isn't above his own privileges, and that should bother Remus—it does, a bit—but mostly, it just makes him seem more real, too.

What Remus likes best about Sirius is that he isn't afraid to acknowledge these things. The first thing he says is, "I never even thought about laundry, not once. You do it for all of us, don't you? Here?"

"Yes," Remus admits. "I like Regulus the best, if I'm honest. He keeps his dirty clothes in a neat stack for me to find. I don't have to go searching for them, and he doesn't leave them lying all over his floor." At this, Remus shoots Sirius a pointed look, mildly amused when Sirius looks horrified instantly. "James doesn't leave his wet towels on the floor, which is nice. And Pandora… Well, she never has laundry at all. I think she throws her clothes away, or burns them, or...I don't even know."

"She donates them, or recycles the fabric," Sirius explains, huffing a weak laugh. "Pandora is...a gentle soul, really. She was dealt a good hand, being born in the Hallow, and she doesn't waste that, if she can help it. She tries to help the less fortunate as much as possible."

"Not much like a Hallow at all."

"Not really, no. It's what I like best about her."

Remus hums. "She's kind to me. You all are. Well, Regulus is… Actually, I don't think he's ever spoken to me outside of a quiet hello here or there. Meanwhile, James talked to me for almost an hour yesterday about something he'd learned while training. Did you know that some moths and butterflies will drink blood and tears from people? It's called mud-puddling. I didn't know that until James felt the need to tell me."

"Oh, James," Sirius says with palpable fondness, chuckling under his breath as he shakes his head. "Sounds like him."

"I saw you two earlier in the kitchen, you know," Remus confesses as he turns around to face the clothes in a pile on the table. His voice comes out measured with tentative curiosity, unable to help it. "I didn't mean to. I was just walking by. I didn't linger, I promise."

Sirius walks around the other side of the table, watching Remus sort the clothes into separate, smaller piles with a furrow in his brow. "Sorry if we were in your way. You could have come

in if you needed to. Um, what are you doing?"

"Sorting the clothes," Remus explains. "Some have to be washed at different temperatures, some can't be dried, and some can't be washed together."

"Oh," Sirius says weakly. He looks very out of his depth as he lifts his gaze to Remus'. "I didn't know that." Again, Remus likes that he just—admits it. "Can I...help?"

"You can separate the white clothes from the rest," Remus says, lips curling up. Sirius looks relieved and immediately starts doing what he's told. Remus likes that, too. "I didn't want to interrupt. You and James, I mean. It looked like an intimate moment. You two seem...close."

"Yeah, we are," Sirius murmurs, smiling softly, and then he blinks before his gaze snaps up. "Oh, you mean—do you think—no, no, no, I swear we're not—we're just best friends. It was intimate, but not *intimate.* Not like—we're not together."

"Okay," Remus replies casually, nodding easily as he keeps sorting through clothes.

"We've never been together," Sirius apparently feels the need to add. "Just best friends. I mean, I've known him since I was eleven years old. He's…" Sirius' face softens into something much sadder. "He's the best friend I've ever had."

Remus feels his heart clench, because he knows that Sirius is in a difficult position right now, between his little brother and best friend going into the arena. Only one can come out, and the chances of that are depressingly low. "I, ah, have one of those. A very special best friend. I get what you mean."

"You do?" Sirius asks, startled and curious, sucked right out of his sadness in a snap. "Here?"

"No. Back home," Remus murmurs, dropping his gaze to the silk slipping over his fingers. He swallows thickly. "Lily. I haven't seen her in five years, but when you're best friends like

we are—like you and James are—time and distance doesn't really matter, does it? It goes beyond that."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean," Sirius croaks, offering a tight, trembling smile. There's a long beat of silence, and then he clears his throat. "Five years. I can't even imagine being without James for that long. You must miss her."

"Very much. Every day with every breath," Remus admits.

Sirius smiles at him, gently. "You can—I mean, if you want to, you can tell me about her."

And Remus does want to, he realizes, because he misses Lily like a permanent ache in his bones, and it's been so long since he's seen her; he's starved, in a way, desperate to take the chance to talk about her. It's like he can keep her closer if he makes her real to someone other than him.

So, Remus tells Sirius about Lily. In between sorting clothes, he tells Sirius how he and Lily met in school, how they became fast friends, how they ate lunch together every day and went to the train tracks after school just to walk up and down them while talking about nothing and everything as the sun sank down below the tree line. He tells Sirius about the red of Lily's hair, the snort in her hardest laughter, the light that entered her green eyes every time she saw Remus coming.

In between starting the first load of clothes—and giving Sirius a brief lesson on how to use the fancy Hallow machine—he talks about how he and Lily went everywhere together and did everything together, so much so that everyone mostly assumed they were dating. He talks about how they thought, because of those assumptions, that they *had to* date, only to realize after a kiss that sent them both into uproarious laughter that their desires leaned *away* from the opposite sex. He talks about how he was there for Lily when her first girlfriend got taken in the reaping and never made it back home. He talks about how Lily punched his first boyfriend in the face because he was caught kissing another boy from their class.

As they go back to sorting the clothes, Remus talks about how close their families were. Lily was always coming over to the Lupin home, and Remus was always at the Evans house. He talks about the long summers, the heat that brought a flush to Lily's round cheeks, the nights they sat out at the train tracks to watch the lightning bugs flicker. He talks about their

tradition to get high the night before every reaping, smoking and giggling like they had no worries at all.

Remus doesn't talk about when it went wrong. When it all fell apart. When he and Lily were crossing the train tracks for the very first time, running for their lives and going farther than they ever dared to, blood on their hands and Aurors on their heels. He doesn't talk about how only one of them could get away, and how he made sure it was her.

He doesn't even breathe a word about the fact that he doesn't know if she managed to or not, if she's dead or alive, and if she did escape, where she is now.

Because he doesn't mention these things, Sirius essentially shatters his heart by tentatively saying, "I—well, you know I have to be there on the tour back through the districts, so if you wanted to write her a letter, or just send a message, I don't think it would be impossible for me to get it to her."

"Thank you," Remus says softly, swallowing down the lump in his throat, "but it would be impossible. I—I appreciate the offer, though, really. You're very kind, Sirius."

"Alright," Sirius murmurs, eyebrows furrowed. "If you change your mind, the offer is always open."

Remus gives him a tight smile and turns away to put the first load onto dry, then turns back and clears his throat. "The rest of this is really tedious, and there's nothing more that you could do to really help me, so you don't have to stay. Thank you for all your help, but I have it from here."

"I didn't really do anything," Sirius says.

"You listened," Remus tells him. "That's more than anyone else in the Hallow has ever done. I just…"

Sirius scans his face, then he takes a deep breath before slowly releasing it. "Remus, you don't need an excuse to tell me to go away. If—if you want to be alone, you can just tell me you don't want my company. It's alright. I'm not going to… I said you can do whatever you want, and that can include telling me to piss off. You don't have to hold back with me, alright?"

Having it put to him so bluntly makes him realize that this is a fear, too. A faint, flickering fear in the back of his mind that this newfound freedom Sirius has granted him could be taken away if Remus upset him in some way. It's such a small concern that he didn't even notice it, because he doesn't really believe it; doesn't really think Sirius would make something like this conditional. He's so *earnest,* and Remus can feel his trust in Sirius growing stronger with every interaction.

That doesn't mean it's easy. That doesn't mean Remus isn't unconsciously being careful, having doubts, clinging to restraint he's had rewired into his brain after five years. It's like a leap of faith, pushing boundaries even when Sirius tells him that he can. This is bigger than a knock on a door, and yet, with Sirius right there, he's not as afraid as he should be.

"I—I'd like for you to leave," Remus says, and immediately, his heart jolts and takes off in his chest, his stomach dropping right out from under him.

"Alright," is Sirius' quiet response, a tiny smile flickering across his face, and then he pulls back and starts to leave.

"Sirius!" Remus blurts out, a little breathless, and Sirius pauses to glance back, blinking and waiting. It's strange. Remus wants to shrug back into freedom like a familiar, beloved coat, but less so when it involves freedom from Sirius. It's not that Remus forgot that he wanted things; it's that he forgot he was allowed to. He's relearning to navigate that, and he wants to do it with Sirius. "I just—I only want a bit of time. I'm—I still have to make dinner when I finish with the laundry, so if you wanted, you could—I mean, you could help with that, too."

"You don't have to do that, Remus," Sirius says.

"No, I know," Remus breathes out. "I *know,* Sirius."

Sirius bites his lip. "You know I'm not going to be much help in the kitchen."

"Well, that's the thing," Remus tells him, huffing out a soft laugh, "it's your company I really want."

"If you're sure," Sirius says, holding his gaze, his lips twitching at the corners like he's struggling not to grin.

"I'm *very* sure," Remus replies.

"Well, alright," Sirius muses, tucking his lips in, eyes bright. He nods and clears his throat. "I'll just…go make sure I don't have any clothes strewn all over my floor."

Remus looks down with a smile. "Much appreciated. I'll see you in the kitchen in an hour, then?"

"Yeah. Yes. I will—yeah," Sirius answers, stumbling over his words as he backs up. He turns and knocks directly into the door. "Shit." He glances back at Remus, and then he drags his hand down his face as he hangs his head, cheeks red. He opens the door with a cough. "Right. Bye. I mean, see you soon. In the—okay. Bye."

Remus moves over as Sirius ducks out and starts up the hallway, berating himself under his breath as he goes. Remus slowly shuts the door and presses his forehead against it, a small smile curving his mouth. Sirius—more so than anything else he's ever encountered—is Remus' favorite mess. Nothing or no one could ever compare.

Despite that, Remus is glad that he left. Glad that he *would* leave, all because Remus gathered the courage to ask, all because Remus needed him to. Because, right now, Remus really needs to be alone.

He turns and puts his back to the door, slowly sliding down the length of it until he lands on the floor, his knees bent in front of him. His smile is long gone as he stares at the machine

that whirs quietly with the clothes of people who don't even bother to think about who washes them. He can't really see it through the blur of tears in his eyes, because at this moment, the only person he wants to be with is Lily, and he will never get to see her again. He doesn't even know if she's alive.

For the first time in five years, Remus is granted the freedom to sit down and cry about that.

Chapter End Notes

i have been encouraged to ramble at will in my end notes, so ill do it when the mood strikes.

first of all, regulus being a defiant little shit will never not be funny to me, but also, the butterfly effect is real, and regulus just caused a wing flutter.

also, sirius is going THROUGH it. this poor guy is just being pushed to rip all his hair out, like james and regulus are trying to give him a heart attack, at this point. and the complicated relationship between regulus and sirius makes me so sad. it's so, so complex, and honestly, despite the angst of it, it's actually really interesting to navigate and explore. there is no pain like the pain between them, in my opinion. like, that always hurts me the worst.

and sirius being in denial about james deciding to die. he really said: this sign can't stop me, because i REFUSE to read it. 😜 same, sirius. i also do not accept any version of james potter's death. that's valid, king!

but then!!! james and regulus talking!!! the hat!!! the snowball to the back of james' head!!! they're so cute, and at the same time, they're so fucking tragic. james being sad that he'll never see regulus wear the hat again :(

and THEN!!! remus and sirius. i find it absolutely hilarious that they're essentially falling in love in the middle of being very domestic. like, they're cooking and doing laundry together. yes, that's a recurring theme for them. i didn't plan that, honestly. it just kept happening. but it makes me giggle because like, oh there's this big horrible event (the hunger games) about to take place and it's freaking everyone out. cut to sirius and remus flirting while doing laundry 😭

and finally, LILY!!! LILY LILY LILY!!! oh, you all have NO IDEA how excited i was for that mention of her. but also, remus crying because his best friend is possibly dead. oh, that's so sad. their backstory is... well, it's a doozy, lemme just say that.

anyway, hope you all enjoyed!

Interview Preparation

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter:

-an overall background theme of death (because of the whole "possibly dying in an arena" thing)
-references to murder (not explicit, just mentioned)
-references to child abuse (vague, but obvious, yes it's Walburga and Orion's A+ parenting again)
-more references and descriptions of Sirius being objectified by the Hallows
-violent thoughts
-angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius wakes up to a knock on his door, and he can tell it's early because he has to fight the desire to groan and shove his head underneath his pillow to hide away from whoever is trying to drag him to the land of the living before it's time. His sweet oblivion; he misses it already. He can almost feel himself sinking right back into it, eyes drifting shut again as—

Knock, knock, knock.

Muffling a growl under his breath, Sirius tumbles out of bed with one eye squinting as he snarls, "What the fuck do you *want?* It's too fucking early to be—"

Sirius promptly swallows the rest of his words when he opens his door to find Remus standing on the other side, a mild expression on his face. Sirius tries to fix his face into something that's not just squinting at him with one eye like a deranged lunatic.

"Remus, hi," Sirius greets weakly, regretting the last five seconds more than he's regretted anything in his *life,* and he's actually murdered people.

"Good morning, Sirius," Remus says calmly. "Pandora asked that I would wake you up, as you apparently requested an early start to the day."

Sirius grimaces. "Yeah, well, Sirius of the past is a prick, and I don't like him." This makes Remus' lips twitch, but his expression remains fairly neutral otherwise. "Sorry about—you didn't have to do that. You're not an alarm clock. You could have told her no."

"I didn't mind," Remus murmurs. "It got me out of making breakfast. Pandora said everyone knew how to use the toaster, and the day would be so busy that a big breakfast would just hold up the schedule."

"It's—yeah, it's going to be a busy day," Sirius admits wearily, heaving a sigh as he runs his hand through his hair. It's likely sticking up in all different directions, but he tries not to focus on the fact that Remus can see it. "We have to get James and Regulus ready for their interviews tomorrow. It's—well, if I'm completely honest with you, it's going to be difficult."

"Regulus?" Remus asks, because he's spent four days around him by now, and that's all it really takes to know that Regulus isn't the best conversationalist.

"Regulus," Sirius confirms with a sigh.

Remus hums. "I don't suspect James will be much of a problem."

"No, I think his interview will cause the least drama, honestly," Sirius admits. "Regulus… Well, my hopes aren't high, if I'm honest, and we had a fight yesterday, so… And then they have to go be fitted for their outfits with their stylist team while *I* have to go to a fucking party and smooze at sponsors."

"I have to work that party," Remus tells him.

Sirius blinks. "Oh. So, you'll be there?"

"Yes," Remus says. He pauses, slowly lifting his eyebrows at him. "You—you can't talk to me, Sirius. Or remove my mask. Or have anything to do with me there, really. I mean, I'm sure you know that, but...just a reminder."

"Right, no, I know," Sirius replies quickly, despite the fact that his brain was already coming up with increasingly ridiculous scenarios involving literally all of those things. But that's not how it works in the Hallow. He does that, and Remus would be killed. "But, well, I can look at you."

"You...can," Remus agrees, lips curling up. "I suppose that's not a crime."

"That'll be enough to improve my night," Sirius admits, because it's true, and he's so pleased he said it when Remus' smile grows.

Remus hums and looks away, his side profile still giving away the smile on his face. He can't hide it at all. "Right, well, I suppose I should leave you to...starting your day."

"Do you want to come in?" Sirius blurts out.

"Aren't you going to shower and get dressed?" Remus asks, looking at him again with his eyebrows flying up.

Sirius thinks it's unfair that the floor won't open up and swallow him on the spot like he's desperately internally begging it to. "Ah, yeah, but—I mean, you could help me pick out what to wear tonight. So you'll recognize me."

"Sirius, I think you could be in a plastic bag, and I would still recognize you," Remus tells him, amused.

"I'd wear a plastic bag if you told me to," Sirius replies, and he would. He absolutely fucking would.

Remus starts laughing; full, genuine laughter that shakes his body and makes his eyes sparkle and brings a flush of life to his cheeks. He lifts his hand like he's about to cover his mouth to hide it, or smother it, and Sirius' hand snaps out to catch his arm. He pushes it down gently, and Remus' laughter fades slowly, leaving behind a smile and something that shifts in his eyes. Sirius pulls his hand back, his stomach all topsy-turvy and his heart thumping hard in his chest.

Maybe Sirius shouldn't have done that. He's never—he hasn't touched Remus since trying to remove his mask, careful not to do it without permission. In a way, stopping Remus from covering his mouth was—wrong, and presumptuous. He should have let Remus do it, if that's what he wanted to do; he just wasn't thinking, because he liked it, to see his smile and hear his laugh, and Sirius didn't think Remus should feel like he had to cover that at all.

"Sorry," Sirius murmurs. "I wasn't—I shouldn't have—"

"You don't have to hold back with me either, you know," Remus replies quietly, his face softening. "Really, you're fine. Come on, let's pick something for you to wear."

"Not a plastic bag?" Sirius jokes as he turns to let Remus inside, his heart jumping as Remus slips past and very gently, very briefly slides the tips of his fingers over Sirius' arm as he goes by. Sirius swears it makes his whole body tingle; even his scalp is prickling in the aftermath of the barely-there touch.

Remus glances back with a tiny smile. "No promises."

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James is not at all gratified by the tension that exists between Sirius and Regulus right now. It's putting him on edge, if he's honest, because they need to sort their shit out before the games—which starts in *three fucking days,* including this one.

The thing is, James has accepted that he's going to die. Is he happy about it? Well, obviously not. He isn't happy that he'll never see his parents again, that he'll never get to go home again, that he won't get to stay with Sirius, who will need him, who will get older while he can't. No, of course James isn't fucking pleased that he's in this situation, but he's accepted it nonetheless, because this is his choice. The alternative—he can't do that. He *won't* do that.

So, in a way, it feels like a slap to the face that Sirius and Regulus are essentially wasting this time they could spend getting on better terms by remaining stilted and distant. James knows that it's complicated, that they can't just overcome a decade of issues in a handful of days, especially under the very stressful constraints they all exist within now; that being said, he still wishes that they would just—be okay again.

James is annoyed with Regulus, because Sirius is going to need him; James is annoyed with Sirius, because Regulus already does. They love each other *so much,* even more than the other realizes, and if they could just accept that, and *show* that, then things would be better for them. They're both so stubborn, so resistant, and it's driving James mad.

But, because James is always willing to find the bright side to any situation, he can admit that, while all of this is fucking awful, it does nonetheless force Regulus and Sirius to actually interact with each other. Hey, it's something. He'll take it.

Sirius is pacing back and forth, clearly weighing his words very carefully, so at least he's making an effort. The same can't be said for Regulus, who is slumped down in his chair, arms crossed with a scowl etched onto his face. James doesn't think it's fair for someone to look good when they're making such a sour expression, but that's Regulus for you.

"Rita Skeeter," Sirius starts, and Pandora makes a low sound of disdain, which causes Regulus' lips to twitch. James' does as well, frankly, because it hasn't taken very long to grow fond of her. Even Regulus is giving into it, at this point. "She's been doing interviews and commentary for four years now. She's settled in and made a name for herself, beloved by many Hallows, and she knows what she's doing."

"Not *all* Hallows," Pandora grumbles, and James has to stifle a chuckle at the derision in her tone.

Sirius coughs around a laugh. "Ah, originally, Pandora tried to go for the same job, but Rita…"

"Is a vapid, morally corrupt *snake* who will do anything and *anyone* to get what she wants," Pandora snaps, and Regulus' eyebrows fly up, visibly impressed by the poison in her words. He glances over at James, and as soon as their eyes meet, they both quickly look away so they won't bust out laughing. Meanwhile, Pandora huffs. *"Some of us* have standards. I wasn't about to lower those standards or stoop to the level required to get that job. It's an ugly, horrid position, you know. I wanted to go in with *sympathy,* with genuine sincerity to the tributes we meet and lose, but *no,* it's all about the drama. Tch."

"Right, yes, you have *our* sympathy, Pandora," Sirius tells her, seeming to honestly mean it. That softens Pandora quite a bit, and James is once again startled to find that Sirius actually has people he cares about in the Hallow; fellow mentors, a Hallow here and there, and most definitely Pandora. "You certainly would have been the better choice, no doubt, but I'm selfishly grateful to have you to myself anyway. We *all* are, aren't we?"

"Oh, yeah, certainly," James confirms supportively.

"It doesn't make much of a difference to m—ow!" Regulus' scowl deepens as Sirius walks by and whacks him on the back of his head. Sirius gives him a rather stern look, and Regulus rolls his eyes. "Yes, Pandora, we're very grateful for all that you do for us. You're appreciated."

Pandora looks much happier now. "Thank you. If I'm honest, I'm much happier where I am anyway. Carry on, Sirius."

"So, as Pandora so helpfully described, Rita is not a good person," Sirius announces as he continues to pace. "She doesn't give a toss about you. What she cares about is *drama.* She thrives on a story, a scandal, any secret she can find. I've watched her ruin men twice her size during interviews and take them from having countless sponsors to having none."

"She can really do that?" James asks warily.

"She can, and she *will,"* Sirius warns. "If she detects even a hint of weakness, she will absolutely pounce. If there's *anything* for her to uncover, then she will dig it out by the root."

James swallows. "By anything, you mean…?"

"Secrets. Lies. Drama. *Anything* the Hallows will go mental over," Sirius explains. "In your case, James, you're fine. You don't have anything to hide, and there won't be very much drama surrounding you."

"Are—are you sure about that?" James says, high-pitched.

Sirius waves him off lazily. "Quite sure. At most, she'll try to follow the thread on thinking you hate Regulus, but you won't be lying when you tell her that you don't. She'll no doubt ask if you two are squabbling, and she'll drag me into it, but *you're* not the complicated part of that equation."

"That would be me, I'm assuming," Regulus says flatly. He heaves a sigh. "Why does it always come back to me?"

"Because you're a Black, and our family is cursed," Sirius replies, and Regulus snorts weakly, tossing his hands up in some form of agreement. "But yes, it's going to come down to you. Regulus, listen to me, if she catches even a *hint* of a whiff that you have complex feelings for me, she will *pick them apart.* Do you understand what I'm telling you? If you let slip that we're not—that things are more complicated than it seems, she will chip away until there's nothing left, then lay it out for everyone to see. And I do mean *everyone."*

Regulus stares at him, suitably uncomfortable. In a rare show of vulnerability, he whispers, "Sirius, I don't—I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to talk to people. I'm not like you. I can't—I don't know how to be—"

"Regulus," Pandora cuts in gently, "that's why we're here. We're going to help you, alright? You'll be prepared for anything that vile twit could think to throw at you."

"Look at me," Sirius says quietly, crouching down beside Regulus' chair to hold Regulus' gaze. "You can't—you can't shut down, Reggie. When you're up there, you can't retreat into yourself and hide. I know you'll want to, but you need to present yourself in a way that makes them love you. I *know* you hate that, and I get it—I really do—but your survival depends on it. You just have to make it through, alright?"

"I don't know how to make people love me," Regulus replies softly, and that might be the singularly most heartbreaking thing James has ever heard in his fucking life. Oh, that pierces right through the heart, that does.

Sirius' throat bobs, and he squeezes his eyes shut, exhaling slowly. When he opens his eyes, he murmurs, "You don't have to *make* people love you."

"You just said—"

"I—I know what I just said, but I'm not talking about that anymore. I'm not talking about the Hallows. I'm—I mean, in life, Regulus. You don't have to make people love you; they just do. The ones who do—they *do,* just because you're you."

"No one—" Regulus halts, his mouth snapping shut, and just like that, his expression shutters. He *visibly* shuts down, then looks away. James feels his heart sink, because he knows where that ends; they all do; it was fucking obvious where that was going. *No one loves me.*

Sirius looks stricken, and then—because he's a Black, too, and just as complicated as Regulus, if not more—his face goes blank as well. He pushes himself up, pacing away again as he shoves his hands through his hair, gaze distant and cloudy. James feels like his insides are wilting, because that's the perfect opening for Sirius to tell him, except Sirius can't, or won't, because he's too locked in his own head.

James could say it. *You're loved,* he could say. *Sirius loves you,* he could say. There's a lot he could say, but the worst thing about knowing what needs to be said is knowing that he's not the one who needs to say it. Regulus doesn't want to hear it from him, not any version James could throw at him, and he won't believe him. Frankly, James doesn't think Regulus wants to hear it from Sirius either. In a way, that just makes things so much harder for them both.

"Do you remember when we used to play the redirect game?" Sirius asks abruptly, whirling around to face Regulus.

Regulus slowly turns to frown at him. "Yes?"

"The redirect game?" Pandora asks curiously.

Sirius chuckles, and even Regulus quirks a small, sardonic smile, like they're sharing an inside joke that's both funny and not funny at all. "It's this game we used to play when we were children, sort of to prepare ourselves to try to avoid any punishments from our parents. It was like—practice, I suppose. It didn't always work, but sometimes it did."

"It was for when we'd done something wrong. When we broke something, or came home late, or said something we shouldn't have," Regulus explains. "Sirius' method was to be as erratic as possible. He broke a vase once, and when Mother started to punish him, he rambled for—I'm not joking—an hour about various gossip he heard around the district, in hopes that something else would infuriate her more. It actually worked that time. He just got sent to his room."

"One of my luckier moments," Sirius says wryly. "Now, Regulus' method was to be their innocent little angel who never did anything wrong. Oh, that broken window? No, Mother, of course your precious baby boy didn't launch a ball through it. Your baby boy was bringing the ball inside when he tripped and fell, and the ball went flying, and he wanted to pick up the glass, but what if he got hurt? Mother, your baby is so sorry, he'll go pick up the glass now. What's that? You don't want your darling little angel to cut his fingers? Just be more careful next time? *Of course,* Mother. Of course."

Regulus' lips curl up into a smirk. "I still can't believe she bought that one, actually."

"He won the redirect game more than I did," Sirius declares, shaking his head.

"Someone's bitter," Regulus comments. "I can't help it that I was good at it."

"It's all in the eyes with you," Sirius mutters. He points at Regulus and raises his eyebrows at James and Pandora. "He can cry on command, you know. Just bring tears to his eyes in *seconds,* and it's all fake. I've seen it. Fucking mental, he is."

"Wait, can you actually?" Pandora gasps, leaning forward.

"Yes," Regulus admits with a shrug.

Sirius makes a face. "That is *not* normal, Reggie."

"Do it," Pandora insists, looking enthralled.

"What, right now?" Regulus asks, eyebrows furrowing.

"I vote no," James cuts in. "Let's keep the tears to a minimum, yeah? Fake or not."

Regulus huffs a laugh. "That stopped working on Sirius by the time I was eight anyway."

"You know when it's real," is all Sirius says. He shrugs when James stares at him incredulously. "Trust me, the real thing isn't that calm. He gets all shaky and struggles to breathe when he's properly crying."

"Yes, well, you're ugly when you cry, so," Regulus grumbles, and he scoffs when Sirius flips him off.

"That sounds brilliant," Pandora announces brightly. "Do it."

"No," James says sharply. "Can we just—is there a point to all of this? Are you telling me that you want him to fake cry during his interview, Sirius?"

"No, I don't think taking it *that* far would do much good, especially not in the arena." Sirius crosses his arms and goes back to pacing, eyes narrowed in thought as he traces his lips with his finger. "The problem is, this is really just a balancing act, and a *very* important one. Think of it like spinning plates, and you do *not* want to drop even one of them, because that will surely bring the rest down as well."

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "I'm good at balancing things."

"Yes, I know. James is the clumsy one." Sirius purses his lips, then claps his hands together. "Alright, so you've got three plates, yeah? One is threat level, dealing primarily on how your enemies in the arena see you. To start, you balanced that one quite well, but you've likely fumbled it with that act you pulled that got you a high score. They're wary of you, Regulus, which is good. What's *not* good is that they're eager to get rid of you as soon as possible. So, that's one plate down, *but* it's not a broken plate. You didn't shatter it. You're good with daggers, you can fight, and you can run. You're smart enough to outwit those brainless idiots."

"Alright," Regulus says slowly, sounding cautious, clearly not expecting Sirius to brush off the source of their last fight.

"The second plate is political damage," Sirius continues, heaving a sigh as he crosses his arms. "This one is about the gamemakers and government officials, particularly their opinion of you. If you're a favorite, or if you're boring to them, or if you've caused trouble and peeved them off—which you have, by giving Slughorn an impromptu haircut."

"I just took a little off the side," Regulus protests. "Sirius, honestly, you can't even tell! And I could have killed him, you know, but I *didn't.* That's something!"

Sirius covers his whole face with his hand, and then, miraculously, he laughs. He's *still* laughing when he manages to choke out, "Do you—do you realize that you sound like *me?"*

"I do not," Regulus argues instantly, rearing back in offense, like he can't think of anything more insulting.

"Reggie, that's *absolutely* something I would have done, and you're defending yourself by pointing out how much worse you could have been, which is *exactly* what I do," Sirius informs him, dropping his hand.

"No," Regulus denies, shaking his head. "No, absolutely not." He looks at James, who scrunches his face and tips his head from side-to-side. Regulus looks appalled. "No. I *refuse* to—no, James. That—that wasn't a *Sirius* move."

"It was a Sirius move, yeah," James confirms.

"Well, if—if that's true, which it *isn't,"* Regulus stresses, and it looks like his eye actually twitches, "then why were you so fucking angry, Sirius?"

"Because it's not *my* life on the line," Sirius tells him, raising his eyebrows. "It's yours. It's James'. You did something incredibly reckless, and if it wasn't for the fact that it increases your chances of being killed, I *wouldn't* have been angry. But it does, and I can't believe I have to say this to *you* of all people, but you have to be more careful."

"I thought it was brave," Pandora comments.

Regulus looks stricken. "Oh, it *was* a Sirius move. Why did I do that? Why would I *ever—"*

"Well, for you, I imagine it comes from a place of pettiness, because you're a raging bitch," Sirius says casually.

"And what's *your* excuse?" Regulus shoots back.

Sirius grins at him. "The same, really, but I'm just louder about it. You couldn't have picked a worse moment to increase your volume. Tone it down, would you?"

"Oh, fuck off," Regulus mutters, but something about his tone or body language must read as compliant, because Sirius looks satisfied as he nods. "So, political damage plate down, too?"

"Well, it's certainly falling, which is not good," Sirius tells him with a wince. "These people control your experience in the arena, *particularly* Horace Slughorn. They're the ones who can blink a stream out of existence just as you're dying of dehydration, or send a fucking fireball at your head when you're sleeping. Some things in the arena are set in stone, like the layout and original design, but they can control other things as well. They can't outright *kill* you, as that wouldn't make for a good show, really, which is the most important part to them—but they can, however, influence how easy or how hard things are for you. If you've peeved them off, well, you can assume that it's not going to be easy."

"Lovely," Regulus says, eyes sinking shut. "One plate down, and another heading for the floor. Just lovely."

James fidgets restlessly with his hands in his lap. He doesn't like this at all. It's sounding more and more like it's going to be very fucking hard to keep Regulus alive and get him home. Whether it's simple, or the most grueling thing James will ever go through, he's still going to do it regardless, but he's not ashamed to admit that he wishes it wasn't *that* difficult.

"And the last plate?" James prompts warily, because at this point, he isn't expecting good news.

"Public image," Sirius announces. Regulus scoffs as his eyes snap open, and Sirius points at him. "No, don't do that. Don't make that face and be so quick to dismiss it. Public image is more important that you realize; I don't know how many times I have to tell you. Believe it or not, it's the *most* important."

"It is," Pandora confirms. She leans forward with a heavy sigh, threading her hands together. "Who do you think this is all for, really? I mean, *really* think about it."

Sirius nods. "The people—the Hallows, primarily—have more power than you'd think. The tributes they care about, the ones they want to see, *those* are the tributes that make it far. Not just because sponsors empty their pockets; it's also about public opinion. If they have a high opinion of you, they want to see you live, and fight, and even *win.* The games...they're never really just left up to chance, or fate. There's an unfair advantage for those that come in with skills, and there's an unfair advantage for those that endear themselves to the public. You *want* those advantages, and it can't matter that they're not fair, because it might just be the thing that stands between you and death. Very, *very* rarely does anyone go into the games with no skills and no support and come out alive. It can happen, but it almost never does, and do not make the mistake of thinking that it will for you. Chances are, it won't."

"But it has happened?" Regulus asks, sounding genuinely curious. "I mean, you say it can, but *has* it?"

"Only once that I've ever seen," Sirius murmurs. "My friend, Marlene. She had virtually no sponsors, and she hadn't ever practiced with a weapon before the training center."

"She won," James says softly. "How?"

"She fought when she needed to. She hid well. She surprised everyone, because no one expected her to live past the first day, let alone be the last standing. Not even me," Sirius admits.

Regulus is quiet for a long moment, taking that in, and then he heaves a sigh. "So, I'm guessing my public image plate is absolutely shattered on the floor, then?"

"Actually, no," Sirius corrects. "It's still up and spinning, but it's a bit wobbly. Fortunately, you haven't had to appear in public much just yet. This interview is going to decide whether or not that plate falls, and Regulus? You *need* to not let it fall, do you understand? If you keep it up, the other two can be picked up, too. But if it falls, all plates are down, and your odds in the arena… Well, it's not good. Not good at all."

"The problem is, I don't know how to keep it from falling, Sirius," Regulus grits out.

"I know that, which is why I brought up the redirect game. You're going to play it," Sirius tells him firmly. "You're going to be the Hallows' angel trying to avoid trouble. That's all it is. You can do that; you've done it all your life."

"So, I'm supposed to—lie," Regulus says.

Pandora busts out laughing, smacking her thigh. They stare at her until she calms, and she shakes her head, amused. "Oh, you're *absolutely* going to lie, Regulus. Everyone is going to be lying when they talk to Rita. She is *not* the type of person you want to trust with the truth."

James feels a jolt of nerves shoot through him, because he's not a good liar, especially when he's anxious. He starts to bring this to everyone's attention, but Sirius and Pandora lean forward and launch into coaching Regulus on how to survive his interview. James falls silent, but he can't help but think that he might need some coaching, too.

Well, maybe it'll be fine.

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Regulus doesn't want to admit it, but he's come to reluctantly like Gideon as a person, despite the fact that he's a Hallow. It's much the same as with Pandora and Dorcas. Being forced to spend time with them has shown him that they're more than he ever expected them to be. Not many Hallows are.

"No, not like that," Gideon says with a sigh, reaching out to smack Regulus' hands away from the clasp at his throat. He looks unbothered by the glare Regulus pins on him. He even rolls his eyes. "Oh, stop it, I'm trying to *help* you. What are you going to do? Attempt to bite me again?"

"Don't tempt me," Regulus mutters.

"Believe it or not, this is a collaborative effort," Gideon tells him, looking amused. "We're all here to make you look your best, so you can survive your best."

"The day we met, you told me I was the nicest doll you'd ever had," Regulus says flatly.

Gideon chuckles. "Yes, well, don't fault me for appreciating potential when I see it. You, my friend, have what one would call timeless, natural beauty." He leans in and lowers his voice to a whisper. "That's a weapon too, if you use it right."

"Well, the goal is to get the Hallows to love me, so...I suppose being pretty can't hurt," Regulus replies with a grimace, a deep sigh escaping him. He can't help the nerves that jumble up under his skin just thinking about the interview.

"Hey," Gideon murmurs, his voice softening as he braces his hands on Regulus' shoulders. "You're going to do fine. And this, what we've given you? It's a tool, Regulus, and you can use it. We're going to be in the crowd, you know. So, if you need a familiar face, look for me, Fabian, and Dorcas."

Really, if Regulus wants anyone to be there, just for reassurance, it's Sirius. He won't be, because he'll be in the back before and after each interview. Still, it's actually sort of nice that Gideon offers. "Thank you."

"Not too tight?" Gideon asks as he gently tugs on the cloak resting over Regulus' shoulders.

"No, it's—it's fine."

"You're comfortable? Don't feel like you're being strangled?"

"No."

Gideon nods and pulls his hands back. "Excellent. Might I say, Regulus, you look downright *fetching."*

"Yay," Regulus mumbles, and Gideon snorts. "I know that this is basically your livelihood, but it's just not...my thing."

"Yeah, I figured that out on my own," Gideon muses, lips twitching. "You know, Fabian and I… Fashion was one of the things that always really gave us independence. We've expressed ourselves differently since we were children, and this actually gave us a sense of independence that—well, I'd say it really empowered us both. We needed it. Something that kept us separate, but it also brought us together as well. When you're brothers, something like that is sacred."

Something that kept us separate, but it also brought us together as well. When you're brothers, something like that is sacred. Regulus thinks of him and Sirius, and then, rather ridiculously, what passes through Regulus' mind is one word. A name. *James.*

He swallows thickly and drops his gaze, running his fingers over the cloak that slips down past his fingers. It's dark and soft, only just sweeping along the floor.

"Come on," Gideon says, stepping back, "let's get you to Dorcas so she can explain everything."

Regulus follows him out and isn't surprised to find James and Fabian chatting easily. James is cracking up, laughing at something Fabian is saying, and he looks unfairly good in the outfit designed for him. It's not much different from Regulus' own, except there's no choker around his throat shaped like a crown. Instead his crown has been broken in half and placed on each shoulder, holding his cloak up. It's similar to Regulus', except it's white, and it looks more like a cape for a set of armor than an actual cloak. It drapes mostly from his back, making him look like some form of royalty.

"Oh, well don't you look nice?" James comments when he sees Regulus, a smile spreading across his face immediately. He's been shaved recently, a close and clean shave that makes his face look smooth. Regulus has admittedly appreciated his stubble before, so this is...new.

"Are they ever going to give you your glasses back?" is all Regulus can bring himself to say in response.

"I asked the same thing," James admits, clearly vindicated. He shoots Fabian a look that quite blatantly says *see?* Fabian just rolls his eyes, and James looks at Regulus again. "Did they, er, fluff your curls? They look—fluffy."

"Yeah, that'd be called *volume,* darling," Fabian says, amused, and James huffs. "But yes, Gideon has obviously tousled them for him. The goal here is to make him look angelic, and I'd say he looks as near to a cherub as one can get. Nicely done, Gid."

"Thank you, thank you," Gideon replies grandly, dipping down into a bow with a pleased grin.

Regulus scoffs. "Oh, come off it. I do *not* look—"

"No, you do," James cuts in, then coughs when Regulus stares at him, startled. "I just—I mean, you look...sweet. Because of Gideon. What he did, I mean. You look—yeah."

Fabian snorts, then disguises it as loudly clearing his throat, suddenly finding the ceiling utterly fascinating. Meanwhile, Gideon starts to smile, only to tuck his lips in and look down at his shoes like he's never seen them before. James, on the other hand, looks like a spooked deer.

"Sweet?" Regulus asks skeptically.

"Yeah, like...young," James says slowly, then starts rambling instantly. "Not—no, I don't mean that you look really young, because obviously you're not. Just—well, I'm not saying you're old. We're the same age, is all. And it's—I don't see you as, you know, younger or innocent or—or anything like that, just because you're Sirius' baby brother. Well, not baby. Little. Younger. I mean—"

"Pretty," Dorcas fills in as she comes sweeping into the room, her lips curled up. "He thinks you're pretty."

"Oh, I'm so glad you've arrived," Gideon breathes out.

"Yeah, that was painful," Fabian says, and James elbows him sharply in his side, which just makes him stifle a laugh.

"Yes, well, James is right. You're very pretty. Both of you are. Come here, let me look at you," Dorcas says, moving over to reach out and grab Regulus' shoulders, turning him slowly. She hums in a pleased fashion when he faces her again. "Yes, very pretty, but not only just. You're a star, Regulus."

"Ha ha," Regulus says flatly.

Dorcas chuckles, pivoting to face James. "Now, let me see you. Oh, this is good. Very good. You're shining, James."

"Very funny, Dorcas," James teases as he comes to a stop in front of her.

"Laughter is the music of the soul, my loves," Dorcas says sagely. "Right, let's start with you, Regulus. You're the one Sirius is most worried about. Now, your outfit is a very good talking piece should you feel uncomfortable, or not know what to say, or don't know how to answer. There will be cameras at all angles, so when you stand up and spread your cloak, give a slow spin so everyone will be able to see it."

"Alright," Regulus murmurs, nervous all over again.

"Your cloak is the main event. The Leo constellation with the brightest star: Regulus. Do you know the myth behind it?"

"About Hercules, yes."

"Don't be afraid to tell it, and don't hesitate to draw the comparison between you and Hercules. He defeated the lion, making him a champion. Play into that, if you need to."

"Right, but Regulus is the heart of the lion. The comparison between me and Hercules doesn't make sense. I'm not the champion; I'm the slain."

"I know," Dorcas tells him, her voice softening. "That's the hidden message, Regulus. That's the *truth.* People will see it. Not all of them, but some of them, and it will mean something. It can mean something to you, too, because you're the one that is being sent to your death. Be a champion anyway."

Regulus finds that he can't respond to that past the lump that blocks his throat. He dreads every second that brings him closer to the arena. There's the rest of today, the interviews tomorrow, and then the next day they go. He's not ready. He doesn't think he'll ever be ready.

"This is something personal," Dorcas murmurs, reaching out to gently run her finger over the crown-shaped choker resting around his throat. "You come from a family of Victors. Royalty, if you will. There's a saying—heavy is the head that wears the crown. The thing is, this is no crown that sits upon your head and grants you power. It is a *collar,* and no one should dare think any different. We'll make them look at it, because ignorance is bliss, and they don't deserve bliss when you're suffering at their hands."

"Thank you," Regulus whispers, and in that moment, he understands what she means about expression, about how moving it can be. She really does design in bold.

"Don't thank me. Believe in yourself, because I already do," Dorcas tells him quietly, holding his gaze for a long moment, and then she smiles and turns to face James. "Now, you."

"Me," James says, blinking at her.

"Your cloak works much the same as Regulus'. Sirius has informed me that your interview will be after his, so I don't doubt that Rita will want you to show off first to get it out of the way," Dorcas explains. "Yours, of course, is different in that it's not multiple stars; it's only one."

James huffs a weak laugh. "The sun."

"A very important star to us all, but there's meaning in it as well," Dorcas declares firmly. "What you can lean into is that getting too close to the sun ensures that you'll burn up. You're the sun in this scenario, James, and that's the warning. The hidden meaning, though? We need the sun to survive, and yet it still sets. What happens if it doesn't rise again?"

"I don't know," James admits.

Dorcas smiles. "Exactly. No one does, but I can promise you, no one wants to find out." She steps forward and runs her hands gently over the broken crown pieces at each of his shoulders. "We talked about this. One for your mum, and one for Sirius. Your exposure to what being a Victor really is. There's a saying—the weight of the world on one's shoulders. You've felt it before, and you carry it still. Carry it a little longer, James, and never stop rising."

"Right," James whispers, staring at her with wide eyes, and Regulus understands. The force of Dorcas Meadowes looking at you like that is heavy and life-altering. She sees the world in a way no one else does, and she looks at those around her just the same. It's both frightening and invigorating.

"Gid, Fab, get them undressed and let them go rest," Dorcas says. "They're going to do lovely, I just know it, and I've a party I need to attend. Good luck, my loves, we'll be right there in the crowd tomorrow, just for the two of you."

And, with that same commanding, larger-than-life presence that she used with her entrance, she makes her exit. Regulus looks over at James to find him already looking back, and then Gideon and Fabian are ushering them both off. When Regulus glances back, James is already doing the same.

This time, Regulus doesn't look away until he has no choice.

~•~

Remus, shockingly, likes working at events. Well, he likes it as much as anyone in his position can like anything, meaning he hates it with a burning passion, *but* he does get something out of it from time-to-time.

What he gets out of it, generally, is information. Gossip. Secrets. There is a lot to be gleaned from a party full of high profile Hallows when the drinks are flowing and the people are speaking with loose lips. Sometimes, Remus thinks he knows more about the inner-workings of the Hallow than even Riddle. The things that he hears… The things that he knows… Well, he could do a lot of damage with it all, honestly.

But, really, he can't. He has a mask, one he can't remove, not here. Not with these people. He hates it, and what he hates more is that he's fucking used to it. He's worn it every day for five years, and the only time he takes it off is when he's eating, or when he's in the suite he's assigned to now. He doesn't know when the discomfort of having the mask on shifted into a sense of strangeness when he has it off. He hates that, too.

Remus' duties at the event are fairly simple. He's not the only servant here, and there's an unspoken agreement between all servants (unspoken for obvious reasons) to divide and conquer for wider coverage. It's a solid rotation, like cogs working in a machine, all of them circling the room from one station to the next. There's pouring drinks for people, or offering trays of food, or working at the bar, or cleaning in the back, or preparing more food and drinks in the kitchen; and, of course, there's the overall station that remains a priority at all times, in which the servants are at the beck and call of everyone around them for *anything* they need or want.

Currently, Remus is in the middle of pouring Joffrey Macnair more wine while simultaneously listening to gossip about one Sirius Black. He's a little too interested, honestly; he shouldn't be, he knows that, but he can't help it. There's some secret, glowing satisfaction that he *knows* they're wrong.

"Francilla is *insisting* that he's taken her to bed," Joffrey says in a low voice, talking to Devina. "She said she wouldn't pledge her sponsorship for nothing less, and there are

whispers of a *sizable* donation already promised in his name."

"He sure is getting around this year," Devina murmurs, holding out her wine. Not even in Remus' direction. She just lifts it a little and expects it to be filled, which it will be. "I'm not surprised. It's his brother and closest friend this time, so naturally he cares more for them. It's a pity, isn't it?"

Joffrey hums, sipping his wine. "Yes, I know. I asked him who he thinks would kill the other, but he didn't quite give me an answer, the tease. Just winked, laughed, and told me to watch the show to see. My money is on James."

"Oh, *is* it?" Devina asks, leaning in with a soft gasp. "You naughty thing. Did you promise a donation as well?"

"Well, a gentleman never kisses and tells, Devina," Joffrey replies with a smooth laugh.

Remus steps back, his breath held. He wants, rather violently, to smash the bottle over both of their heads. Sirius has done no such thing, of course. He hasn't brought *anyone* to his bed, and he's quite busy with doing everything he can to help his little brother and best friend. It's beyond fucked up that they can't see how horrible of a situation this is for Sirius, and they're just fucking sitting here, discussing him like he's nothing more than a piece of meat.

"Joffrey, Devina, I *thought* that was you," comes the bright voice of none other than Sirius Black himself, which causes Remus to freeze as Joffrey and Devina pull away from each other to turn in their chairs.

"Sirius," Joffrey greets warmly, launching himself up from his chair to lean over and kiss each of Sirius' cheeks, which Sirius allows with a charming grin.

"My, you look so handsome tonight, Sirius," Devina comments as she holds out her hand.

Sirius bends over it instantly, gripping it and pressing a lingering kiss to it as he winks at her. As he stands up, his gaze flicks to Remus, and his smile softens a little. "Thank you. Someone very dear to me helped me pick my outfit."

"Dear, you say?" Devina asks curiously as Sirius takes a seat next to her. Remus turns away to pour another glass of wine, a smile trying to form under his mask, even though that's literally never happened before, and it's quite impossible with how tight to his face it is. "By *dear,* you mean…?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Sirius teases.

"Do my ears deceive me, or has someone managed to capture and ensnare the ever elusive Sirius Black?" Joffrey muses, clearly fishing for information.

"Perhaps I'm only elusive to those who don't have anything to offer me," Sirius replies easily.

Remus leans down next to him and offers him a glass of wine. Sirius glances at him only briefly before he takes it, but he makes sure their fingers brush as he looks away. For a moment, as Remus straightens up, he fantasizes about a life where Sirius was born in his district, where they could have known each other outside of a setting like this, where Remus could have done things he doesn't dare to do here.

He doesn't have anything to offer Sirius. Genuinely not one thing. He's chained to his forced servitude to the Hallow, nothing to his name, and no possessions to claim. And yet, Sirius is the least elusive person Remus has ever known. Is that a choice? Or does he just know the real Sirius?

"Well, I wouldn't know anything about that," Joffrey announces, crossing his legs and leaning back with a grin. It's shark-like. "I have much to offer. You need only ask."

"If I were to ask, it would be a request, not an offer," Sirius points out, and he reaches over to gently lay his hand on Devina's knee like an afterthought. It makes her hide a smile behind her wine glass, and it causes Joffrey's eyes to zero in on it, his nostrils flaring. "And you, Devina? Do I elude you?"

"You are quite the enigma, indeed," Devina admits with a rich laugh, reaching out to place her hand on his chest, like she has a right to it. Sirius lets her. "I think there are some who would offer the world to see the inside of your mind. What must go on up there, I wonder."

"Oh, you can't imagine the things I have hidden up there. I'm afraid the cost of sharing it is an amount so few have been capable of meeting," Sirius tells her, smiling as she walks two fingers up his chest slowly, gazing into his eyes. Without ever breaking her gaze, he lifts his wine and takes a slow sip, the temptation of his curled lips peeking over the rim.

"Name your price," Joffrey states firmly, sitting forward.

Sirius focuses on him again and takes his hand off Devina's knee. "Make an offer. Let's see if you meet it."

And, just like that, Joffrey does.

What follows is a very convoluted dance in which Sirius plays Joffrey and Devina for fools, using them against each other to get the promise of their support when the games start. Sirius hardly has to do very much at all, other than sit there and let Devina run her hands all over him, pointedly not letting Joffrey do the same; in turn, Sirius only ever touches Devina's knee, removing the contact as a sign of approval when Joffrey has done something he likes.

It's—fascinating, almost. Terrible, yes, but the way he plays them to his will, twisting them around his fingers with one short conversation and a few gestures—it's like magic. There's something dangerous about it as well, how simply Sirius does it, how alluring he is that he *can* do it. He's magnetic, and people want him, but never for the right reasons. That's where it's sad. Remus' heart sort of breaks for him, actually, that he *can* do this, that he *has* to do this, because he does. Because there's no doubt in Remus' mind *why* Sirius is doing it; all of it is for James and Regulus, that much is clear.

Remus tops up their drinks one more time before he rotates out with the next servant, ending up at the bar. From this vantage point, he can see the whole room, and he can see as Sirius proceeds to work it. The night carries on with Sirius making his way from person to person, laughing brightly and turning people to puddles for him to play in.

Sirius does seem to give himself breaks in between, chatting with other mentors, from what Remus can tell. Remus knows that getting all these sponsors to do what he wants is a precaution, because no one knows what's going to happen yet. And from what Remus has learned over the years, it can take multiple donations from multiple sponsors to afford a couple of small loaves of bread, let alone more necessary things such as medicine for injuries. So, it doesn't surprise him that Sirius takes small breaks only, consistently working as much as he can.

There is one point where Sirius comes to the bar with a blonde woman Remus quickly learns the name of—Marlene. They chat as they order drinks, and under the dim lights, Sirius gives him a very special smile. Remus never quite realized until tonight, but Sirius smiles at him differently than he does all those other people. This is a warmer smile, a more bashful one, and it's so much sweeter than Remus can really wrap his head around.

"Oh, oh, Sirius," Marlene hisses as Remus slides her a drink. She starts swatting at Sirius' arm. "That's Dorcas. That's—"

"Pipe down, McKinnon, she's not a celebrity. You seem a little starstruck," Sirius teases.

Marlene swats his arm harder. "Shut up. Fuck, just *look* at her. I mean, she's legitimately mouth-watering. How are you around her without constantly fainting?"

"She's not really my type," Sirius says, lips twitching.

"A sexy Hallow isn't your *type?"* Marlene asks incredulously.

Sirius chuckles. "A sexy Hallow that my *friend* quite clearly fancies, so no, not my type. I have a little integrity, believe it or not. See? Watch this. Oi, Dorcas!"

"Sirius," Marlene chokes out, whirling around frantically and nearly spilling her drink. Remus quickly picks it up before she does, then gently slides it into her hand. Distracted and

looking dangerously close to fainting, Marlene shakily raises her glass at Remus and wheezes, "Cheers," before knocking all of it back in one desperate gulp.

"Ah, Sirius, lovely to see you here," Dorcas greets as she moves over, leaning in for a hug as soon as Sirius does.

"And it's lovely to see you, as always. You're a vision, as always," Sirius replies as they break apart. "Tell me, did Regulus and James behave?"

"As much as they ever do," Dorcas tells him, amused. Her face softens as she nods at him. "They looked lovely, Sirius, and I know they're going to be just fine."

Tension visibly seeps out of Sirius' shoulders. "Thank you, Dorcas." He turns slightly, gesturing to Marlene. "Have you met Marlene? She's rather infatuated with you."

Marlene proceeds to choke into her glass, which Remus had dutifully refilled for her because she was looking a little desperate, honestly. She goes into a coughing fit, wiping the back of her mouth as she turns, looking mortified.

"Because of your work," Sirius clarifies with a grin. "She's rather infatuated with you because of your work."

"I—yes, hi," Marlene says weakly, holding her hand out.

"Marlene McKinnon. Yes, I know of you. The Victor that shocked the Hallow," Dorcas murmurs as she takes Marlene's hand and promptly brings it up to her mouth, kissing it. This isn't really unheard of for Hallows as a form of greeting, but it's usually only done for people you hold in high regard, or people you want to *think* that you hold them in high regard. Marlene looks at her with her lips parted. "I think I'm the one who should feel honored to meet you, honestly. I rather like anyone who can defiantly shock the Hallows, including myself. No one saw you coming, Marlene McKinnon, not even me, and *that* rather infatuates me about you."

"Well, isn't that lovely? Lots of infatuation going on here today," Sirius says pleasantly, winking at Marlene behind Dorcas. "I'll just leave you both to it, shall I?"

"Never can stay in one place for long, can you?" Dorcas teases, but she's still looking right at Marlene, even as their hands break apart all at once.

"Yes, well, people to do and things to see, or however that saying goes," Sirius says lightly. He turns and looks at Remus. "I'll take another drink before I go, though."

Because Dorcas and Marlene seem to be genuinely swept up in some intense eye-contact, Remus allows himself to pour Sirius' drink slowly. Perhaps for the same reason, Sirius looks right at him, not looking away for the duration of the drink being made. His bottom lip catches between his teeth, a smile trying to form on his face, and Remus only has to look at him with a quirk of an eyebrow, just one twitch upwards, for his cheeks to flood with color. He looks flushed and flustered and utterly delighted, more so than anyone has been capable of making him so far tonight, and it's—fuck, it's *exhilarating.*

It's genuinely so thrilling that he can do that to Sirius when he's not even showing his whole face. Remus, a servant with nothing, not even the ability to speak, can do to Sirius what rich Hallows with more words than they know what to do with can't. They all want to, they all try, and none of them ever manage it—but Remus? He does it with ease.

When Remus pushes the glass over to him, their fingers brush again, a warm caress of contact that makes Remus' skin break out in goosebumps. Sirius' hand visibly shakes, his breath punching out of him, and he nearly drops the glass entirely. Remus snaps his hand out to catch it at the bottom, grateful he didn't pour too much so none spills over the sides, and he's quick to draw his hand away. Sirius is blushing harder.

He curls his glass to his chest, and Remus can tell he wants to apologize, so dangerously close to rambling and stuttering and turning into that lovely mess Remus has come to appreciate so very much. That would be very bad for both of them, so Remus steps back and ducks his head.

When he looks back up, Sirius is gone.

For a bit longer, Remus is subjected to seeing Dorcas and Marlene blatantly flirt with each other. They aren't ordering any more drinks, but they remain at the bar, and if he's honest, it's sort of amusing. Dorcas is very bold, and Marlene is a bit guarded, so this makes for great entertainment. Nonetheless, there's no denying that they get on *very* well, and Sirius is sweet to see to it that his friends have the opportunity to enjoy each other's...company. How thoughtful of him.

They're still chatting, but now Dorcas' hand is on Marlene's arm on the bar, and Marlene keeps getting blatantly distracted by the rings on her fingers, so much so that she repeatedly loses the thread of the conversation. Dorcas is patient with her, even seeming to find it endearing, and Marlene appears to grow just a bit meaner the more flustered she gets. They've gone from light conversation to mild bickering, and Dorcas looks like she's having the time of her *life.* Marlene looks like she wants to rip Dorcas' dress off, the poor thing.

In the end, Remus has to rotate from the station before he ever sees which one of them will inevitably make a proper move past getting to know each other and teasing one another. It's a bit disappointing, honestly, because that was the least troubling interaction he's seen between anyone at this horrible fucking party. Everyone else here is complete shit, while Marlene and Dorcas seem to be the only genuine ones, other than some of the other mentors. Well, except for Sirius, but he's working at the moment, and his job isn't exactly as glamorous as some would think. He's an actor, essentially, and a performer, and a manipulator, and a mystery, and so many things that Remus can't even fathom how he manages to balance it all with such effortlessness.

Remus sees Sirius a few more times as he works, but they don't get near each other again. Instead, Remus has to watch across the room as people touch, talk, and flirt with Sirius, while Sirius touches, talks, and flirts back. Which is fine. That's fine. Remus is fine. It makes sense, actually, because Sirius is doing what needs to be done to help ensure that Regulus and James will be safer and have more support. Remus knows this.

Does that mean Remus doesn't want to break every finger on every hand that dares to touch Sirius? No, of course he does. He wants to snap them all one-by-one, which is a violent thought that he should shy away from, but he almost relishes in it. It's been *ages* since he's gotten this worked up about anything, so it's sort of—nice, in a way, to know that he still has it in him. The fact that it has to do with Sirius… Well.

Remus tells himself it's just being protective, because really, these people treat Sirius like he's a fucking object that they can play with, or buy, or pick up and put down at will. He's so

much more than that, so Remus being angry on his behalf would make perfect sense. They're...friends. Sort of. Right?

But, deep down, Remus knows what it is. He *knows* it's an unearned sense of possessiveness, tangled with jealousy and envy that leaves a bitter taste in the back of his mouth. He knows that's senseless, because he has no right to Sirius, but the feelings exist anyway. That steady pulse of *he's not yours to touch,* which makes no sense, because he's not *Remus'* either; and then there's the sharp twist in his chest at every word that they get to say to Sirius, free to speak and gain his attention, only to fucking *waste* it; but perhaps the most pressing feeling is the way he wants the same things they all do, but without wanting them for the wrong reasons. He wants all of Sirius' focus, too. His touch. His laughter. Anything and everything Sirius Black, he wants it—most importantly, he wants it where no one can see, and he wants to never breathe a word of it, and he wants it to be something only they know about, no one else.

Of course, the acknowledgement of his wants only frustrates him, because he *knows* that's literally the worst thing he could do. That's the most dangerous thing he could do. There would be no penalty for this; they would just torture him until he fucking died, if they ever found out.

It's not proper. Remus *shouldn't.* He keeps telling himself that over and over, and then he sees a man lean in close to whisper into Sirius' ear and he's viscerally reminded that he's not very good at being proper or doing what he should.

The only thing that stops Remus from doing something very, very stupid is the fact that none of them—no one Sirius talks to, or flirts with—make him blush. They don't get his soft smiles. They don't make his hands tremble.

No, that's Remus. Just Remus.

At one point, Remus is in the back, washing various glasses and trays. It's a fairly secluded area, only one way in and one way out. The dishes come in on a conveyor belt that he controls, and the servant before him didn't let it get backed up, which was nice. There's a separate, smaller room with racks for the dishes to be dried, and the door squeaks every time he goes through it. Otherwise, it's rather quiet. He likes it better back here than out at the event, except for the fact that he can't actually see Sirius from here.

Remus is in the middle of washing a glass when the door peels open, and he looks over in surprise because it's far too soon for a rotation already, but then his eyes bulge when Sirius pokes his head in. He immediately starts to open his mouth to speak, and Remus dives forward quickly to clamp a hand over his mouth, which makes him inhale sharply.

Sirius stares at him with wide eyes, frozen in place. Remus shakes his head and draws his hand away, lifting his finger in front of his mask to indicate that he should be quiet. Very carefully, Remus sits the glass down and reaches out to run the machine before it's even fully loaded, the loud whirring filling the space. Even still, Remus jerks his head and moves over to the room with the drying racks, holding it open as Sirius slips into it. Remus follows and shuts the door, then reaches up to unclip his mask.

"You shouldn't be back here," Remus whispers, his voice barely even a breath. "Sirius, people will notice—"

"No one's going to notice, Remus," Sirius murmurs, stepping closer to compensate for how quietly he's speaking. "I told everyone I was leaving. The party is slowing down now, so I could slip off. I just—I wanted to say hi. Um. Hi."

"Hi," Remus replies with a breathless laugh. "You look nice. I hear someone very dear to you helped you pick your outfit?"

Even in the low lighting, Sirius' blush is glaringly obvious. He shifts a little restlessly. "Yes, well… Yeah."

What Remus really likes about Sirius is the fact that he'll just say things that are true. Sometimes with a lot of stuttering and very blatantly embarrassed about it, but he will. He's a perfect blend of shy and shameless.

"Well, they have excellent taste," Remus teases softly.

"It's been helpful," Sirius whispers. "The outfit, I mean. I know you've seen me tonight with —with *them.* It's not—I'm not exactly proud of it, but there's nothing I wouldn't do for Regulus and James. I know what it looks like, but I'm not—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in, "you don't have to explain yourself to me. I get it. I already know."

Sirius bites his lip, and the motion draws Remus' eyes to his mouth. "I'm sure you hear things, though. No one ever thinks to censor themselves around the servants, so I can't imagine what nonsense you've heard about me."

"None that I believe," Remus assures him.

"Good, please don't," Sirius says with a weak laugh, like he's trying to make it seem like a joke, but he actually, desperately means it. "I just wanted to say hi before I go, and tell you thank you. Seeing you really did improve my night, Remus."

"Glad to help."

"Will you—are you coming back to the suite tonight?"

"No. I have to return to my cell after I finish here," Remus admits with a sigh.

"Oh." Sirius nods slowly, doing nothing to hide the way that disappoints him. "Will I see you again in the morning?"

Remus' lips twitch. "Yes, and I'll be there following the interviews as well."

"Brilliant," Sirius breathes out, perking up immediately. He breaks out into a grin and gestures to the door as he attempts to slide his hand in his pocket. He keeps missing it. "Right, I should go. Don't want to be too risky. I shouldn't have—I'm sorry, Remus. I'll just—I'll see you in the morning."

"Sirius," Remus says, and Sirius pauses with his hand on the door handle. For a moment they're just staring at each other, and it's so quiet that Remus can hear neither of them breathing, holding their breath at the same time. Remus just wants Sirius here a little longer.

Slowly, Remus exhales and steps forward to reach out and capture a lone strand of Sirius' hair that fell forward from behind his ear. He carefully tucks it back into place, listening to the shaky, thin exhale and immediate following hitch in Sirius' breath. Remus' knuckles only just brush Sirius' jaw as he pulls his hand away, and Sirius sways forward like he's following it, like he's being reeled in.

"Goodnight," Remus murmurs, and Sirius sways right back with a violent blink of his glazed eyes and a harsh flush painted on his cheeks.

Sirius takes a moment, just breathing, and then he gives Remus that very special smile before saying, "Goodnight."

With that, Sirius swivels on his heel and quickly slips out of the tiny room, the door squeaking as he goes. It shuts after him, and Remus takes a moment to breathe as well, then puts his mask back on and returns to work.

Chapter End Notes

sirius really would wear a plastic bag if remus told him to, and i stand by that. they're so cute, i want to bite them.

lmao, i love that literally everyone looks at regulus and they're like: that is the most grumpy, awkward man on the planet, he knows NOTHING about how to be charming, so he's absolutely going to bomb his interview 😭😭😭 HELP that's so mean, but it's true. regulus is NOT interview material.

then you've got james, who is like: hey, so um, i know im really charming and all, but im a REALLY bad liar when im scared and this may be a problem. hello? is anyone listening to me? no. okay. great. just great.

well, it's like james said, maybe it'll be fine 🤔

fabian, my beloved <3 gideon, my beloved <3 dorcas, my beloved <3 marlene, my beloved <3

also the little hints of dorlene 👀 trust me, we see more of them in the future.

sirius just having everyone eating out of the palm of his hand, but he can't be normal and calm around remus for two seconds is EVERYTHING to me.

sirius, to everyone else: pathetic

sirius, to remus: talented, brilliant, incredible, amazing, show stopping, spectacular, never the same, totally unique, completely not ever been done before—

The Interviews

Chapter Notes

hello all! 👋 im like, stupidly excited for this chapter. as the chapter title suggests, it's the interviews!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death
-references to torture
-description of characters being anxious/nervous
-brief display of violence (quickly stopped, and no one is seriously injured)
-a bit of angst

enjoy the drama ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus can tell that everyone is nervous. He'd offered to go and wake them all up, which Pandora had seemed grateful for. He starts with James, who he knows is generally up early as it is, so there won't be any issues there.

"Morning, Remus," James greets when he opens his door. He sounds less cheerful than he usually does when greeting him.

"Good morning, James," Remus murmurs. "I just wanted to be sure that you're up and ready for the day."

"Up? Yes. Ready for the day? Well…" James grimaces slightly and runs his hand through his hair.

Remus is silent for a beat, then he says, "If it helps at all, I find you to be very likeable. You're kind and funny, James. I doubt you'll have any issues for your interview."

"Yeah?" James brightens up a little at that. "Thank you, Remus. I'm just—well, I'm nervous. Not just for me, but for Regulus, too. And—and it's also our last day before…"

"I know," Remus says softly, his heart squeezing in his chest. He's never really grown attached to anyone as a servant before; no one cares about him, so he returns the favor. And yet, when it comes to this group of people—Sirius, James, Regulus, and even Pandora—Remus finds that he's come to care about them so much in such a short amount of time.

James huffs out a weak laugh. "It's a shame I'll be gone soon. I think you and I could have been friends."

There's something so irrevocably sad about that, even more so because Remus can tell that James means it, and believes it. To him, it doesn't matter that Remus is a servant. So, Remus keeps his voice light as he teases, "I thought we already were."

"No, yeah, we are," James agrees, grinning. He looks so relieved to have something to be cheerful about.

"I have to go wake the rest," Remus tells him. "Breakfast is already finished, and you should eat."

"Alright," James says. "Hey, you'll eat with us, yeah? Sirius likes it when you do that. Well, we all do, but today… Er, you always cheer him up, that's all. He likes you, Remus. A lot."

"I know," Remus repeats once again, this time with a tiny smile, and James' eyes sparkle with delight. "He's not very subtle about it."

James laughs. "Bless him, he's really not."

"He doesn't—do anything," Remus ventures cautiously, not entirely sure how to put into words what he means.

"Yeah, he won't," James replies simply, and Remus can't stop himself from frowning. Seeing it, James sighs. "It's—I mean, in fairness, the power imbalance is… Well, I know none of us really talk about it, but we're painfully aware."

"It's not his fault, or anyone's," Remus points out. "It's not as if you all did this to me, and you've made my assignment here as comfortable and close to freedom as I'll ever have."

"I get that, but Sirius won't cross a boundary," James tells him, sounding solemn. "We see you as Remus, our friend, but we also know that we have superiority over you that none of us asked for. We could—we *wouldn't,* not ever, but we could have you killed, or we could make you do...fucking anything, honestly, and it's awful. It's not right. None of us would ever, *ever* cross boundaries with you, because you deserve them, and you deserve for us to respect them."

Remus feels like there's a band tightening around his chest, just from that blunt declaration of consideration. It's basic human rights that Remus doesn't have as a servant, and yet they *all* grant it to him without question. That's more important to him than he could ever express to any of them. There's just one *tiny* problem, though.

"But what if I *want* Sirius to...do things?" Remus asks weakly, feeling oddly embarrassed, his face heating up.

"I thought you might," James teases, beaming at him. He looks fucking ecstatic. "I suppose the question is, if you want something done, why don't you do it yourself?"

Remus stares at him.

James chuckles. "Who said it has to be Sirius? You can. That'd tip the scales on the power imbalance, don't you think?"

The mere thought sends Remus' brain into an uproar of fear and desire all tangled up together. He could. He *could,* but could he, really? That's fucking dangerous. If it were Sirius

to do something, then Remus would be able to just—go along with it. Less control that way, which is his normal, what he's used to. Five years ago, Remus would never have stopped to have this internal debate. Actually, five years ago, Remus would have fucked Sirius by now, probably.

Remus swats that thought firmly out of his head, because it's making his heart race, leaving him jittery. He's too enticed by it. Tempted. "Right, I'm going to wake the others now. Nice chatting with you, James."

"Same to you, Remus, anytime," James replies with a note of satisfaction to his tone. It makes Remus fond, how pleased he is to be his best friend's wingman. They're sweet, James and Sirius, and their love for each other is palpable.

The next person to wake up is Regulus. Like Sirius, he does *not* appreciate being up early, and he looks really tired. There are purplish-grey impressions under his eyes, which are bloodshot and watery, and his exhaustion practically falls off of him in waves. He's quiet and reserved, but he's never disrespectful to Remus. He greets him in a quiet mumble, thanks him, then waits for Remus to greet him in return before shutting the door. Remus hopes he doesn't go back to sleep, because he is *not* knocking again. Pandora can handle it.

Speaking of, she's the next person Remus wakes up. Pandora greets him through a yawn, rubbing her eyes like a child, and she smiles at him sweetly as she thanks him for waking her. She offers to make breakfast, then gently berates him when he admits he's already done it, then lightly bullies him into agreeing to share breakfast with them.

Remus did admittedly save Sirius for last, because he's biased and not above a little favoritism. So, alright, maybe he's letting Sirius get as much sleep as he can. What of it?

Sirius doesn't come to the door while cursing, which had admittedly amused Remus the last time. Instead, he opens the door and blinks sleepily at him. A tiny, lopsided smile curves his mouth, despite how tired he also looks, a world-weary exhaustion more so than lack of sleep. He looks unbearably soft like this, just waking up, his hair ruffled and lines creasing his cheek that he probably doesn't know about.

"Good morning, Remus," Sirius greets warmly, his fingers fiddling mindlessly with the doorknob.

"Good morning, Sirius," Remus replies, and he gets such a vivid impulse to reach out and touch him that he almost thinks he's done it without realizing. He tucks his hands behind his back to be on the safe side, then wonders *why* he's doing that, why he's holding himself back, only to then be reminded why he is and why he should. It's not proper. It's dangerous.

"Hi," Sirius says, then snorts. "Oh, no, I'm not doing that again. Once was embarrassing enough. Sorry, hi, I just—oh, lovely, did it again anyway. I'm going to shut up now."

Fuck propriety, actually. What's life without a little danger anyway? Dead boring, that's what. Remus can't help it; there's just something about Sirius that tugs at him until he genuinely can't resist, and at the moment, he doesn't want to. He's still careful, despite everything, only stepping forward to reach out and tug Sirius' shirt up where it's slipping down over his shoulder, wrinkled and warm cotton that's just a bit too big.

Remus' knuckles brush his collarbone, and Sirius holds himself very still as Remus says, "I'd really rather you didn't."

"Well, that's a first," Sirius breathes out, gazing at him with such focus that Remus feels his stomach turn over. "Most people like it when I shut up, unless I'm telling them the things they want to hear. For some reason, I get the feeling hearing me tell you *hi* over and over isn't exactly the height of sophisticated conversation for you."

"I don't know, I like it," Remus mumbles, spending far too long holding onto Sirius' collar. He can feel the warmth of Sirius' skin beneath the backs of his fingers. There's a war going on inside him at the moment, one side battling in favor of him tugging Sirius in until they're kissing while the other rages on in favor of him letting go.

Sirius doesn't help either side of this battle, remaining firmly locked in place. He just smiles and asks, "Yeah?"

"You're my favorite hello," Remus admits, swallowing down a sigh as he pulls his hand back. It's not a complete loss. At his admission, Sirius does that very deep, intense blush that sneaks down all the way to where his chest peeks out a bit.

"Oh," Sirius says softly. "Well, hello."

Remus chuckles. "Hi."

"You know, maybe you're onto something. I like it, too," Sirius tells him with a broad grin.

"Mm, I can tell," Remus muses, shaking his head. "Go on, get dressed. Breakfast is ready."

"Right. Today," Sirius mutters, his smile falling. He says *today* like it's the root of all evil. He looks like he's dreading it, and then his eyes lock onto Remus hopefully, as if Remus is the one source of good in *today.* "Will you—"

"Yes, I'll have breakfast with you," Remus cuts in, still secretly pleased that he can interrupt. "With everyone, I mean, but you know what I mean."

Sirius is smiling again, which was the goal. "Brilliant. I'll get ready, then meet you there. Well, meet everyone, but—"

"Goodbye, Sirius," Remus says, exasperated because Sirius is teasing him, his eyes sparkling with humor.

"Bye, Remus," Sirius replies with a delighted little laugh before he shuts the door, and Remus stands there for a long moment, that laughter ringing in his ears.

His favorite hello, indeed, and his hardest goodbye.

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Regulus has always been very good at hiding things, at least from the moment he had things to hide. When he's scared, when he's hurt, when he's nervous, when he's feeling anything he deems a weakness—he knows exactly how to hide it, to cover it up so he looks calm, neutral, completely uncaring.

Before his interview, Regulus does just that, sitting in a tiny room with Pandora (who is watching the other interviews), Sirius (who is pacing with his arms crossed), and James (who is doing nothing to hide his own anxiety). What James could possibly have to be anxious about, Regulus doesn't know. *He's* not the one everyone is worried about; *he's* not the one who will have to fight to make people love him; *he's* not the one with complex relationships and secrets to hide.

No, that's just Regulus.

Sirius keeps glancing at him, then looking away quickly, a wrinkle of worry between his brows. It's sort of nice. Regulus wasn't expecting to see so much concern from Sirius, to be able to pick up on how much he *cares,* but it's there. Regulus can't deny it. He hasn't seen anything like it in years, and he never thought he'd want to see it again, but it's comforting.

Irene is being interviewed before Regulus, and Rita has plucked a few secrets from her with ruthless precision, including the one about having a crush on James. This is sort of ironic, because James is so lost in his own head that he isn't even paying attention, so he completely misses it. The Hallows love it, though. Irene is clearly a favorite, and she's working the crowd with lovely smiles and gentle laughter.

Regulus doesn't like her, but he can admit that she's a survivor who knows what she's doing, and she's going to be a tough act to follow. His stomach is tangled up into knots and only getting worse as her interview draws to a close. Someone steps out to tell Regulus he has about two minutes, waiting to escort him to the stage, and his heart fucking *drops*.

"Hey," Pandora says quietly, moving over to crouch down in front of him, her eyes clear as she holds his gaze. She reaches out and cups his hands in both of hers, smiling gently. "I want you to do something for me."

It takes Regulus a second to respond past his rising nerves. He can see Sirius and James fluttering at the edges around him, likely trying to be comforting, or helpful, but Pandora

takes all of his focus. "What?"

"I want you to find a very happy memory. The first one that you think of," Pandora murmurs. Regulus isn't sure why it pops into his head, but he thinks of the time he and Sirius snuck out of school to go pick pecans that they could sell at the market, just so they could buy sweets. It was Sirius' idea, of course, and they'd ended up cracking pecans open by the shell and eating them together while burning daylight. They'd laughed so much that day, and when they went to sell the pecans they gathered, they didn't even get enough money to buy more than one chocolate muffin, but they didn't mind. They just shared it. Regulus was nine. "Do you have it?"

"Yes," Regulus whispers.

Pandora smiles. "That's lovely. Now, as you go out there, I want you to think about the memory, yeah? Think about it and nothing else, and I want you to smile, because it's a happy memory that you can smile about. Don't think about Rita, or the crowd, or anything else—just think about that memory as you go sit in the chair. Will you do that for me?"

"I'll try," Regulus says.

"You're going to be fine, Regulus," James tells him, drawing his gaze. He gives him a smile. "Remember, you're an angel who's never done anything wrong in his life, not ever."

"Just for today," Sirius agrees with a shaky laugh, nodding when Regulus glances at him.

"I'm going to fuck this up," Regulus announces.

"No, you're not," Pandora counters firmly. She squeezes his hands, shaking her head at him. "Confidence is key, Regulus. You will *not* fuck this up. You will go out there and get through it, and you'll steal more hearts than you think."

They don't really get to say anything else to him, because his time is up, and he has to go. Pandora draws back, and Regulus pushes to his feet, his heart thumping loud in his ears as he lets himself be led out of the room. He glances back one more time to see Pandora smiling encouragingly, Sirius looking blatantly worried, and James just—looking at him, something unbearably soft about his gaze. Regulus turns, and he goes.

The distant sound of Rita talking to the crowd reaches him as he draws closer, saying, "Now, I don't know about the rest of you, but I am *excited* to speak to our next tribute. Regulus Black, little brother to our beloved Sirius Black, thrown into a tense battle against James Potter to make it back home to his brother and make his family proud, no doubt. Let's give him a warm welcome, shall we?!"

In response, there's a cacophony of cheers and chants of his name that makes him want to turn and run in the opposite direction. His stomach lurches, but he continues to walk, squeezing his eyes shut as he tries to do what Pandora said. He thinks of that day, giggling with Sirius as he showed him how to crack two pecans together, peeling the shell with quiet laughter between them. It's hard to focus on the memory, but he does his best, and it manages to draw a tiny smile to his face despite everything else.

That smile lasts for all of five seconds as he walks onto the stage before ultimately falling as he takes in the waves of faces staring at him, cheering for him like he's not just a walking corpse. He wonders bitterly if they'd continue to cheer if he died right in front of them now, if they'd be horrified if it existed outside of their screens, or if they'd just laugh over his dead body because that's all he ever was to them anyway.

But there, to the left in the front row, Gideon sits with Dorcas and Fabian, and Regulus isn't prepared for how much of a relief it is to see them. To see Gideon, especially, who lifts his hand in a little wave and gives him a tiny smile. Somehow, that manages to keep Regulus going, to push him to continue to the chair right across from one Rita Skeeter.

Rita is a blonde woman in a silk dress, lips painted red and making her smile look even more dangerous. She looks right at Regulus like she's eager to crack him open and peel his shell, no different than the pecans. It takes two to do it, and Regulus has a feeling that Sirius will be the other. Suddenly, that happy memory doesn't seem so happy.

"Goodness, Regulus," Rita greets as the noise dies down, and she's addressing him like they're old friends, "you're almost as beautiful as your brother."

Regulus knows a backhanded compliment when he hears one, but he's not entirely sure what he was expecting. Of course Rita would do that, compare them, as if Regulus gives a toss about being as beautiful or more beautiful than Sirius when he's about to be fighting for his life *literally* tomorrow.

"Yes, well, we're related, so it makes sense for us to look alike. That's generally how genetics work," Regulus replies. He realizes belatedly that this may have been a rude thing to say and internally curses. "But, you know, I've seen siblings look different as well. It's a shame you never got to interview Sirius, Rita. He's very funny."

Rita hums. "Oh, yes, I've heard many things about the charm of Sirius Black, and I think it moved everyone when he volunteered for his darling baby brother. It certainly moved me emotionally. How did it feel for you?"

"It felt…" Regulus trails off, and the whole room seems to wait with a bated breath. *Innocent angel,* Regulus reminds himself, and he looks at Rita with wide eyes, blinking slowly. "It felt like he saved me. I was worried for him, worried that he wouldn't come back, but he did."

"You must have been so proud of him when he returned a Victor," Rita breathes out, hand to her chest, and the crowd seems to make soft, heartbroken noises like they sympathize. As if they ever could.

Regulus lies, of course. "He's a hero. My hero."

"Oh, that's just so…" Rita makes a small noise and reaches out to take his hand, squeezing it. Her fingers are cold, and her nails are shaped like coffins. There's some sort of symbolism to that, Regulus thinks. Someone out in the crowd is crying, which is so fucking stupid that Regulus struggles not to roll his eyes. "And do you plan to return home to your brother just as he did for you, Regulus?"

"Yes," Regulus says simply.

Rita drops his hand and leans back. "An honorable goal to strive for, but surely a complicated one. You are, after all, going into the arena with his best friend."

"I am," Regulus confirms.

"Are you and James competing to see who will make it back to Sirius' side?" Rita asks, clearly expecting him to feed into it, to boast about himself and how sure he is of his own victory.

An innocent angel would never do that, though, and Regulus honestly doesn't want to perpetuate the belief that they're fighting. It makes things harder. "No, not at all."

"No?" Rita says, sending a curious look towards the crowd before leaning in like her and Regulus are just trading secrets between them. "Does it not bother you that James may make it back to your brother, if you can't?"

"If it can't be me, then I would hope James makes it back to him," Regulus admits, and it's not even a lie, not really. "But it will be me. Nothing or no one is going to stop me."

Rita cocks her head. "Not even James?"

At this, Regulus hesitates, and Rita unfortunately picks up on his hesitation. He can feel his nerves rising again, though they had barely settled. It takes effort for him not to shift restlessly in his chair, and it's like he can feel every camera, every light, every eye focused right on him all at once.

"Are you and James close?" Rita asks, eyebrows raised.

Regulus can't clear his throat, because everyone will hear it, but he desperately wants to. "Well, I grew up with him, really. He is Sirius' best friend, so obviously he's not a stranger."

Rude, Regulus' brain points out, but is it? He genuinely can't tell. He doesn't know when he's being harsh half the time, because most of the time, that's just him being honest or pointing out the obvious. It's not like he's *trying* to be a prick; it genuinely just seems to come naturally to him.

"So, you never felt like you had to fight for your place in your brother's life?" Rita challenges, gaze sharp on him, probing, trying to find his weakness so she can slip the blade in and start peeling back his layers. "There's no part of you that's eager to triumph against James at all?"

Regulus knows what they all want to hear. Bloodthirsty and panting for drama. They want chaos, something to talk about, something to capture their interest. He refuses to give it to them, though he knows that he could. He could say that he hates James, and Sirius, for the same fucking reasons; he could never say that he can't hate them, not really, for entirely different reasons altogether. He's full of complexities that these people would thrive on, and he won't show any of it.

"Sirius has never given me a reason to feel that way," Regulus lies without missing a beat, and he can see a small tick of frustration in Rita's jaw. The crowd lets out soft sighs and soft murmurs, a quiet *aw* drifting through the room, like they're all so touched. Fucking idiots.

"There must be some pressure on you nonetheless, coming from a family of Victors," Rita continues. "You would hate to be the first to fail, surely."

Regulus smiles at her, all teeth, bright and charming just like he's seen Sirius do a million times. "Well, if history is anything to go by, I don't have anything to worry about. Coming from a family of Victors—it's not a pattern I intend to break."

"Oh, that confidence—we love to see it, don't we?" Rita addresses the crowd, earning laughter and cheers, and Regulus can feel his smile becoming fixed. No one seems to notice, at least. Rita turns back to him, chuckling. "Now, I suspect you're also eager to get back to your parents, as well as Sirius."

Regulus doesn't expect it, but a laugh falls out of his mouth before he can stop it. He can hear the edge to it, so he tries to soften it, and it ends up being a little breathy. The absurdity of her

statement makes his head spin a bit. "Oh, well, my parents are expecting me to come home, that's true."

"You have no desire to let them down, do you?" Rita says.

"I never have before, and I'm not going to start now," Regulus lies, glancing at the crowd with the sweetest smile he can muster, like his mother might be out there watching. It's the redirect game, just like Sirius said. He knows his mother and father must be watching at home, and for a moment, he wonders if they're worried about him.

He knows the answer to that.

As if she can sense his thoughts, Rita muses, "Surely they're at home watching you now. Do you think you're making them proud, Regulus?"

"I hope so," Regulus lies, glancing back at Rita. Again, the crowd titters and seems so touched by what he's said.

"Is there anyone else back home you're trying to get back to? A lover, perhaps?" Rita asks, and *everyone* seems interested in this, which agitates Regulus to no end.

"No," Regulus murmurs. "No one at home."

"I see. A family man," Rita teases, and the crowd laughs again, almost mockingly. He can tell they're displeased, but he knows why. Sirius has a reputation here, and they would all thrive on the idea that Regulus, like his brother, is a romantic. They don't know Sirius, though, not really. Regulus has no intentions of playing that role. Ever. "I suppose if you're a Victor, you'll have many options. Although, I have to be honest, I can't imagine how you don't have options already, with how handsome you are, especially right now."

"Well, I never said I didn't have options. I just said there's no one at home I want," Regulus points out, then realizes that he's being argumentative when he should have just agreed. His

heart rate spikes, and he wants to get far away from this topic right now; he has an opening, thankfully. "I can't take all the credit for how I look right now. Some of it has to go to the design team." He inclines his head towards where Dorcas, Gideon, and Fabian are sitting. People start clapping politely, and they all wave and smile. "Honorable mention to Gideon, who works with me personally. James got Fabian, but I got lucky." At this, Gideon can be heard laughing loudly, and the crowd follows suit, laughing along with him as if Regulus has just told a very funny joke. "But, really, my outfit is lovely. There's more to it. I can show you, if you like."

"Oh?" Rita glances at the crowd, and they all break out into eager cheers, urging him on. Rita laughs grandly and sweeps out her hand. "Please do."

With a secret sigh of relief, Regulus stands up.

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Sirius watches the screen as Regulus spreads his dark cloak and gives a slow spin. As soon as the cloth pulls tight, a white glow of the Leo constellation forms on the cloak, the outline of the lion glittering out to everyone. The heart of it, the Regulus star, shines the brightest.

Everyone loves it, of course. The crowd quite literally goes wild, and Sirius turns his head as he paces the length of the room, agitated. He can feel eyes on him, and he knows it's James before he even looks.

"What?" James asks quietly. "He's doing well, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is," Sirius snaps, his jaw clenched.

James frowns. "Then what's wrong? He's doing everything you told him to."

"I *know* that, James," Sirius bites out.

"Sirius," James says softly.

Shaking his head, Sirius glances back at the screen to see Regulus sitting back down, explaining the constellation, his star being the heart of the lion, and the myth involving Hercules. Sirius looks away again. "He's lying. I can always tell when he's lying. Practically every word he's said was a lie."

"That *was* the point, Sirius," Pandora reminds him.

"Yes, well, you'll forgive me for not being ecstatic about hearing my brother call me his hero, all while knowing it's a fucking lie," Sirius snarls, whipping around to go stomping in the opposite direction.

James sighs. "You were sixteen. You shouldn't have had to *be* a hero. What you went through, that wasn't heroics. That was a tragedy, and it was unfair to you. He sees it that way as well."

"You don't know that," Sirius mutters, grimacing.

"I believe that," James tells him firmly. "Look, this isn't easy for me either. Do you think I didn't notice how hard he was avoiding telling everyone he hates me? He couldn't even bring himself to say we were friends."

Sirius scoffs. "He's a little prick, that's what he is."

"He's doing what you told him to do."

"I *know,* alright?! It's just—it's—"

James' face softens. "It's upsetting. I know. I get it."

"When he said that I never made him feel like he had to fight for a place in my life…" Sirius swallows thickly. "James, he was lying. That was a lie."

"Sirius," James whispers, his eyes sad. "Look at me, you know it's more complicated than that. You *know* it's not that simple."

"But he felt that way. I made him feel that way," Sirius insists, his heart feeling as if it's shriveling in his chest. "I didn't mean to, but I couldn't—I wasn't—"

"Stop it," James murmurs, but Sirius can't.

Sirius shakes his head. "He *still* feels that way, James. He's my little brother, and he's going to —he's going in the arena, and I can't—I can't take his place, I can't save him, I can't—"

"Sirius, hey, *Sirius,"* James cuts in quickly, launching to his feet to come over and put his hands on Sirius' shoulders, shaking him a little. "Breathe. Just breathe."

"There's not enough time," Sirius chokes out. "I don't have enough time to make it right."

James takes a deep breath and slowly releases it, waiting for Sirius to copy him. His voice has softened. "You both have been through unimaginable things, and you've suffered so much, but you're his brother, Sirius. He knows, alright? Deep down, he knows you care about him, no matter what you've been through."

"How did we let it get so bad?" Sirius whispers, his eyes stinging. The question weighs heavy in his mind. He knows the source was him; he was where it all went wrong, even if he can't remember. But he got better, as much as anyone can in his situation, so why didn't their relationship get better? Why didn't they try? Ten years. It's been ten years, and neither of them could bring themselves to try. Now, it's too late.

"It was a joint effort, I think. Between all of us," James says softly, his eyebrows pinched. "We—we did the best with what we had, Sirius. None of us are to blame."

Sirius knows what James is saying. Regulus was the one who pulled away, James was too busy taking care of Sirius, and Sirius was caught up in falling apart. They all had their own problems, and the repercussions of how they handled those problems lingered even after the problems weren't as pressing as they were at the start. By the end, none of them knew how to fix what they'd already brushed under the rug. The shattered remains crackled underfoot until they grew calluses and learned to keep walking, despite the cuts.

James squeezes his shoulders, holding his gaze. "You'll have time with him, plenty of it. I'll make sure of that."

"James," Sirius croaks.

"Let him help you," James whispers. "When I'm not here to do it, let it be him. He needs you as much as you need him."

Sirius swallows thickly. "I need you, too."

"You always have me, Sirius. I'm always with you, even when I'm gone. The ones who love us never really leave us." James smiles, a slightly trembling twist of his lips, and his throat bobs up and down. He pats Sirius' chest, nodding at him. "I will be right here. That's where I'll go, and that's where I'll stay. With you. You'll carry me with you forever, yeah?"

Sirius shakes his head, dangerously close to bursting into tears. He can't accept it. He can't face it. Doesn't know how. Doesn't think he'll survive it. If James—if he's gone, Sirius will go with him. There is no forever without James.

Exhaling deeply, James tugs on him, pulling him into a tight hug. Sirius all but clings to him, shaking all over. He wants to take James and Regulus, and *run.* Just run as fast as they can, as far as they can go, and never look back. He wants to split himself in half and take their places, die in their stead, suffer so they don't have to. He wants to save them, and keep them, and he can't. It's going to kill him.

Someone steps out to give the two minute warning, making them break apart slowly. Pandora is still dutifully watching Regulus' interview. He's used up a lot of time talking about stars, which is working in his favor; less of a chance for Rita to yank any secrets out of him that way. Rita is winding down now, though, clearly about to end with Regulus and get started on James, who looks strangely anxious.

"You'll be fine, James," Sirius assures him, reaching out to squeeze his arm. "You weren't the one we worried about, in any case. The hard part is over."

"Er, Sirius," James says weakly, his eyes wide.

Sirius waves him off. "Calm down, yeah? You just go out there and put on that James Potter charm. You'll have them eating out of your palm in no time."

"Right. Right, but Rita—"

"Rita cares about secrets, and you don't have any. Well, none that I don't know already, and I assure you, the fact that you cried the first time you got high isn't exactly a secret that Rita will be after, so you're *fine."*

"Well, um," James starts, but he never gets to finish before Regulus comes into the room.

"That," Regulus declares, "was the single most torturous thing I have ever gone through. I feel filthy. And ill."

"You did *marvelous,"* Pandora praises, bustling over to him to usher him into a chair. He sinks down into it with a deep exhale, like he's just defeated a terrible foe.

"Did I?" Regulus asks, sounding unsure, and he lifts his head to look right at Sirius for his approval. In that moment, he could be five years old, looking up to Sirius after he managed to

jump over a rain puddle, seeking his pride.

Sirius feels his heart clench, and his voice is a hoarse rasp when he says, "Yeah, Regulus, you did."

"Well, brilliant," Regulus mutters wryly, leaning his head back against the wall as his eyes drift shut. "I never want to do that again. Fucking hell."

Sirius doesn't have the heart to tell him that he will, in fact, have to do that again if he wins. Victors are interviewed at the end, and it's just another brutal process of rehashing all that happened in the arena. Sirius doesn't remember his Victor interview, not really. If it wasn't for Effie, he probably would have been catatonic on the stage.

James jumps when he's called, and he looks worried despite everyone's many reassurances. Sirius reaches out and squeezes his shoulder before he walks away, and Pandora gives him a gentle smile. Regulus doesn't even open his eyes to see him go.

Sirius moves over to sit down next to Regulus, gently bumping their knees together. Still, Regulus doesn't open his eyes, but a tiny smile briefly curves his mouth.

For now, that just has to be enough.

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Rita wastes no time in getting James to show off his outfit, no doubt trying to get it out of the way. The crowd loves it when he holds his cloak out and spins, showing the golden sun that blazes to life on the white fabric. People *ooh* and *ahh,* gasping and cheering in hushed delight.

"Absolutely lovely," Rita comments when he sits down, and she smiles right at him, but James can't help but note that there's no warmth to her gaze. "Regulus the star, and you're the sun, the star that outshines him. Is there meaning to that?"

"What? No," James says, rearing back a little bit. "I don't outshine him. It's—that's not the meaning. Just, you know, the sun is warm, so warm it'll burn you up if you get too close."

"Like Icarus," Rita muses, and James nods tentatively. "And who would you say is your Icarus, James? Regulus?"

"No," James mumbles.

Rita laughs. "Well, aren't you a humble one?"

James takes in a small, short breath. He forces himself to relax. Okay, he can do this; he's brilliant at this. He knows how to smile, to put people at ease, to keep them happy. As he exhales, he smiles broadly and chuckles. "You know, my mum always did tell me to stay humble, and she's never wrong."

"Your mum. Euphemia Potter, a Victor herself, and at the tender age of thirteen, too," Rita says. "She was Sirius' mentor when he was a tribute, wasn't she?"

"She was."

"Do you think she's relieved to know Sirius is your mentor, or perhaps concerned, since his little brother is also a tribute?"

"My mum loves Sirius as if he's her own," James says, which makes the crowd let out soft noises, almost coos. "She holds no ill will for him or Regulus in her heart. She's—well, I know she's watching right now. Hi, Mum. Hi, Dad."

The room breaks out into laughter as he raises his hand and waves at the camera off the side of the stage. He imagines his parents watching, pressing their hands to their smiles as they see him beaming at them, being their goofy son with a smile that never wanes. It makes him

inexplicably sad, but he isn't going to let it show. He chuckles along with the others, dropping his hand as he winks at a few people in the front row before turning to focus on Rita again.

"A man who loves his parents wholeheartedly; we adore that. You must miss them very much," Rita points out.

"I do, yes," James admits, because he does.

Rita clicks her tongue in sympathy, but James doesn't think it's real. "I'm sure you're eager to get back home to them."

"I'd love to see them again," James says carefully, perhaps too carefully, but he really is a shit liar when he's anxious. This is the truth, though. "They know my intentions to do what needs to be done, and I know they're proud of me."

"How lovely," Rita replies with a hum. "Let's talk about your reaping, how you must have felt when your name was called, only to hear Regulus' name afterwards. I can only assume you were relieved at first, knowing that your best friend would be beside you, but surely that relief soured when you heard your best friend's little brother would be your competition."

"He's not—we're not competing," James announces, shaking his head. "It's not like that."

"No?" Rita challenges. "You're not worried that Sirius will do more for his little brother than you?"

James clenches his jaw. "We're under no illusion of how difficult this is for all of us to navigate. What's important is that we're all doing our best, and we are. Sirius, especially."

"That's sweet, James, but I must ask… What will you do in the arena when it's just you and Regulus?" Rita presses, leaning forward with a frown, like she pities him. "You said you'll do what must be done. Do you think Sirius will forgive you for it when that includes his baby brother?"

"Well…" James swallows, feeling lost at sea. He wishes more than anything that Pandora or Sirius had coached him for something like this, because he has absolutely no idea what to say. He doesn't want Regulus—who is watching—to know his decision, and he doesn't think people would like it so much if they knew he was going into the arena with all plans to die. They like people who will fight, who aren't planning to give up. *Think, what would Sirius do?* James asks himself. Instantly, he laughs and plasters on an easy smile, leaning forward like he's telling a secret. "I suppose you'll have to watch and see."

Rita hums as the crowd responds pleasantly, clearly liking the suspense and implications. She laughs along with them and nods. "I suppose we will. I, for one, cannot *wait* to see what tricks you surely have up your sleeve."

"Oh, trust me, you have no idea what tricks I'm capable of," James teases, leaning back in his chair lazily.

"Well, well, you sure know how to bring a sense of anticipation, James," Rita praises. "Can I ask? Does *Regulus* know what tricks you have up your sleeve?"

"Honestly? He knows most of them," James admits, his lips curling up, "but not all. Never all."

"Do you think you'll surprise him, then?"

"I know I will."

Rita gives a theatrical shudder. "Oh, you sound so sure that you've gone and given me goosebumps. We're all on the edge of our seats; I daresay you have us hooked."

"Well, I have you right where I want you, then," James says with a grin, sweeping his gaze over the crowd. This time, he catches sight of Fabian with Dorcas and Gideon. Fabian is hiding a smile behind his fist, and James winks at him. Some of the people behind him think it's towards them, and they look like they're about to swoon.

"I can't help but notice that you speak of Regulus fondly," Rita tells him. "He mentioned that you two grew up together, but he didn't say much else. I think he was shy."

James' smile softens helplessly. "Believe it or not, he actually was shy when he was younger. He was very, *very* sweet. The first time I saw him, he was riding around on Sirius' back, asleep on his shoulder." Again, the crowd seems to find this unbearably adorable, and James can't really blame them. It *was* very cute, even then. "We met properly a few days later when I came to their house. Sirius dragged him out to introduce us, and he was certainly more bashful then. Very polite, though."

"Isn't that just adorable?" Rita asks the crowd, and they make loud noises of agreement. She laughs and turns back to James, her gaze sharp. "It's almost as if you see him as a little brother, too. That would make sense, if you grew up together."

"Er, no, not—definitely not," James says weakly, clearing his throat. Rita raises her eyebrows at him. "I just—I only mean that Regulus isn't… He's not just Sirius' little brother. He's his own person. I—I, um, worked that out as I got a bit older."

"Oh?" Rita murmurs, her tone light. "So, you would say that you two are close? Friends of your own, perhaps?"

James can feel the eagerness in the room, the pressure building as everyone wants an answer one way or the other, metaphorical claws digging into his skin in persistent demand. He flounders for a moment, his heart racing, feeling frozen to the spot and overheated with every eye on him. How the fuck does he answer this? Does he—can he lie? *Should* he lie? He can't very well tell the truth, because that would be very bad for everyone involved. *Well, you see, Regulus hates me and has hated me for the last ten years or so, but the feeling isn't mutual, so it's all very complicated; can we talk about anything else?*

Yeah, no, James can't say that.

"Ah, we—well, we have a lot of memories together," James stutters out, struggling not to wince at how shaky his tone is. Rita looks fucking *delighted,* like she can tell that he's hiding

something. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Not good. "A lot of good memories, in fact. With Sirius, too."

"But also without Sirius?" Rita cocks her head at him, her gaze piercing. "Did you and Regulus spend a lot of time alone?"

"I—well, no, not very much. I mean, sometimes we spoke when Sirius was getting ready to come down from his room, but um, mostly we just...all spent time together." James shifts restlessly in his seat. "But also, there was the time that Sirius was in the arena. I was there for him as much as I could be."

Rita makes a soft sound and reaches out to pat his knee, which feels very patronizing and only makes James' nerves even more tense. "Of course you were, but surely you had other friends."

"Er, yeah," James admits slowly. "I had a lot of friends back home. Still have, actually."

"That's lovely," Rita says. "You seem to have made a lot of friends here as well. Many other tributes spoke highly of you."

James breaks out into a smile. "Oh, yeah, I've met many lovely people here."

"I'd say you're a clear favorite, and with your gorgeous smile and undeniable charm, it doesn't surprise me at all. In fact, I think you've caught Irene's interest the most," Rita tells him, and the crowd breaks out in titters and dreamy sighs. James is so confused right now, honestly. Is she implying…? "Could you see something blossoming between the two of you?"

"Er, in the arena?" James asks skeptically, a little incredulous. So, she obviously *is* implying what James thinks she is, but she can't be serious, can she?

Rita laughs. "Oh, sure. Love is like a flower that blooms even in the harshest conditions. Do you look for that to happen?"

"Between me and Irene? No. Goodness, no, we're just friends," James declares quickly, shaking his head. This is clearly not the right thing to say, because the crowd makes it *very* clear that they don't like this. James holds his hand up in surrender, internally panicking. "Not—not because of her. She's lovely, but I'm—I just, um, well—"

"I see what this is," Rita says softly, reaching out to grab his hand and pat the back of it. "You had feelings for someone back home, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah, actually," James confesses, relieved that the crowd has gone from being upset to being intrigued.

"You were dating someone?"

"No. It wasn't—I mean, he doesn't know how I feel."

Rita pats his hand yet again, and the crowd joins her in making soft, pitying noises. "You could always tell him now. After all, James, it could be your last chance."

"Ah, no, I really couldn't," James mumbles, huffing out a weak laugh. "It's...complicated."

"Feelings always are, aren't they?" Rita pulls her hand back and studies him. It looks like she has cogs turning in her mind, and the needling force of her gaze is just making his anxiety so much worse. "Well, if you win and return a Victor, you'll have to confess your feelings for him."

James snorts and says, "Well, if I win and return a Victor, I won't have anyone to confess *to."*

There's a long pause, and the entire room falls silent. James realizes a beat too late that this is possibly the stupidest thing he could have said. He goes very still, his eyes widening, and he

can see a slow smile steadily splitting Rita's face. Oh, fuck. *Shit, shit, shit,* James thinks, his heart falling to the pit of his stomach. He did not just—why did he *say* that?

"Do you mean...Regulus?" Rita asks, gazing at him with this bright spark in her eyes, utterly triumphant. "A boy you had feelings for back home, a complicated situation, and if you win, that means he won't be there. Am I right?"

James waits for someone to come save him. He waits for the ability to turn back time and fix this mistake made in the shaky foundation of his anxiety, only growing worse from each second that passed from the start. He feels like shrinking down and hiding away from the world, but all eyes are on him, and he has nowhere to go. Helplessly, he glances around the room, finding nothing more but eager eyes and waves of delight for the drama unfolding before them.

"James?" Rita prompts, drawing his gaze. Her eyes are still sparkling, despite the tender frown on her face. She reaches out to put her hand on his knee again. "Is this true? Do you have feelings for your best friend's brother?"

"Um," James rasps, flexing his fingers on the arms of his chair, and he can feel how hard his heart is thumping against his ribs, threatening to break them in an attempt to break free. He opens and closes his mouth, then feels himself sink into the freefall, because he doesn't know what else to do. With a shaky laugh, he nods. "Yes, well, can you blame me?"

Rita's lips curve up at the side, just for a moment, and she squeezes his knee before leaning back. "No, I don't think anyone can blame you for that. He's beautiful, and I think I can speak for everyone when I say how unfortunate it is that you two are in these circumstances. It's a tragedy, isn't it, that you'll never know what life you two could have lived together? But remember, harsh conditions or not, love is like a flower that can bloom anywhere. I hope it blooms for you. Don't we all hope it blooms for James and Regulus?"

The room nearly trembles with the ear-splitting shrieks and cheers of support. People are crying, people are shouting advice, and some are telling him to love while he still has the chance. Rita doesn't interrupt it, and James swivels his head to look out at everyone, feeling faint and out of his depth.

It makes sense, in a way, because love is a universal truth. It is, despite everything, what most—if not all—people can agree on, in that people feel the call of it. People find hope in it. People *believe* in love, almost instinctively, because love exists all around them. In families, in friends, in lovers. There's so much love in life, and it's what makes living worth it.

For James, in more ways than one, it's what will make dying worth it, too. For Sirius, yes, but also Regulus.

The interview doesn't last for much longer. Rita gives out a closing statement as James fixes a smile on his face, ears ringing, and then he's being escorted off the stage. He's almost as nervous to go back to the room as he was to leave it. What is he going to say to Regulus? Fuck, what is he going to say to *Sirius?* His brain is in an uproar, too much going on for him to make sense of anything at all.

James steps back into the room and shuts the door, turning around with a deep breath. He doesn't even get to exhale before his back is hitting the door with a loud thud, Regulus shoving him against it and pinning his forearm against James' throat, holding him in place. James wheezes, eyes bulging as he takes in the pure fury on Regulus' face, his lip curled into a snarl and his eyes blazing. Frankly, he's fucking gorgeous. These are less than ideal circumstances, admittedly, but James can't help but notice.

A steady stream of an angry tirade is spilling from Regulus' mouth, even as James gazes at him and thinks, helplessly, *you are so beautiful.* He'd probably say it like an idiot, because he's in it now, so why not? But Regulus isn't really giving him the chance between his arm at James' throat and his ranting.

"Are you fucking *mental?!"* Regulus is shouting. "Do you think this is funny, some sort of joke? Were you trying to tease me? Make me look weak? You stupid fucking—"

"Reggie! Regulus, *stop!"* Sirius scolds, then curses sharply under his breath and fully reaches around Regulus' front to grab him and haul him clear off his feet as he pulls him back. Regulus, being Regulus, tries to tip forward and get to James again, but Sirius ignores his dramatic flailing and carries on pulling him back.

"Put me *down!"* Regulus bellows.

Sirius swats him on the side of his head, snapping, "I will when you stop trying to attack him."

"He—"

"I *know.* I heard. I was there."

Regulus cranes his head to stare at Sirius in disbelief, his face flushed with anger. "Sirius! Let me *go.* He just told the entire fucking *world* that he—he—"

"Yes, as we've established, I *know,"* Sirius grits out, dropping him harshly enough that he stumbles a little bit. Sirius latches onto Regulus' arm so he can't get away. "You should be thanking him. Do you have any idea what he just did? He made you *desirable,* Regulus."

"He—you—" Regulus rears back, eyes wide. "Did you fucking put him up to this, Sirius?!"

"No, actually, that was all him," Sirius mutters, his gaze darting to James. His eyes narrow slightly, but he glances back at Regulus. "Stop being an idiot. Pandora, take him to go cool off, would you?"

Pandora moves over, winding her arm through Regulus' and gently tugging him towards the other door. "Come on, Reg. I know, I know, you want to kill him. Save it for the arena."

Somehow, Pandora coaxes Regulus out of the room, and James prods at his throat with a grimace. It doesn't hurt, really, but the pain behind the gesture tugs at his chest. What was he expecting, though? He knows Regulus hates him, so it would only make sense for Regulus to respond that way.

That doesn't make it hurt less.

Hesitantly, James drops his hand and drags his gaze up to find Sirius staring at him. His lips are pressed into a thin line, and his arms are crossed. Slowly, one eyebrow ticks up.

"So, er, I take it I failed my interview," James says weakly.

"James, what the fuck was *that?"* Sirius hisses.

"I just—I don't know what you want me to say, Sirius. She was dead awful, and I—I tried to —" James makes some sort of helpless gesture with his hands, and Sirius still looks tight with agitation, and all the stress comes crashing down on James at once as his mounting frustration bubbles up in him until it spills over. "Well, it's not like I knew what to do! I *told* you I was worried, and you just kept brushing me off. What did you expect to happen when you and Pandora didn't coach me at all? I did my best on my *own,* because you certainly didn't fucking help me, did you?"

Sirius doesn't react for a moment outside of the tiniest flinch, something like horror flashing in his eyes, and then his eyebrows tug together as he drops his arms. He almost instantly reaches up to drag his hand over his mouth, then shoves it through his hair. "No, you're right. I—I'm sorry. I just thought—I don't know why I assumed you would handle it with ease. Even I didn't. No one does, really, and I shouldn't have expected you to. It's—I just admire you, so I…"

"I know I make it seem easy to get on with people, and for me, it generally is," James croaks. "Just...not so much when I'm being interrogated and I'm so scared that I can barely think."

"Fuck." Sirius' eyes sink shut, his face twisting. He hangs his head forward and scrubs his hand over his hair roughly once, twice, and then a third time before dropping his hand and looking up with remorse in his eyes. "Fuck, James, I'm really sorry. That was a lot to put on you. I should have—well, you're right, I should have helped you. If—if it makes you feel better, you did brilliantly on your own. You—you *didn't* fail."

James blows out a deep breath, his shoulders slumping as he looks at Sirius with wide eyes. "I didn't?"

"No, you…did really quite well, actually," Sirius says, and James instantly feels better. "You answered questions beautifully with only a few minor hiccups here and there, but they were smoothed over quickly. And I wasn't lying when I said that Regulus should be thanking you."

"You weren't?" James asks in surprise.

Sirius shakes his head. "You just solved the issue of everyone pitting you two against each other, and not only that, but you've given them reasons to root for *both* of you. What's more enthralling than war? A love story, that's what."

"Oh," James breathes out, feeling a hysterical laugh bubble up in the back of his throat. He didn't even *mean* to do that, but if it'll help Regulus survive… Well, brilliant.

"The thing is," Sirius says slowly, "you didn't do that on purpose. I know you didn't, James. Rita dug that out of you. But that would mean it's true…"

James stares at him, holding his gaze, and then he lets his head thump back against the door. He huffs a weak laugh and lifts his hands before letting them drop back down limply. "What are you going to do, Sirius? Kill me?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Sirius mutters, looking downright *exhausted.* James sort of pities him. "My brother, James?"

"Sorry?"

"Are you?"

"I mean…" James trails off, biting his lip. In his defense, he's never done anything to be sorry *for.* It's not as if he and Regulus have been running around behind Sirius' back. James just has hopeless feelings for him that he failed to mention to Sirius, very much on purpose.

"But, like, *why?"* Sirius' face screws up. "And *don't* say it's because you think he's pretty. You think *I'm* pretty—or you *better* think I'm pretty—"

"Yes, of course you're pretty, Sirius."

"Thank you. Moving on. I need an explanation."

James scratches at the side of his head, pursing his lips. "I mean, I—I *do* think he's pretty, to be fair. But you're right. He's just… Well, it started—er, do you remember his fifteenth birthday, when he hit me in the head with a snowball?"

"Yes. Is that—" Sirius stares at him incredulously. "Do *not* tell me my little brother *abused* you into forming a crush."

"Listen—"

"Fucking hell, James."

"Shut up, alright?" James mumbles sheepishly, his face getting hot. He averts his eyes. "Obviously it's more than that. *He's* more than that. His eyes, the way he talks, the little smile he tries so hard to hide. Even his anger, his pain, his—everything. I can't help it. I can't ignore it. I can't ignore *him.* And I know it's stupid, I know he hates me, but I just—I—"

"Yeah, alright, I—I got it," Sirius cuts in wearily, heaving a sigh as he reaches up to rub his finger furiously along his eyebrow. James can see him chewing on the inside of his cheek, processing. "So, all the flirting lately…"

"I...may have been indulging a little," James admits with some chagrin. He shrugs when Sirius drops his hand to stare at him blankly. "Well, you know, I'm going to die soon, so I may as well…"

Sirius flinches again, looking distraught in an instant, and James is so fucking scared of dying for a lot of reasons, but the main one is Sirius. He doesn't want to leave Sirius alone. He doesn't want to leave Sirius at all.

Something flickers over Sirius' face, and then his eyes widen as he whispers, "Oh. *Oh,* that's why, isn't it? Your choice—you said it was more than just for me. It's for you, too."

"Yeah," James says softly. "Yeah, it is."

For a long time, they can only stand there in stifling silence, utterly smothered by the tragedy that is.

And oh, what a tragedy it is.

Chapter End Notes

starting from the top:

remus really went to sirius' best friend and was like, hey why isnt sirius doing inappropriate things to me??? help??? lmaoooo the fact that james immediately sold sirius out. "he really likes you. a lot" JAMES DIDNT EVEN HESITATE 😭😭😭 but also, he's a real one for being like, maybe YOU should do inappropriate things, ever thought of that, remus, huh? james "best wingman" potter is trying to get his best friend laid, and we love him for that.

not sirius being remus' favorite hello and hardest goodbye ☹☹☹ brb gonna cry. everyone sort of calls this a "jegulus fic" and there are times when jegulus gets the main focus (particularly in the games), but this is as much a wolfstar fic as it is a jegulus fic. this is very, VERY wolfstar heavy, and we also get a lot of dorlene, too. others as well, but i can't speak on the other relationships because we haven't gotten to them yet. we get there when we get there.

anyway, as for the interviews. regulus really did his best, you've gotta give him that. he held it together and lied his ass off. go ahead, king, you be a little innocent angel. james potter number one regulus stan: he's never done anything wrong in his life, ever. all regulus stans: i just think he's neat 🥰

side note: the pecan story will be used for further angst later on, just a warning

but also, sirius being sad because regulus was lying, so now he knows regulus doesn't see him as his hero 😭😭😭 that's so fucking upsetting. listen, regulus and sirius have A LOT they need to unpack and literally no time in which to unpack it. they make my heart ache.

then you've got james, who was SO anxious for his interview and NO ONE HELPED HIM 😭😭😭 like, everyone really looked at james and thought: now THAT'S a man who can do anything and charm anyone with no problem. and yeah, it comes from a place of admiration—even sirius is not immune. in a way, it's cute, because he's like: james is great, he can do anything, he's so cool and doesn't need help at all. yeah, real sweet, except for the fact that james is not perfect because no one is and no one can be, so it leads to moments like james accidentally confessing his feelings for regulus in front of the entire world.

i would like it on the record that sirius was not maliciously withholding his help from james—neither was pandora, for that matter—but he literally just admires james and believes in him THAT much. like, it came from a place of love. he didnt MEAN to put james in that position, and he was quite convinced that regulus was the one who needed help (and to be fair, regulus absolutely would have bombed that interview without all that help). still, james getting to be upset about being brushed off and put on a pedestal and having to do it on his own with no help was very cathartic.

lmao regulus was about to claw james' eyes out 💀 we get more on why he was so upset later, i promise. james really got mildly attacked by regulus and STILL was sitting there thinking he was beautiful. help this fool. and sirius smacking regulus upside the head will never not be funny to me, because it reminds me of that video where that cat is trying to fight, and the dog just comes over and grabs the cat by the scruff to pull it back 😭😭😭

not pandora being like: save it for the arena. she's FOUL for that one, but she's so funny to me, pls

sirius being confused about why james would even like regulus is HILARIOUS to me. he really was like, okay you're gonna have to make diagrams and pie charts to explain to me how this even happened. this poor man. he is So Tired. like, james and regulus are stressing him out so much at this point. if it's not one thing with them, it's another, and now he has to deal with romantic feelings on top of everything else??? let him REST.

meanwhile, james is over here twirling his hair because regulus is pretty and mean to him and nearly gave him brain damage when he was fifteen. leave him alone, that snowball was his wakeup call and he's been wide awake ever since 😭😭😭

anyway, i really liked this chapter, if you couldnt tell. let me know your thoughts!!! i love all your comments so much and try my best to reply when i have the energy/time. thank you all so, so much <3

The Last Night

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death (in the past and also assumed to be in the future)
-brief description of violence
-brief description of murder (nothing too detailed, but explicitly stated what happened)
-references to torture (not explicit and only really hinted at, you might not even pick up on it)
-depictions of dissociation and dissociative amnesia
-reference to a pet passing away to old age (peacefully and only briefly mentioned)
-brief reference to a nightmare
-angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dinner is a quiet affair.

Regulus isn't sure if it's tense because of the earlier interviews, or simply because it's the last day for him and James, or both. Pandora is the only one who speaks, really, but she quickly gives up on that when no one has much to say in response.

Sirius and Remus are making eyes at each other, which Regulus mostly ignores. Usually, it's sort of fun to see his brother turn into a complete idiot the moment Remus so much as *breathes* in his direction, but Regulus understandably detests any and all hints of romance right now. The source of this issue—one James Potter, of course, who barely lifts his gaze from his plate the entire meal and doesn't say one word.

Actually, James is the first one to leave, and he does so in a manner that's not like him at all. Without a goodbye, he just shoves himself out of his seat and leaves without looking back. It takes Sirius all of five seconds before he's up and following him, looking worried and a little sick.

Regulus doesn't want to be bitter, but he is, a bit. Of course Sirius would go to James, regardless of the fact that Regulus is literally in the same situation as him. Of course James

would want Sirius' company over anyone else's, regardless of the fact that Regulus is surely feeling just like he is at the moment. That's how they work; it's always James and Sirius, and Sirius and James. Never one without the other.

It feels like a bad omen, in a way. Vaguely, Regulus realizes the world wouldn't make much sense if Sirius and James didn't have each other. Going into the arena with James where only one can come out...this acknowledgement isn't a comfort. It's never been a comfort for Regulus, though, so he's used to it.

He remembers when he used to be so, *so* happy that Sirius and James were best friends. Funny how things change. But, really, not funny at all. Regulus hasn't laughed about it in years.

Pandora tries to get up and help Remus clean, but he firmly sends her off to bed, which is probably for the best. She's tired, and honestly, she might be the only one who actually gets some proper rest tonight, so Regulus figures *someone* should.

Regulus doesn't want to admit it, but he doesn't want to be alone right now. He doesn't want to go sit in his room and think about what's waiting for him tomorrow. He doesn't want to drown in his own thoughts. Mostly, he wants to avoid thinking for a while; he wants to avoid everything. So, he gets up and starts scraping plates without a word.

"You don't have to do that," Remus murmurs.

"I know," is all Regulus replies, because he's very aware that it's technically something Remus is only required to do. He doesn't care. He's doing it anyway.

Remus is silent for a long beat, then he says, "Really, Regulus, you can go rest. I can do this on my own."

Regulus lifts his gaze and just looks at him, the fork scraping slowly against the plate as he continues what he's doing. For a moment, Remus just stares at him, then he seems to realize that Regulus isn't budging on this, and he gives a tiny, singular nod—mostly to himself—and turns away without a word.

In silence, they work in tandem to grab the plates off the table, throwing food away. Regulus hates it, really, because this is food that could go to people who are very, very hungry in various districts. He never wastes a meal, and neither does James or Sirius, but...well, this is their last day. It doesn't leave much room for an appetite, so Regulus lets it go.

Regulus also helps Remus gather the glasses off the table, then just gives in and goes to help him wash dishes. If Remus is surprised by this, he doesn't show it. In fact, Remus doesn't say anything at all at first, letting them fall into a silent rhythm where Regulus washes and Remus rinses, dries, and puts away.

"I saw your interview, you know," Remus says, eventually. "I'm not technically supposed to watch, but I was already here, so I just… Well, anyway, you did very well."

"You saw James' too, I'm guessing," Regulus mutters.

Remus hums. "Yes, but I was assuming you didn't want to talk about that."

"Nothing gets past you, Remus," Regulus says dryly, and Remus snorts quietly.

"You don't have to talk about it. It's obviously complicated."

"Yeah, that's the word he used, too, but it's not really that complicated at all."

"No?" Remus asks.

"No," Regulus confirms. "I hate him. I hate him even more now, for involving me in a stupid lie that I wanted nothing to do with. He had no right to do that."

"Right," Remus says slowly. There's a long pause. Remus puts away a glass and comes back, his lips pursed when Regulus glances over at him. "I hope I'm not overstepping here, but if I may… I'm not so sure that it is a lie, and people can't—they can't help how they feel, Regulus."

"Don't compare what you and Sirius have going on to James and I. It's not the same," Regulus replies shortly.

"I...wasn't," Remus mumbles, and Regulus appreciates that he doesn't try to deny anything about him and Sirius. It would just piss Regulus off if he did. "It's just, well, when you're a servant with nothing to do but watch, you learn to notice things, and James looks at you. *Really* looks at you. A lot."

Regulus scoffs and scrubs harder at a plate, his face dropping into a scowl. "That doesn't have to mean anything."

"No, but I'm observant, and I've observed that it does." Remus reaches over to take the plate without warning, and Regulus huffs quietly under his breath. Remus seems to find this amusing, if the way his lips twitch are anything to go by.

"Honestly, this is the least of my worries right now," Regulus says shortly, shaking his head.

"I know." Remus blows out a deep breath. "I just don't think it has to be a worry for you, really. Rita practically tore James apart to get to what he was protecting, and that turned out to be you. He was sincere, Regulus, and it wasn't malicious."

Regulus turns that over in his head, because admittedly, he hasn't really—considered it. He doesn't know why, and he also does. But he was there. He watched the interview. He saw the way James looked, the pure fucking panic in his eyes as soon as he realized what he said, as soon as he realized what he *revealed.* James—of course he would never do something like that to be malicious; he literally announced to everyone that he had no feelings for Irene only moments before. He's sincere like that, about the things that matter, and feelings—people's feelings *matter* to him. Rita just cracked him like a fucking pecan, and Regulus wasn't prepared for him to be the other one that she used to do it. He didn't see it coming.

But, really, in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter. It *can't* matter, so Regulus isn't letting himself think about it. He doesn't want to think about it, not when tomorrow is still going to come no matter what passes through his mind.

"I have more important things to focus on than what James may or may not feel," Regulus announces firmly, passing the last plate over. He reaches in to drain the water, staring at the suds that cling to his forearm. "It's not going to change anything in the arena anyway, so…"

Remus rinses the last plate, but he takes his time drying it. Regulus can feel him looking at him, so he slowly glances back. Remus murmurs, "Are you scared?"

Regulus stares at him, then arches an eyebrow.

"Right, stupid question," Remus admits wearily, shaking his head. "I just—I suppose I wanted to give you the option of talking about it, if that would help."

"It won't," Regulus says bluntly. "Talking about the fear isn't going to magically make it go away. It's still there, no matter what's said about it."

"Yeah," Remus replies quietly. "Yeah, I know."

Regulus watches him, lips pressing into a thin line. "This is going to be hard for Sirius. Watching James be in danger when he can't do anything about it… He'll be a mess, Remus."

"And you."

"What?"

"Watching James *and you* be in danger, he'll be a mess. You're his brother, Regulus." Remus frowns when Regulus doesn't respond to this, and then he sighs. "I know this isn't going to be easy on him."

"You'll make it easier," Regulus murmurs, holding his gaze, and Remus swallows harshly. "You're important to him. I'm sure you've worked that out by now, but I'm telling you in case you haven't. Just—I can't make you, I can only ask, so I'm asking. Do you know what I'm asking?"

Remus nods carefully. "Yes."

"Will you, then?"

"I'll try."

Regulus nods, then turns and leaves without another word, feeling like he's smothering in the request he couldn't bring himself to voice out loud. *Take care of him.* It's always so hard to say, because it's never him that Sirius needs, but that doesn't stop him from wanting Sirius to be alright.

He's grateful that Remus heard him nonetheless.

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Sirius remembers when James lost his first and only pet. A stray cat that had wandered through the Victor's Village for years, one that James had been feeding and bringing inside since he was a child. She was an older cat, and she had been around for years, but by the time James was eighteen, she was gone. The day he found her, peacefully gone in her sleep in a patch of sun, James had been a fucking *wreck.*

It had been alarming seeing James cry. Since they were eleven, Sirius had never seen James cry like *that.* He'd seen him cry from laughter, and he'd seen him cry while reading soppy books, and he was sure that James cried when he returned home after his time in the arena—even if he couldn't remember it. None of that was how he cried that day, raw sobs and horrible grief, so heavy that Sirius had been scared.

James hasn't cried like that since, until tonight.

It's as scary as it was then. Tonight, he curls himself up on his bed next to Sirius and cries with so much grief, so much loss, that it's a fight for Sirius not to cry right along with him. The one James is mourning this time? Himself.

That feels like some sort of cruel joke that the universe is playing on him. People don't get to attend their own funeral, and yet James has already made himself at home in his grave.

Sirius sprawls out on the bed next to James, listening to him weep with a shrill sound ringing in his ears that sounds like his own screams he keeps trapped behind his teeth. He says things, soft things, comforting things; he wraps an arm around James and holds him; he tries and tries to help, and he doesn't really do anything at all. There's nothing to do, and yet his hands ache to dig James up from his grave until his nail beds are so torn that they're bleeding.

Sirius breathes and thinks *I'll breathe life back into you,* because James isn't dead. He's not dead, and Sirius can't accept that he might be one day very soon. He doesn't accept it. To him, the grave is just a door, and Sirius refuses to close it.

James cries himself to sleep, and Sirius stays a long time after anyway, just watching him breathe. He can't drag himself away until James turns over in his sleep, and then Sirius buries his face into the pillow to muffle the choked sound that falls out of his mouth. He shoves it down, the rising grief and pain that threatens to consume him, because he has no reason to feel it. He doesn't accept the reasons it would be there.

Sirius tugs the blanket over James, his lungs feeling like they're on fire, and then he leaves.

It's not late. Still afternoon, technically. James just exhausted himself with all the crying, and Sirius hopes he sleeps all the way through until morning, just for one last night of the last dredges of peace he'll get to have before the arena wrings it out of him for good. Because it will. Sirius can attest to that.

He's not surprised when he ends up at Regulus' door. For a long time, he just stands outside of it, not even sure if he can bring himself to go inside. He rests his hand on the doorknob, feeling oddly hollow. His mind buzzes dully, but nothing really sticks when it drifts through; it's like his thoughts are just pieces of paper fluttering along the wind, brushing past his fingertips when he tries to grab them, always out of reach.

Slowly, he turns the doorknob, his eyes shut as he eases the door open. He waits for Regulus to say something, but he doesn't, and Sirius understands why when he peels his eyes open. Regulus isn't in his room. The door to the balcony is cracked, and Sirius can just make out the shadow of his brother pouring in from outside the gap.

Sirius' memory of the past is really bad, but he still has issues with it in the present. His mind isn't—sometimes he can't get it to work right. It's not brain damage from the arena; he was medically checked over and cleared when it was over. He has physical scars from his injuries, but the mental ones never fully healed, and he doubts they ever will. It fucks with his memory a lot, sometimes even in real time.

Like now. Sirius blinks and finds himself at the door to the balcony with absolutely no recollection of how he got there. It's just—blank. He doesn't know if he walked in a straight line, if he stopped halfway there, if he skipped or ran or twirled in circles from one point to the next. And he'll never know. That time—that moment—is just *lost* to him now, and he knows he'll never get it back.

It's one of the most common aftereffects of the arena that has lingered in his life, even ten years later. It's gotten better, admittedly. He used to lose entire days, or hours, and not just moments. It used to happen frequently and without reason, no matter what he was doing or who he was with. James told him once that he acts no differently than usual, that he just carries on what he's doing, and no one can even tell that he's gone. It's like he's sleepwalking, but it's *sleep-living,* and it scares him each time he wakes up. It's different from the nightmares or hallucinations, because he's still *present* for them, but this? It's like he doesn't even exist when it happens.

Sirius exhales quietly, reaching out with a shaking hand to ease the balcony door open and slip outside. Regulus is curled up in a chair, his arms wrapped around his bent legs. His head swivels to watch Sirius move over to sit in the lone chair across from him, but he doesn't protest, or speak at all.

For a long time, Sirius doesn't speak either. He can't. He isn't sure what to say. The silence feels heavy between them, thick like quicksand, something they sink into the more they struggle. They've been struggling for so long now that Sirius doesn't think they know how to do anything else. You don't drown in quicksand; it suffocates you. There's a difference, and Sirius doesn't know which is worse.

Sirius feels like he's dangerously close to breaking down, but he can't let Regulus see that. Maybe it's messed up, because Regulus has lost it on him more than a few times when they were younger, but Sirius is supposed to see that, supposed to step in and be there to mop his face and hold him up when he can't do it on his own. That's not Regulus' job to do it for Sirius, because he's the little brother, the one who looks at Sirius and knows he's strong, steady, not someone who loses it.

It is, Sirius knows, really messed up. They're brothers, and the age gap isn't very big at all, and they're adults now. Older, wiser, capable of understanding what they just *didn't* as children. Regulus sees them as equals, and Sirius knows just how badly Regulus used to want to take care of him, just like Sirius took care of Regulus for so long, until he couldn't anymore. But Sirius just *can't.* He can't bust down that wall and shatter that illusion, because he's weak—he knows he is—but for Regulus, he gets to be strong. He can't lose that.

Sirius sucks in a rattling breath, his hands shaking, losing it. He's losing it, and what happens then? He never has, not with Regulus. What happens when he has no choice? *I can't help it,* he thinks, vision blurring. It hurts. Fuck, it hurts so much.

"I—I'm—" Sirius curls his hands into fists, his voice scraped raw, thin and reedy like it might snap in half. Regulus turns to look at him, just staring, and Sirius is too close to tears to see what his expression looks like right now. "If I could, I'd go so you didn't have to, Regulus. If I could—"

"But you can't," Regulus murmurs with quiet finality, like the final nail in a coffin.

"I'm sorry," Sirius rasps.

Regulus is silent for a long moment, and then he whispers, "I'm not. I think once was bad enough."

And Sirius just—he laughs, because yeah. Yeah, it was. It's the worst thing that ever happened to him, and he would do it again a hundred more times for Regulus. It fucked him up beyond repair, and he wouldn't go back to choose differently, even if it meant he got to be whole again.

"I wish—I really wish I could remember everything *before* better than I do," Sirius confesses as his laughter fades out. There wasn't any real humor in it anyway.

"You...don't?" Regulus ventures cautiously, clearly confused. Of course he would be. Sirius has never told him how bad he was, and he never let him see it.

Sirius clears his throat. "No, not really. I can remember some things, but not very much. Not as much as I should. And what I can remember, some of it isn't clear, or comes in this strange jumble, so I don't always know what was real or not."

"I remember," Regulus murmurs. "I can tell you if it was real."

It tugs at Sirius heartstrings that, despite everything—all that they've been through, and all the time that's passed—Regulus *still* wants to do the one thing that Sirius could never let him do. He knows logically that he's not all to blame; he was going through a lot, and Regulus was as well, and neither of them knew how to handle it. They should have never *had* to handle it, no different than they should have never had to handle what they did from their parents. Regulus grew bitter and cold and resentful; he pulled away and *stayed* away, giving up on Sirius just as Sirius was trying to learn to stop giving up on himself. Sirius didn't let Regulus in; he let the distance grow and never knew how to cross once it was there, because it was never supposed to be there. They put it there together, and only they can get rid of it by meeting in the middle, but they're different, and they've changed, and neither of them really know how.

Maybe this is a start. Maybe it's too late to start at all, and maybe they won't get farther than this one step, but Sirius thinks this one step might mean the world to both of them regardless. Maybe it's enough, or maybe it'll have to be, because maybe this is all they get to have, and maybe that's more important than having nothing at all.

"Did we ever…?" Sirius' face scrunches. "I have this sort of disjointed memory of—of glass shattering? But I wasn't scared, and it wasn't Mother or Father. I think—I *think* we were throwing bottles? Glass bottles. Is that—did we—"

"No," Regulus says softly. "No, that never happened, not with me. With Uncle Alphard. You used to go over to his house, and you'd both throw glass at the wall. He was raging and sloshed, but you—well, it frightened me. Made me uncomfortable. Mother always told us to stay away, but you never did, of course. You would bring shards of glass back sometimes to use in something. You built me a dagger out of one once."

Sirius blinks rapidly. He doesn't—even with Regulus telling him, he doesn't *quite* remember, really, but it doesn't feel as distressing *not* to. The memory is still broken up, and Sirius doesn't remember Alphard there at all, but something in him eases to know what it is. All he'd known was that he wasn't scared, and he'd assumed that meant he was with Regulus.

"Oh," Sirius mumbles. "Alright, what about…? There's one where I *know* you're there, but I don't—I can't remember what we're doing *exactly.* You were young, but I can't recall how old you were, or even my own age. We were...chasing something, I think. Yeah, yeah, that's what we were doing, but we were laughing, not—desperate or anything. There was this—this house? A mud house. Like, a tiny one. I don't...I can't really remember much else, but was that—do you know what I'm talking about, or am I making that up?"

"I was nine, and you were ten. We were chasing a lizard, and I actually caught it, so you decided it needed a house to live in. It had rained, so the ground was muddy enough for you to build a tiny little house out of it. There were a few windows, I think, and you tried to build a door, but it kept falling over. We put the lizard in, no bigger than my palm, and it stayed for about...fifteen seconds, maybe? Yeah, just about, and then it darted out one of the windows and ran off," Regulus tells him. "You named it Lewis."

Sirius closes his eyes. With the details, the memory is easier to sort out and click into place, less fuzzy and distorted as it comes into focus. He doesn't know if it's because he actually remembers it, or because he can just picture it perfectly, but either way, it feels nice to have something solid.

"I have—I know it's impossible, but I have this memory of us jumping off the roof of our first house, and we flew. We were trying to touch the stars. Our stars. I don't even know if they

were visible that time of the year, but I—I *distinctly* recall us doing it. Obviously we didn't fly, but...did we…?"

"No. We never even climbed to the roof, but we used to talk about flying to the stars. Me, you, Andromeda, Narcissa, Bellatrix—all of us. We all used to plan grand adventures along the stars and constellations we were named after, and Narcissa would pretend to feel left out because she didn't have one, but it wasn't real. They were older, so that was just something they used to do to entertain us, especially when they babysat us. It was like a little story they would tell us before bed, all the adventures we'd have in the cosmos."

A lump forms in Sirius' throat that he has to swallow down, because that memory—one that isn't even real—is so *vivid.* He's known for a long time that it's not real, because it's not possible. He and Regulus couldn't have leapt off of a roof and flew up to the sky with bright bursts of laughter, but it rings through so clearly that he can feel the air on his cheeks and hear Regulus shrieking in delight as he soars through the sky.

Maybe it was a dream and he can't separate them from reality as properly as everyone else can. Maybe he took a story that his older cousins told them and turned it into a memory that feels more real to him than things he actually experienced. He doesn't know why it's there, and it's frustrating. The way his own mind betrays him makes him want to curl up in a tight ball and never move again. His past is so flimsy, so spotty in some places, and it's like he lost so much of himself that he can never really get back. He aches with the loss.

"Thank you," Sirius croaks. "For being honest, I mean."

"Do you remember the day we gathered pecans?" Regulus asks him, and Sirius frowns.

"No," Sirius admits. "Should I? Did we do that?"

Regulus sighs quietly. "Yeah, we did."

"You can—I mean, you can tell me about it, if you want," Sirius suggests. He won't remember, he knows that, but he'd like to hear about it.

"It's fine," Regulus says, looking away. "It's not a very happy memory anyway."

"We had them, though, didn't we?" Sirius asks, his voice soft as he drops his gaze. "Happy memories, I mean. Back when we were—the people we used to be."

"I don't know anymore," Regulus replies, equally quiet. "I don't really remember the people we used to be."

Sirius smiles sadly. "Yeah, Reggie, neither do I."

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Remus knocks on Sirius' door, receives no answer, and decides to leave. It's sure to be a hard night for him, as well as James and Regulus, so maybe Remus shouldn't intrude. He doesn't think he would have dared to, if not for the conversation he had with Regulus only a few hours ago.

You're important to him, Regulus had said. The thing is, Remus knows that. Sirius has made that clear. Somehow, in just a handful of days, he's become important to Sirius. He hasn't been important to anyone in five years.

Sighing, Remus turns away as if to go, only to come to a halt when he sees Sirius heading towards him. His eyes are tired and red-rimmed, and yet he still manages a small smile when he looks at Remus. It's faint and flickering like a flame threatening to go out, but it is there nonetheless.

"Almost missed you," Remus comments as Sirius draws closer.

"Wouldn't want that. I have divine timing, then," Sirius jokes weakly, coming to a stop beside him, in front of his door.

"Are you alright?" Remus asks softly, then feels just as stupid as he did when he asked Regulus if he was scared.

Unlike Regulus, Sirius doesn't make it obvious how stupid of a question that is. He just says, "No, honestly, I'm not."

"I know, I'm sorry," Remus murmurs. "Can I do anything?"

"You're doing plenty already, right now."

"I'm not doing anything at all."

"You're here," is all Sirius says.

"I can't stay all night, but I would if I could. I only have a few more hours before I have to go back to my cell," Remus tells him with an apologetic grimace.

Sirius nods. "Alright. How do you want to spend them?"

"With you," Remus admits, feeling his stomach drop out from under him like he's just fallen from a great height. These wants he's learning to allow himself to have, they scare him and excite him in equal measure.

"Well, that works out quite nicely, because I want the same thing," Sirius replies, and despite everything, there's a blush on his cheeks and a tiny smile curving his mouth. "Do you want to come in?"

"Yeah, alright," Remus says.

Sirius holds his gaze for a moment, then opens his door and steps inside. He holds it open, waiting for Remus to come in before he shuts it. For a moment, Remus is overcome with the awareness that he trusts Sirius, even behind closed doors.

Utterly oblivious to the magnitude of such a thing, Sirius moves past him while blowing out a deep breath, muttering about changing. Remus watches him step into his closet, sliding the door shut. Slowly, Remus glances around the room, just standing awkwardly in place.

Remus has seen Sirius' room many times before, of course, but he doesn't really know what else to do with himself at the moment. A fond curl wriggles in his chest when he thinks about the fact that Sirius never leaves his clothes on the floor anymore. He folds them as meticulously as Regulus does now.

Right on cue, Sirius steps back out of the closet with his clothes he was previously wearing in a neat stack that he puts on the chair in the corner. He's changed into joggers and a shirt that appears soft, and there's no sleeves, the hem ending on his shoulders and revealing his upper arms. Remus isn't at all prepared for how toned they look, or the scar that spills out from his right shoulder, jagged like someone tried to slice him in a harsh arc but never got to finish.

"That's not even the worst one," Sirius says, and Remus' gaze snaps up to see that Sirius has caught him staring. He reaches up and pokes the scar with a snort. "The ever so lovely Jericho tried to slit my throat, but I dodged and got this instead."

"I remember that," Remus replies, because he does, if only vaguely. "You bashed his skull in with a rock."

Seems like a lifetime ago, before he ever ended up in the Hallow. He did watch Sirius in his games. Everyone watches, and Remus was no exception before he became a servant. Back then, Sirius was just a boy on the screens doing things that churned Remus' stomach, even when he was so desensitized to it that he barely let it weigh on his mind. What would be the point? It happened the year before, and it would happen the year after. Remus knew even he could one day have to do it, if his name was called, but that's not how things went for him. Some would think he was lucky. They would be wrong.

"I did, yes. I remember that all too well." Sirius huffs a sardonic laugh. "Of all the things to remember… You know, I can't forget one detail of my time in the arena, and yet—" He shakes his head, lips twisting, then he looks at Remus with a tight smile. "If I'm honest, I was sort of hoping you might not have seen my games. I know you weren't a servant then, but…"

"No, I saw them," Remus confirms, and Sirius nods, looking away as he clenches his jaw. "It's—Sirius, it's alright. You did what you had to do to survive."

"I killed twelve people. I'm literally a murderer, Remus."

"Against your will. You didn't have a choice."

"I could have died instead," Sirius says, gaze foggy and distant, and there's a wistful quality to his voice like he almost wishes he had. It makes Remus' stomach cramp with panic.

"Well, I'm glad that you didn't," Remus tells him firmly.

Sirius glances at him. "You saw all that I did, what I'm capable of, and yet you still say that. I don't know how you can stand to be in the same room as me, honestly."

"You had no *choice,"* Remus says, and it's sharp like a whip cracking against wet concrete, and he would know. Sirius gives a harsh blink, his lips parting in surprise. Remus shakes his head. "What happened to you—it wasn't fair. You didn't *want* to go through all of that. It's not right that you were forced to *kill* to survive, and that's not on you."

"It's just…" Sirius swallows. "I don't know. I just hoped that maybe you hadn't seen me at my worst."

Remus softens helplessly, and he takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Sirius."

"Yeah?" Sirius rasps.

"You see me at my worst every time you look at me," Remus whispers. "I wish more than anything that you could have seen me at my best, but this is what you get, and somehow it's still enough for you. Why would I feel any differently about you suffering at the hands of the Hallow?"

Sirius shudders out a deep breath, shuffling forward a few steps. He reaches out slowly, coming short of touching him, then he pulls his hand back and flexes his fingers. "I don't see what you think I see when I look at you, Remus."

"What do you see?"

"Something glorious."

Remus' breath catches. He steps forward, running his gaze over Sirius' face. "Why did you pull away? You were going to touch me, but then you stopped."

"Can I?" Sirius asks, and it sounds like a plea, like he's desperate for it. His eyes are wide, and his fingers twitch at his sides as he gazes up at Remus with hope etched into his face.

This idiot, Remus thinks fondly. *This lovely mess of a human being.* He shakes his head with a quiet huff of laughter, still remembering his conversation with James. Sirius won't cross boundaries, so Remus is just going to have to show him that the boundaries have moved. He lifts his hand and cups Sirius' left wrist with his right hand, briefly sliding it up just to watch the way Sirius' chest stutters on a sharp inhale, then sliding it back down to gently tangle their fingers together.

It feels momentous, this breach they've been so careful not to rush into, and yet it's also quite possibly the easiest thing Remus has ever done. He tugs on Sirius' hand very gently and tells him, "Yes, you can. I want you to."

Sirius exhales all at once, loud like he can breathe easier suddenly, and then he proceeds to shuffle forward to close the last bit of space between them and drops his head directly on

Remus' shoulder. He leans into him with a deep sigh, his body relaxing into him; it's so simple for Remus to slide his hands up Sirius' arms and around his back, just to hold him.

"You're so warm," Sirius whispers.

"Mm," Remus agrees distractedly, too busy working up the courage to brush his fingertips over Sirius' hair where it spills over his shoulders. It's so fucking soft that Remus' brain briefly cuts out entirely, and his hands itch to delve deeper into the strands. "I like your hair, you know."

Sirius releases a quiet laugh against his shoulder, dangerously close to a damn giggle. Remus' lips twitch, and he tugs gently on one strand that he catches between the tips of two fingers. Slowly, carefully, Sirius' arms slide around Remus, looping loosely around his back—and, just like that, it's an embrace.

For a long time, neither of them speak. They just breathe and hold onto each other. Sirius' breathing is even and calm, and he's so relaxed that he's actually a little limp, like he could just drift off and fall asleep right here. His only movement is when he occasionally rubs his cheek against Remus' shoulder, as if settling in. Meanwhile, Remus indulges a bit too much, unable to stop himself. He sweeps one hand up and down Sirius' back, and the other is on a mission to get into his hair if it's the last thing he does. He manages it, eventually, finally working up from just playing with the ends or the random strand here or there that he curls around his knuckles. Instead, he gives in and cards his fingers through from root to tip, entranced immediately by the slip of silk-soft hair between them.

In response, Sirius gives a full-body shiver and turns to press his face more firmly against Remus' shoulder. Remus can still hear him breathing, noting the falter in it before it picks back up in a slightly uneven rhythm.

"Alright?" Remus asks.

"Mhm," Sirius responds, high-pitched.

"Do you want me to do that again?"

"I am doing everything in my power not to beg you to do that always."

"I unfortunately have other things I'm required to do with my time," Remus teases lightly.

Sirius grunts. "Cruelty. Torment. Utter misfortune."

"Isn't it just?" Remus' lips curl up in amusement as he once again pushes his hand through Sirius' hair. At this, Sirius' displeasure dissipates, and he gives a low hum of approval.

"That could put me to sleep," Sirius mumbles.

Remus thinks about that for a second, then says, "Well, you do need your rest tonight. I can—I mean, I can help with that."

"In bed?" Sirius' head pops up, nearly displacing Remus' hand, and he looks *very* fixated on this idea immediately. "You'll get in my bed? With me? I mean—I just—I'm not—if you, um—"

"Yes, to help you sleep," Remus says, amused.

"Well, you know, there's a lot of ways to—" Sirius stops all at once, coughing as he does that blush all over that Remus likes so much. He looks a little mortified. "Sorry, that was—"

"Are you ordering me to exhaust you in other ways?" Remus asks, arching an eyebrow at him.

It's almost comical how quickly Sirius pales, the blush completely draining from his face. "No! Fucking hell, no, I would *never."*

"So, you *don't* want me to tire you out?"

"No. Yes. I mean—I—"

Remus frowns at him, but he's barely hanging on at this point. In a moment, he's going to break. "Is there a problem with how I complete my tasks? Do you think I'll fail to handle this one to your satisfaction?"

"My—my satis—what? Remus?" Sirius looks a little lost, and dazed. "No? I mean, I'm not asking—it's not that I—" He cuts himself off as soon as Remus' lips twitch at the corners, which means he's studying Remus mouth a little *too* closely, but Remus isn't complaining. Sirius' mild panic drains away until he's stunned. "Oh, you were fucking with me again."

"I was, yes," Remus confirms, breaking out into a smile as he rubs both hands down Sirius' arms as he starts to pull away.

Sirius muffles a quiet noise and reaches up to cup his forehead, exhaling shakily. "That's—you know, for something that scares the piss out of me, I find it *very* attractive. I'm not aroused by my fear, just to be clear. I think it's the mischief that does it for me, if I'm honest. Maybe...a little bit of the fear, but today is not the day for me to explore that."

"Thank you for taking me with you on that short journey of self-discovery," Remus says cordially.

"You make me feel things," Sirius informs him, gazing at him sort of helplessly, like he's lost.

Remus' lips twitch. "I noticed."

"Okay. I just—I wanted to make sure you knew."

"I know."

"Right. Are you still getting into bed with me?" Sirius asks.

"Yes," Remus says.

Sirius' lips tug up into a grin. "After all of that, I have to make you feel things too, if you're still willing to get in my bed."

"Come on," Remus tells him with a gentle laugh, reaching out to push him towards the bed, getting an inner thrill from putting his hand on him again and *knowing* that he can. He slides his thumb along the scar on his arm, and Sirius barely walks straight because he's too busy gazing at Remus.

Getting into bed with Sirius is surprisingly easy, but maybe it shouldn't be a surprise. So many things with Sirius are easy, so why shouldn't this be as well? It's not proper, he shouldn't do it, yada yada yada—the same spiel as usual, and Remus just really, *really* doesn't care at the moment. Being with Sirius is always a risk, and it's one he's willing to take.

The bed is so much softer than Remus' cot in his cell, and he actually has *pillows,* as well as satin sheets and lovely duvets that feel so good Remus could weep. He doesn't really know how to relax into it, despite this, because he hasn't had anything even *close* to it in five years. Luckily for him, the goal isn't to get comfortable; the goal is to indulge in more of Sirius and his hair that Remus is admittedly fascinated by.

Remus ends up propped up on his side and one elbow, his other hand raised to run through the hair that Sirius has helpfully fanned out along the pillow like spilled ink. It's almost artistic, the waves of black against the stark white pillowcases, something sharp and ethereal all at once.

"Remus," Sirius murmurs, gazing up at him through half-lidded eyes.

"Hm?"

"Will you wait for me to fall asleep before you go?"

"If you fall asleep before I have to," Remus says softly.

Sirius hums and closes his eyes. "I want to fall asleep with you here. Is that strange?"

"No, I don't think so," Remus replies, because he'd desperately like to do the same. He can't. He'll never be able to.

"Thank you," Sirius whispers, his eyes still shut. "For being here for me, I mean. Tonight, especially. It's—it would have been so much worse without you, Remus."

Remus gazes down at him and keeps dragging his hand through his hair. Tenderly, he whispers back, "Of course."

Sirius releases a soft sigh, and it's not long before he genuinely drifts off to sleep, his mouth falling slack and his body sinking into the mattress. Remus continues to stroke his hair, marveling at the level of trust Sirius has in him, the same trust that Remus feels reverberating in him for Sirius. He stays right where he is until he has to go, wishing with every cell in his body that he could stay. The one reprieve is that Sirius got to fall asleep with him there, at least.

If Remus will never get to do the same, he makes sure to take a little something for himself before he goes. A tiny indulgence. He leans in and presses a kiss to Sirius' forehead, soft and lingering, letting it form into a smile as he pulls away.

When he leaves, even under his mask, his lips still tingle.

~•~

James jerks awake with his heart pounding and Sirius' name falling from his mouth in a rasp of pure panic. He sits up frantically, disoriented, searching for him—but he's not there.

It takes James a moment to realize that this is okay. That the lack of Sirius' presence doesn't mean something bad has happened. That Sirius is likely in his own bed, hopefully getting whatever rest he can. James exhales and hunches forward to rub his palms into his closed, gritty eyes. Sobbing oneself to sleep, especially whilst still wearing contacts, does not make for very happy, healthy eyes. Who knew?

Dropping his hands, James swallows past the lump in his throat. He hates that he did that. He isn't—he *doesn't* regret his choice, alright? The plan is still the same, and he won't change his mind, but...that doesn't make it easy. That doesn't mean he's not scared. That doesn't stop him from feeling like he's gagging on his own grief for the life he won't get to live.

James drags himself up to check the time—it's the middle of the night—and then goes to take a shower. He's sweaty from his nightmare, and he tries not to take the chance to be clean for granted.

Once he's finished and changed, James eases out of his room. Carefully, he moves up the hall to Regulus' room, intending to just check on him, maybe see if he's up. They haven't spoken since the interviews, and James feels the need to apologize. More than that, he doesn't want to enter the arena with the weight of Regulus being angry at him on his shoulders.

He eases the door open cautiously, and the light is still on, but Regulus isn't in bed. The door to the balcony is cracked, just like last time. There's a brief moment of hesitation, and then James slips in, shuts the door, and heads to the balcony.

Regulus is sitting in the same chair as he was last time, a creature of habit. He's always liked his routines, his little made up rules of tidiness for how things should be, what goes where and how things have to function. When he unconsciously picks a chair, that chair is his. When he wears brown shoes, he needs black socks. When the streetlights come on, he has to pass through each golden glow of the circle on the ground on his route home. Regulus has always been comfortable with order in his life, while Sirius and James prefer spontaneity.

"Hi," James greets cautiously as he sinks into the open chair. Regulus doesn't acknowledge him, but James can see his jaw clench. "Er, have you slept at all?"

"No," Regulus answers stiffly. "Have you?"

"A little, but not very well," James admits.

Regulus exhales sharply and turns his head to look at James. In the wash of light that barges out here from the cracked door, his eyes are blazing. "What do you want, James?"

"I know you're angry with me," James mumbles.

"Yes, I am," Regulus snaps.

James swallows. "I'm sorry, Reg."

"I don't want your fucking apologies. I want you to not have done it," Regulus says harshly. "Of all the fucking things to do, to *say,* and you—and you *know* that was cruel—" His voice cracks, and he sounds brittle. He turns his head away, hand balled in a fist on top of the table. When he speaks next, his voice sounds small, and it breaks James' heart. "It was cruel. You had no right to mock me like that."

"I wasn't mocking you," James tells him. "I know why you would think that, but—"

"Do you?" Regulus hisses, his shoulders wrenched tight, and he sounds furious because of what he already knows.

James already knows, too. He's known since he was eleven and was introduced to Regulus for the first time, and Regulus had looked at James with wide eyes, like he was the most

amazing thing Regulus had ever seen. He's known in all the moments after; when Regulus could barely string a sentence together around him; when Regulus blushed every time James smiled at him; when Regulus would race to beat Sirius to the door every time James came over, just to have a precious few minutes alone with him before Sirius stole James' attention entirely.

Of course James knew that Regulus had a crush on him all the way from eleven to fifteen. James knew, and he thought it was funny. He thought it was hilarious, in fact, and he sometimes even played into it with winks and playful comments, just because it amused him. Not because he cared. James didn't care, unfortunately. To James, Regulus was just Sirius' baby brother with a hopeless crush.

And then, well, Regulus abused him into forming a crush right back, quite literally hitting him over the head and telling him to fucking *pay attention,* which reoriented James so hard and so swiftly that he'd gone from not even thinking twice about Sirius' baby brother to daydreaming about what it would be like to kiss him. This abrupt one-eighty happened in just enough time for Regulus to do an abrupt one-eighty of his own, going from crushing on James *hard* to hating him just as fiercely. Isn't that terribly ironic?

"I know you had a crush on me once," James admits quietly, and he can't help but appreciate the blush that floods Regulus' cheeks, even when he's still pissed off.

"Yes, well, I was young and stupid," Regulus mutters with a scowl. "Not that it mattered to you anyway, and we both know it. For you, it was just a source of entertainment."

"You have no *idea* how long I've been kicking myself for being young and stupid in the exact opposite way. I had so many opportunities that I let pass me by, and as soon as I realized how fucking stupid I was for that, it was too late." James heaves a sigh. "No more opportunities."

Regulus is silent for a beat, and then he looks over at James with narrowed eyes. "You meant it, then."

"I didn't mean to tell literally everyone my deepest, darkest secret," James says dryly, "but having feelings for you was, in fact, my deepest, darkest secret."

"Deepest and darkest," Regulus echoes flatly, an eyebrow arching. "High praise. Very romantic. Should I swoon?"

James groans and reaches up to scrub his hand through his hair. "Just—fucking hell, Regulus, you know what I meant. Obviously I didn't want anyone to know, or anyone to find out like *that.* For one thing, Sirius didn't know. For another, I didn't want *you* to learn about it."

"Why?" Regulus challenges. "You knew about *me."*

"Yeah, I did, but—" James grimaces. "Well, it's shit, isn't it? As soon as I started having feelings for you, *your* feelings for me went away. What was I supposed to do with that, especially with everything that was happening with Sirius? There was so much, too much, and even when we learned to live with it all, there was no point. You fucking hate me."

"Yeah," Regulus murmurs, frowning. "Yeah, I do."

"See?" James tosses up a weary hand. "No point."

"There's even less of a point now, and yet you're still here."

"Well, the thing about feelings is, whether or not it's pointless to have them, they still sometimes persist anyway."

Regulus looks at him for a long time, no longer seeming angry, but his face is inscrutable. James shifts a little, feeling weirdly studied, like he's under a microscope. Regulus' gaze feels like a test, and James wants so badly to pass it, but he knows he can't when Regulus is the one grading him.

Slowly, Regulus pushes his chair back with an awful scrape, standing up. James instantly goes still as Regulus circles the table at a leisurely pace, moving closer to him. His heart races, because he—fuck, he doesn't know what's about to happen, but Regulus is coming

closer, and he's doing so with the knowledge that James *wants* him closer than he's ever been.

"One of us is going to die in that arena, or maybe it'll be both of us, but *neither* of us have very good odds," Regulus says softly, pausing to lean against the table, one hand gently drifting back and forth along the edge.

James nods slowly. "I know. This is—it's our last night."

"It is," Regulus agrees. "Things are complicated with Sirius, I have murder and possible death in my very near future, and I've had no choice but to do a lot of thinking about who I used to be, who we all used to be. You're right, feelings persist, and my hatred for you isn't going anywhere. Ever. If I die, I'll do it hating you. If I live, I'll do that hating you, too."

"Even when—if I'm dead?" James asks, admittedly hurt by this, though he shouldn't be. He knew this already.

"Yes." Regulus holds his gaze. "I'll hate you for that, too."

"For being dead?" James murmurs, startled.

Regulus looks at him, and his eyes—those eyes, James knows them when he knows nothing else, and there's something about them now. Heavy and intense. "Yes, for being dead. Perhaps for that more than anything else."

James should not find that overwhelmingly romantic, as well as tragic, but his breath hitches in his throat anyway. It's so strange how Regulus' hate can feel like a benediction when he wields it this way. James never wanted it before, and now he's suddenly grateful for it. Hatred isn't apathy, or indifference, and James doesn't think he could survive those from Regulus. Hatred isn't love either, but it's dangerously close, and James thinks he could die for both. He's going to.

"We could be dead tomorrow," Regulus whispers, "and I don't want to spend my last night alone, even if that means I have to spend it with someone I hate." He lifts his hand off the table and holds it out, fingers spread and gently curling, an offering and a beckoning. "You're lucky, James. You get to spend it with someone you don't."

"What about the fourteen year old Regulus in you?" James whispers back. "Does he feel lucky, at least?"

"He doesn't feel anything at all. He's been dead since I was fifteen," Regulus replies with a brief smile that's sad around the edges. He wiggles his fingers a little. "Go on, I want to be young and stupid just one last time, so you should take your last opportunity before I change my mind."

James exhales shakily, the significance of it all not lost on him. He knows it's because they're going into the arena tomorrow, and everything will change, then. Regulus would never do it otherwise. But when you're trying so hard to outrun tomorrow, the only direction you can go is backwards. Regulus wants to go as far back as he can get, and in the distance behind him is a boy who once wanted someone who never took his hand when he offered it, but will now. Funny, how things change. Tragic, how some changes don't get to mean something.

James slips his hand into Regulus', his heart doing this weak, pathetic fluttery thing as their fingers slide past each other. Regulus holds his hand delicately, cupping it from the bottom as his thumb swipes tenderly over James' knuckles, like James is royalty and he's going to bow over his fingers. He doesn't, though. No, he just gives a gentle tug, encouraging James to stand up, and as soon as James has, he turns his hand to slot their fingers together before leading James in his room.

Ridiculously, James feels a little wobbly in the knees, just from the way their fingers tangle together, fitting in the crevices of each other like they were always made to be that way. James had thought that the first time they held hands, that fateful day in the courtyard while Sirius was attacked on the screen, and Regulus had threaded their hands together like he needed the contact to help him stop trembling. It didn't really work, but neither of them let go, even long after Sirius had walked away from the fight with a dead body in his wake.

Regulus turns off the light first, and immediately, the modifications he's made to his room with the Hallow tech and advancements offered to them become obvious. The ceiling is just the night sky full of pinprick stars that offer a faint, blue glow to the room from the midnight

canopy above them. It's gorgeous, honestly, and James is admittedly distracted by it so much that he doesn't look away until Regulus pulls on his hand again, silently demanding him to get in bed.

It's almost like Regulus is that young boy with a crush again, calling out to James for his attention. Here and now, it's very different, because they're adults who are about to be in bed together when they never have before. James' mouth is dry as he follows Regulus under the sheets.

"Don't get any ideas," Regulus mumbles, like he can read James' mind, which did in fact have *many* ideas.

"Too late," James admits. This earns him a soft huff of laughter, despite everything, and he grins as he sinks down onto the pillow under his head. He's on his side, and Regulus is right across from him, looking at his face in the dark. They're both just looking at each other, but James is a brave soul, so he works up the courage to make a request for what he really, *really* wants, most of all. "Can I hold you?"

Can I have you? James thinks, desperately. *Just for tonight. Please.*

Regulus doesn't answer him. Not with words, at least. He turns over, and James' heart starts to sink at the rejection, but then Regulus scoots back until he's pressing into the curve of James' chest and open arms. He shifts to share James' pillow with him, tugging his own up to his chest, then curls up slightly and rocks back more firmly into James like he's snuggling in. James holds his breath, not quite believing that this is actually happening.

He hesitates, but then he slips his arm over Regulus and relaxes forward with a soft sigh, eyes drifting shut at the sensation of actually getting to hold him. He's close, and warm, and apparently the little spoon—and James feels dangerously addicted to this already. He doesn't want to let go; he wants to stay right here forever, where he gets to hold Regulus and know what it's like to have him, even for a moment in time that can't last, because tomorrow is on its way, and it will catch up to them eventually.

But, for now, James curls up to Regulus and thinks that he was right, because here, like this, despite everything he has waiting for him when tomorrow comes, James knows he's lucky to get to spend his last night just like this.

Chapter End Notes

regulus and remus WILL be friends in this fic, don't you worry, but we gotta get there first. it's a slowburn friendship lmaooooo. i love them so much. remus is just like: so, like, are you scared about the whole "possibly going to die tomorrow" thing? and regulus is just like: 😐🤨 and remus is like: you know what? that's fair. carry on, mate. HELP THEY'RE SO FUNNY TO ME THEY'RE GONNA BE SO SASSY WHEN THEY REALLY SETTLE INTO THEIR FRIENDSHIP I CANT WAIT 😭

meanwhile, sirius and james are being sad girlies 😔 nah bc sirius really said: james isn't gonna die, i simply Do Not Accept It. and he's so valid for that. the denial is strong with this one. me too, babe, me too.

and then the regulus and sirius angst had me like that meme where that reality star is like screaming and crying at the cat, you all know the one. me after writing every line: STOP, YOU'RE DONE, PUT THE PHONE AWAY. me @ me: leave them alone and let them rest 😭😭😭 also me: *writes more sad shit*

but the pecan story being one of regulus' happiest memories in the last chapter, only to find out that sirius doesn't even remember it at all, and THEN to learn that it's not a happy memory for regulus anymore because the Hallow essentially destroyed that for him??? im chewing on glass. ☹☹☹

on a high note!!! remus and sirius hugged 😭😭😭 no, sorry, they "embraced" bc sirius would feel like that's an important distinction. yes, he was practically levitating in that moment. FINALLY SOMEONE IS HOLDING THIS MAN HES BEEN SO STRESSED PLS. but they were unbearably cute with a little angst mixed in, as well as humor, because remus never misses a chance to fuck with people if he can. "you don't think i would complete this task to your satisfaction?" OH??? 🤨 WHAT'S THAT MEAN, REMUS??? he's so sexy i love him 😌

anyway, cut to james and regulus, and it comes out that regulus used to have a crush on james, and james KNEW about it, but didn't care until it was too late. talk about tragic, right? on the bright side, regulus stowed away his Personal Issues for one night and was like: you know what, im could die tomorrow, so i will allow myself one (1) human indulgence of not spending my last night alone. go ahead, king, you be that little spoon! and james is just happy to be involved 🥰

Lift Off

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

this is the point in the story where i remind all of you that this fic will get dark and people will die. it's heavy, heavy stuff, so PLEASE check the warnings, and don't hesitate to check the more in-depth descriptions i put in the end notes to spoil yourself if you need it, and also DO NOT READ if it's best for you not to. always, always prioritize yourself first. <3

warnings for this chapter:

-some sexy spice!!! (only semi-explicit, nothing too detailed, but you definitely know what's going on)
-angst (very, very heavy angst)
-references to torture (not explicitly described but most definitely stated where you won't miss it)
-references to death
-references/hints to possible future plans of suicide (basically stated, but nothing explicit, and no, it's not going to happen. it's not from a place of wishing to commit suicide, but rather from a place of grief)
-dissociation and a dissociative amnesia moment explicitly described (i will go in more depth about this in the end notes for more spoiler-y warnings)
-assault and murder (yes, there's death in this chapter, and i will go in more depth about this in the end notes for more spoiler-y warnings as well)

i will be putting very in-depth warnings in the end notes, but i will also be telling you how you can skip or just simply skim-read those parts, like to warn you in enough time so you can just quickly scroll by if that's something you'd rather do, which is valid as well!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius is only half-awake when he turns over and presses into something warm and solid, and usually, this would be strange enough that he would be in danger of responding defensively, but he remembers falling asleep next to something warm and solid, so it's perfectly fine.

In his sleepy state, warm and solid means something good, just like it did when he fell asleep, and so Sirius snuggles into it as he smacks his lips and tries to go *back* to sleep.

A beat later, Sirius' brain connects *warm and solid* to *Remus,* and his eyes snap open as he jerks up in alarm. It is, in fact, Remus. He's wide awake and looking at Sirius fondly, but Sirius' heart promptly *drops* as dread and panic sinks in.

"Did you fall asleep here?" Sirius rasps, his blood pumping as his heart races. "Remus, are you—"

"Sadly, no," Remus interrupts calmly. "I did leave last night, but I came back. I thought, since you wanted to fall asleep with me here, you'd like to wake up the same way."

"Oh," Sirius breathes out, relaxing all at once as his eyes drift shut and he settles back down. A moment later, it feels like his heart seizes in his chest when he realizes that Remus—he did this on his own. He chose to do this. He came into Sirius' room without asking and crawled right into bed with him, and if it was anyone else, Sirius wouldn't be giddy and delirious with joy about that. *"Oh.* I—yes, I do like it. Thank you. Hi."

"Hi," Remus responds, lips twitching. "You don't mind, then?"

"No, no, of course not," Sirius rushes to say. "You can do whatever you want, Remus, you know that. I mean, um, you *did* want to, right? You don't have to be here if you—"

"I wanted to. I want…" Remus' gaze flicks down to Sirius' mouth, lingering, then flits back up. "I want a lot of things."

Stupidly, the only thought that Sirius is capable of forming is *wait, no, I haven't brushed my teeth.* Fortunately, he doesn't say that, but only because the sole sound he's capable of making is a little high and garbled.

Remus' eyes soften from sharp to playful. "My compromise on my many wants was this, though. Watching you drool in your sleep. *Very* entertaining start to my morning, I'll admit."

"I do *not* drool in my sleep," Sirius sputters, reflexively lifting his hand to rub it quickly over his mouth.

"You do," Remus counters. "It's cute."

"Oh, well, in that case, I *do* drool in my sleep, actually," Sirius says, breaking out into a grin when Remus turns his head and stifles his laugh into a pillow. Sirius thinks he's so lovely, just gazing at him, and before he knows it, his hand is reaching up to gently push back where his hair flopped over his forehead. Remus turns his head slightly, peering at Sirius through his eyelashes. "Is this alright?"

"It's alright," Remus murmurs.

Sirius bites his lip, moving very carefully as he sweeps his fingertips across various strands of hair. His fingers shake from the importance of this moment, from brushing up against the glorious. He doesn't go too fast or too far, refraining from doing too much, no matter how desperately he wants more. Sirius breaks things, but he is *determined* not to break this with Remus—whatever *this* is.

He used to build things. Create things. And now he's lucky if he doesn't destroy what's already formed. This, with Remus, feels like building something, and it scares him. He never means to break things, especially what's important, and Remus is undoubtedly one of the most important things to come within reach of the ruin he carries in his palms.

Overcome by his own wariness, Sirius draws his hand away, swallowing thickly. A mixture of shame and guilt swirls in the gaping maw of his chest, making the back of his throat burn. Instantly, he feels the compulsive need to apologize, because he doesn't—he can never tell when he's genuinely done something wrong, or when he just feels that he has.

"Sorry," Sirius blurts out. "I'm sorry. I didn't even ask, and I shouldn't have just—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in firmly, and Sirius shuts up, gaze caught as Remus stares at him. He shakes his head slightly, then sighs deeply. "I won't break, you know."

"Just wait, I've barely gotten my hands on you yet," Sirius says.

"You can't break what's already broken." Remus quirks a tiny smile. "Besides, if breaking is the result of being touched by you, I won't be satisfied until I'm in shambles."

"Did—did you mean for that to sound as sexual as it did?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Oh, that's not fair. That's *dangerous.* You're dangerous," Sirius announces breathlessly. "You'll be the death of me. All that's tried to bring me to my end, and it'll be Remus Lupin and his poetic innuendos."

Remus chuckles, then proceeds to rock forward and roll right on top of Sirius, pushing him on his back on the bed with the weight of his body. Which—oh, okay. That's a lot for Sirius' brain to handle, honestly, and he briefly short-circuits. No, really, Remus might *actually* be the death of him.

Remus is. He's just. There's a lot of him, somehow, and he's literally just lying on top of Sirius, chest-to-chest. Sirius is under the thick duvet from the waist down, which thankfully keeps their hips from meeting, hopefully deterring his body from responding the second he actually gathers his wits about him. At the moment, he's frozen, staring up at Remus with wide eyes and staying very still.

"Touch me," Remus says.

"What?" Sirius chokes out.

"Touch me," Remus repeats, and ah, yes, Sirius did hear him correctly the first time. How he's still alive right now, Sirius has no idea, but he isn't surprised that he's struggling to

breathe properly. He'll be dead soon, probably. Which is fine. What a way to go, really. "You need to get over this, Sirius. Or maybe I just need you to. I don't want you to hold back with me, so just—just touch me. That's all."

Sirius is so, *so* tempted beyond measure, like a bee drawn home to honey. Despite the destructive nature of his hands, he wants so badly, so selfishly, to put them on Remus anyway. Not only that, but Remus is *asking* him to, and there's genuinely nothing Sirius wouldn't give him if he wants it.

Slowly, Sirius lifts his hands and slides them up the sides of Remus' arms, flexing his fingers into the gray cloth that covers them, even though he should be gentle. He isn't sure if his hands know how to do that anymore, but Remus doesn't seem to mind, at least. He's just watching Sirius with half-lidded eyes, heavy and drooping like he's relaxed.

Easing up, Sirius gets to the shoulders next, feeling the broad line of them and up into the curve of his neck before pushing down to his upper back, pressing fingers into his shoulder blades, internally freaking the fuck out at the firm muscles under his hands. He drags back up and over, breath stuttering as he slides his palms down Remus' collarbones, then his chest until it meets with Sirius' own. Again, he slips right back up to go back to each curve of Remus' neck, clamping down on his bottom lip as his fingers find their way up into Remus' hair.

Remus is watching him, still, and the lazy gaze is somehow *obscene.* It's like Sirius is indulging in some secret, hedonistic pleasure while Remus observes with mild, suppressed interest. There's no reason for it to seem like Remus is a voyeur when Sirius is simply *touching him,* and yet that's how it feels.

Helplessly, Sirius' fingers tremble as they rake through Remus' hair. He's fascinated by the feeling, and even more so by the way Remus' eyes flutter shut ever so briefly, his lips parting around a soft sigh. Sirius' stomach promptly erupts with butterflies, and his whole face goes hot.

"Why are you blushing?" Remus asks, low and amused.

"I don't know," Sirius mumbles, and he just *knows* he's blushing even harder now. "Just...you. This. It's intimate."

Remus hums. "Imagine how I feel. No one's touched me without causing me pain in five years."

"I would never hurt you," Sirius says immediately, an automatic response, reflexive and instinctive like breathing. He can inhale and exhale that promise; exist with it, like it's a necessity to life, because it is.

"I believe that," Remus murmurs.

Sirius feels his chest tighten, but in a good way, strangely enough. He ruffles Remus' hair gently. "Does it feel good?"

"It's calming, with you," Remus tells him.

They fall quiet as Sirius slides his hands out of Remus' hair and carefully drags his fingers down the sides of his neck before slipping to the front. He gently presses a thumb into Remus' Adam's apple, to which Remus dutifully hums, low and deep, so Sirius can feel the vibrations of it. Sirius' lips curl up, pleased, and Remus looks so endeared by him.

Next is the jaw and cheeks. Sirius cups the first in both palms, then cradles the second while tenderly brushing his thumbs under Remus' eyes. He keeps doing that, feeling a rush of emotion from the sight of Remus' face held in his hands. He's precious. He's lovely. He's glorious.

"Remus," Sirius whispers.

"Hm?" is Remus' equally quiet response.

"You're achingly beautiful, do you know that?" Sirius asks softly, running his gaze all over Remus' face. This means he gets to see in perfect detail how Remus' eyes flick down, his lips

curving up, a bashful response that only becomes more apparent when Sirius *feels* Remus' cheeks heat up under his hands. A blush glows between his fingers, highlighting freckles that Sirius is eager to trace. "Oh, you liked that, did you? Who's blushing now, Remus, hm? Go on, tell me—"

Remus props himself up to reach around Sirius' arm, covering his mouth to muffle his teasing and breathless laughter. Sirius grins against his palm, using his own hands to gently push at Remus' (still warm) cheeks, making his face pucker a bit.

"Smug bastard," Remus grumbles as he moves his hand, but he doesn't go very far, leaving his palm cupping Sirius' cheek. There's a smile on his face, one he's trying to pretend isn't there, but Sirius has it caught between his hands.

"Let me have this. I'm always the one blushing. It's nice to know I can make you do it, too," Sirius teases.

"Is it?"

"My greatest achievement, honestly."

Remus chuckles and gazes down at him with unbridled affection, doing nothing to hide it at all. It makes Sirius melt a little bit, his insides turning to soup. He can't help it; Remus just makes him feel—well, everything, really. The whole spectrum of emotion, things that Sirius didn't even know it was possible to actually experience, and Remus can gift it to him with something as simple as a look.

"What?" Remus asks when Sirius huffs out a soft laugh.

"Oh, you have me all wrapped around your finger," Sirius informs him shamelessly.

"Is that so?"

"So it is."

Remus arches an eyebrow at him. "Are you only just working this out now?"

"You know, Remus, you could save a man the embarrassment of being so painfully obvious," Sirius mutters with no true heat to his words.

"There's no saving you from that, I'm afraid," Remus says solemnly, and Sirius laughs so much that he snorts inelegantly and shakes the bed as he wheezes. It can't be a pretty sight, frankly, and yet Remus gazes down at him and announces, "You're beautiful too, you know."

Sirius' laughter cuts out, already breathless when Remus steals his breath by saying so. It makes his heart flutter and his stomach swoop, a fuzzy feeling that's not at all unpleasant forming in the tips of his fingers, even where they're still draped over Remus' cheeks. He lifts one hand to carefully connect the distance between Remus' freckles under his eyes.

Remus' eyes are so lovely, brown like a sequoia tree and amber when the light hits it just right. Sirius remembers the first time he saw those eyes, the way it was like missing a step on the stairs, something inside of him *lurching.* Everything had stopped when those eyes locked with his, and it happens again here and now. Sirius feels that little lurch in him, like the ground just gave way beneath him, and he can't help but fall.

Not for the first time, Remus' gaze drops to Sirius' mouth, eyes glazing over, and then he's leaning in, and then Sirius is blurting out, "I need to brush my teeth," like the biggest idiot on the planet while his heart attempts to evacuate his chest right up through his fucking throat.

"You—" Remus blinks, some sort of clarity coming back to his eyes, then he starts laughing. He hangs his head forward, pressing it to Sirius' chest, forcing Sirius to sort of just cup his ears, mildly bemused. It takes a second for Remus to regain his composure, and then he lifts his head with a broad smile and sparkling eyes. "Right, of course. I'll let you go do that. I need to start breakfast anyway."

Sirius' face is on *fire.* "Can I, um, help you with breakfast when I get out of the shower, if you aren't already finished?"

"You can come stand next to me and look pretty, how's that?" Remus teases, still grinning at him.

"Perfect," Sirius says with a snort. "Finally, something I'm good at."

"You're good at a lot more than that, but you *are* good at that, yes," Remus muses, sounding fond. He leans down with no warning and brushes a kiss against Sirius' cheek, just a faint pressure that's a blink-and-you-miss-it sort of thing.

Regardless, Sirius makes a humiliating sound in response and goes hot from his hairline to his navel, no doubt flushing more than he ever has. Remus has already drawn back, and the only smug bastard here is him. He looks very pleased with himself as he rolls off of Sirius and right out of bed, telling him oh so casually to meet him in the kitchen when he's finished.

As soon as Remus is gone, Sirius turns over and proceeds to bite his pillow, then muffles a scream into it for good measure. He's never felt so much all at once in his *life.*

He's also never been happier.

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Regulus wakes up to a hand carding through his hair and a warm chest rising and falling under his cheek. Even before he's properly awake, he knows that it's James.

He knows James just by hand alone. By the time he was fourteen, he had memorized the shape of James' hands, just because James' hands felt like a brand every time he deemed to touch Regulus. There was *nothing* like James' hand on his arm when he was fourteen; he could have powered entire cities from the way he just lit the fuck up, the energy it gave him, how utterly *giddy* he was. James could touch him once, just casually, and Regulus would

think about it for three days, revisiting how it felt, how it made him feel, over and over until the next time James did something else.

Regulus, to put it simply, was a pathetic teenager with a crush so painfully obvious that it could be seen from space. James knew. Regulus *knew* that he knew, even if it wasn't confirmed out loud until last night. They never said anything, but James would hint at it a few times when Sirius wasn't around, and Regulus would get helplessly flustered and shy, because back then, the scariest thing he could think of was James laughing at how pathetic he was. Then, well, Sirius went into the arena, and nothing was scarier than that.

Ten years later, and James' hands are different, much bigger now, but Regulus still knows them. He knows the way James' pinky curves, and the blunt, square shape of his nails, and the warmth carried in the crevices of his palms. The way they make him feel—well, that's different, too. Regulus isn't a pathetic teenager anymore, so he won't be powering any cities or running laps around the world, *but* he's a pathetic adult who pretends to be asleep for longer than he actually is just so he can keep basking in how unfortunately good it *still* feels.

There's also just—it's just, when he does drag himself up, the reality of the day is going to sink in, and Regulus isn't ready for it yet. Like this, with James, he gets to escape. It's safe here, with James' steady heartbeat under his ear.

"I know you're awake," James says, because he's terrible, and oh, right, Regulus hates him.

"No, I'm not," Regulus mumbles.

James chuckles, the vibrations of it against Regulus' cheek. It shakes him a bit where he's laying all over James' chest with little care to how he ended up there. "Oh, sure."

Regulus doesn't respond, keeping his eyes closed as he breathes in and out, trying to stay in this state of calm he knows better than to take for granted. He's helplessly grateful for the fact that James' hand still pushes through his hair in a repetitive motion, in the same exact pattern that matches the rise and fall of his chest. Honestly, Regulus could drift off to sleep again just like this, if he weren't so determined to feel every inch of how relaxed he is at the moment.

It's a bit pathetic that Regulus hasn't slept so well in—years, honestly, but especially not since his name was called. He hates that he slept like a fucking baby just because James was with him last night, all wrapped around him, holding on like he might never let go. He's still holding onto him now, in fact, his free arm looped over Regulus' back. He will have to let go eventually, but Regulus isn't ready for that either.

"Did you know," James murmurs, "you talk in your sleep?"

"No, I don't."

"You do. That's how I woke up. I was moving around a bit, trying to get comfortable, and you told me to piss off."

"Alright," Regulus says, "so maybe I do."

"Of course, when I *did* try to piss off, you rolled over and latched onto me like a limpet," James tells him, and Regulus can hear the smile in his voice. "I'd assumed you were kicking me out of your bed, but you were just trying to get me to stop moving. You're very grumpy, you know, even in your sleep."

Regulus grunts, refusing to be embarrassed by literally anything to do with James anymore. "If you don't shut it, I *will* kick you out of my bed. Literally."

"Adorable," James muses with a soft laugh, because he always has the audacity. "That's what you are. Just adorable—and clingy, too. I didn't really see that one coming."

"No."

"I can respect your determination to deny this, even while you're *literally* clinging to me."

"I hate you," Regulus announces with a heavy sigh, peeling his eyes open as he starts to shift away, as much as he despises it.

"Wait, wait, no, don't do that. Sorry, I'm sorry, we don't have to talk about it," James blurts out quickly, reaching out to drag him right back in, blowing out a deep breath when Regulus slumps against him once more. "I was just teasing, Reg, I promise. We can pretend it's not happening."

"Better," Regulus praises, settling back down.

"Just—if we *were* talking about it," James continues, because of course he does, "I would tell you that I really, *really* don't mind. Actually, I'm quite pleased about it, so—"

"James," Regulus snaps, shifting against him to raise up a bit and glare at him. This doesn't get the response he was expecting, honestly. He was prepared for apologies, or maybe a lazy grin, or further earnest commentary. He doesn't expect James to inhale sharply as he goes still, eyes slightly wide.

"You might want to watch where you're sliding your knee, love," James says weakly, a strain in his voice. He pointedly shifts his hips away as he reaches to push Regulus' leg down.

Regulus looks down, then looks back up, his face blank and his voice flat as he says, "Really, James?"

"I—well, *sorry,* but I can't help it," James sputters, looking flustered in a heartbeat. "It's just—you know, a natural bodily response, alright? I'm in bed with someone warm, and you smell really nice, and your skin is soft, and so is your hair, and it's—I mean, it's *you,* quite literally the person I've been daydreaming about since I was *fifteen,* so you'll have to forgive me for being...happy about it."

"You know," Regulus says thoughtfully, "there's some sort of poetic symmetry to this. I used to get off to fantasies about you all the time."

James' eyes sink shut. "Please don't talk about getting off."

"Hm." Regulus studies him for a long moment, feeling the shape of a mischievous thought take form in his mind. It's an idea, really. An indulgence, and frankly, he basically owes it to his fourteen year old self, who would have a fucking heart attack if he knew this would one day happen to him. Less than ideal circumstances, broadly speaking, but still. "It's just, well, believe it or not, one of my fantasies started just like this."

"Did it?" James asks, his voice low as he opens his eyes to gaze at Regulus, heavy-lidded. He can hear the shift in Regulus' voice, no doubt, the suggestive undertone to it.

"Mhm," Regulus confirms. "Me and you in bed together, only just waking up, our bodies close. Don't know how we ended up there, but to be honest, the details didn't really matter." He taps his fingers to the middle of James' chest, then starts sliding his hand down. James' gaze snaps to the motion, tracking it. "Of course, it was always you touching me in the fantasy, because I was just a bit too shy back then."

"Less shy now," James mumbles, gaze locked onto where Regulus' hand slips further down his stomach.

"Well, you know, with experience comes less reasons to be shy," Regulus muses, fingers flirting with the edges of James' waistband.

"Experience?" James says, gaze flitting up. "With—let me guess, Barty?"

James says Barty's name with heavy derision. Regulus became close with Barty when he was seventeen, when they both tried to buy the same chicken from Mrs. Fibbs. They'd gotten into an argument over the chicken (Regulus was having a hard time, what with his brother moved out and avoiding him, and Barty is just always up for an altercation), and then Barty made a comment during the argument about Regulus having a pretty mouth ("I don't give a toss how pretty your mouth is, Black; *nothing* is making me give up this chicken," were his exact words), which somehow led to Regulus responding *very* suggestively ("My mouth could do things that would have you buying, killing, cooking, *and* feeding me this chicken, Crouch, so tread carefully," was his response), and *that* inevitably led to them trading blowjobs less than twenty minutes later.

All that is to say, they became fast friends. They'd dated for about two months, but it never seemed to work out, mostly because Regulus was dealing with too much to care about handling a relationship and Barty was too enticed by all the other people he could also be with to really give it his all. They came to a compromise that worked well for both of them, one in which they had sex when they wanted to, didn't when they didn't, and there were no strings attached.

Above all, they were friends. By the time they reached twenty-one, the sex had slowed down a lot, and they certainly don't do it as much anymore, usually just enjoying getting to spend time together as friends, too uninterested or lazy to get off together the way they used to.

James never liked Barty. Whenever he came around and Barty was there, he would get agitated. Knowing that James had (and apparently still has) feelings for him, that makes sense.

"Oh, yeah, we've done all sorts of filthy things together," Regulus admits, smiling sharply. "Jealous?"

"Yes," James says bluntly, holding his gaze.

"You poor thing," Regulus replies softly, clicking his tongue, and then he curls his fingers in James' waistband to snap it against his skin. James jolts a little, inhaling sharply yet again, and Regulus laughs quietly. "Like you never had anyone. You kissed a girl right in front of me when I was thirteen. Just about broke my heart, you did."

"Tracy," James murmurs, because of course he remembers the name of the first person he kissed at fourteen.

Regulus hums. "Yes, that one. And then you dated Renee when you were fifteen. I overheard you talking about what you did with *her* to Sirius. I handled that better, at the age of fourteen, sort of. Then, well, it was a while before you got with anyone else, I think, but then again, I wasn't paying attention."

"Ravi was next," James informs him. "I was nineteen, and I liked them a lot, just...not enough to get over you. Then there was Holly, then Saxon, then Wellis, then I gave up when I realized no one was going to make me feel the way I did when I caught a glimpse of you."

"Ran off with your heart, did I?"

"And didn't even look back. Return it, would you?"

"Mm, I don't think I will. I think I've earned it after all those years you spent holding onto mine," Regulus says lightly.

James quirks a sad smile. "I suppose that's fair. I should have been more careful with it while I had it. Maybe then I wouldn't be so empty-handed now."

"Poor, poor baby," Regulus whispers, tutting at him, and he once again pops James' waistband. This time, he dips the tips of his fingers inside just a small bit and eases them right back out, watching James take a deep, steadying breath. "Empty hands and unfulfilled fantasies; it's all very tragic, isn't it?"

"Just *tragic,"* James breathes out, catching his bottom lip between his teeth.

"That's us—a great, big tragedy," Regulus tells him. He dips his fingers in again, just a bit, and leaves them there. "Can't change that now, but the empty hands and unfulfilled fantasies —well, we can do something about those."

"What are you doing?" James asks, his voice rough.

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No," James blurts out, "but I'd like to know *why."*

"I'll tell you when it's over," Regulus says, holding his gaze. James' pupils are blown. "Are you alright with that?"

James looks at him for a long moment, exhaling shakily, and then he gives a frantic nod. With that, Regulus pushes his fingers up James' chest to slip around the curve of his neck. Gently, he tugs on James, encouraging him to shift closer.

Regulus guides James' face into his shoulder at the same time he slots his thigh between James' legs. He can feel James' breath stutter against the curve of his neck, and one of James' hands reach out to settle on Regulus' hip not pressed into the bed, his fingers flexing and bunching up the soft cotton of Regulus' shirt. Regulus closes his eyes and turns his face into James' hair, sliding his free hand back down James' chest slowly as he carefully, with a practiced motion, grips James by his waistband and starts tugging to encourage his hips to move.

"Shit," James whispers breathlessly, his free hand snapping out to grab the front of Regulus' shirt, gripping it hard. His other hand tightens on Regulus' hip.

Regulus clamps his teeth together and forces himself to exhale slowly, a full-body shiver winding up at the base of his spine. He ignores it, because it's one thing to indulge his inner little idiot who was obsessed with any and all things James Potter, but it's something else entirely when it's affecting him in the *present.* James stopped affecting him when he was fifteen years old, and Regulus isn't willing to let that change now.

Because that's the thing. Regulus genuinely moved on from James, left all that idiocy over him in the past, and grew to hate him instead. That's real. It's not a lie; everything Regulus ever felt for James twisted and grew thorns, until this is who he is, unrecognizable to who he used to be. Regulus takes comfort in that.

But, well, it *is* sex. He can't be blamed for responding. James is infuriatingly warm, and the quiet sounds he's starting to make sends a very naughty portion of Regulus' brain into overdrive. He bites down on his bottom lip *hard* to stay quiet, refusing to deviate from what he's doing. He breathes in and out, forcing himself to calm down.

"Mm, there you go," Regulus murmurs in approval the moment James' hips start shifting, fully just grinding against his thigh, which means Regulus can stop pulling on his waistband, making James work for it on his own. James groans into Regulus' shoulder, moving almost mindlessly, his breathing erratic.

"Fuck," James chokes out, and then he just—whines. Regulus squeezes his eyes shut as his mind turns to static, that whine the one remaining thing reverberating within his skull. That's *bullshit.* No one should sound that fucking good; that's just not fair. "I—Regulus. *Regulus."*

James says his name like it's the only word that has meaning. His voice is rough, and Regulus' name is sloppy and desperate in his mouth, like a hail mary or a form of salvation.

Regulus slips his hand under James' shirt, which would have been a dream come true once upon a time. Regrettably, he's still finding it to be fucking amazing, because James really *is* fit. Helplessly, he runs his fingers over James' skin, mapping out every bump and divot of James' stomach and chest.

James' hips twitch and curl, his fingers flexing on Regulus where they hold on, and then he's abruptly running his hands all over Regulus wherever he can reach. In his hair, over his shoulders, up his sides; he's greedy about it, desperate like he can't get enough. His head tilts up, mouth grazing Regulus' jaw, breath hot and stuttered against Regulus' skin.

"Regulus? Please?" James breathes out, and Regulus couldn't miss what he's asking for if he tried. James is really obvious about it, making his way to Regulus' mouth and waiting with what seems to be immeasurable restraint to kiss him.

Yeah, no, Regulus isn't doing that. He wouldn't kiss James Potter to save his own life, and he doesn't *care* how inviting James' mouth looks at the moment; it's not happening. The atmosphere is getting to him, obviously. It's the heat, the feeling of James' body against his own and under his hands, the soft moans that spill out of James' mouth. For fuck's sake, he sounds like *sin.* That should be illegal.

Regulus doesn't flat-out say no, but he doesn't quite say yes either. He comes up with a compromise for them both, one he's quite sure is safer than a kiss. He tilts his head and offers James his neck to attack at his leisure, mistakenly assuming that this won't have much of an impact at all.

That's *before* James takes the offering like it's a gift, tipping forward eagerly with a groan to get his mouth on Regulus' throat. He's so gentle about it at first, just soft and sweet kisses that Regulus can mostly ignore, but with each roll of his hips, he grows bolder. Regulus doesn't even notice it's happening until it's suddenly happening, and then James is lavishing at his skin like that's all he's ever wanted to do.

Obviously Regulus has had something similar happen to him before—Barty is a good lover, there's no denying that—but he'll be damned if James isn't just *better.*

Regulus has to catch his bottom lip between his teeth harder than ever to stay quiet, doing his absolute best to concentrate, and it's not fucking *working* because James' mouth is—his mouth is—it's really, *really—*

James muffles a groan into his throat, breathing hard as his hips start to stutter, and Regulus forces himself to shake it off and get back on track. He blinks hard and swallows, then slides his free hand up into James' hair, holding him in place as he slips his other hand from under James' shirt, raking his nails gently down James' abdomen as he goes, which earns him a full-body shiver. Humming, Regulus dips his hand into the front of James' trousers and pants, once again snapping his waistband against his skin.

James' hips jerk, pressing harder into his thigh, no finesse. Just eager in the pursuit of his own pleasure. He whimpers, and *really,* Regulus is going to need him to stop immediately and never do it again. He's never been so desperate to taste a sound before in his *life,* and he is not about to kiss James for anything in this world. Absolutely not.

"Regulus," James gasps out, pressing one trembling hand into Regulus' hair and dragging the other down to paw at his side, desperately trying to get him closer. "This feels—you feel—it's so good. I'm—I—"

"I know," Regulus murmurs. "Keep going. Don't stop. Fantasy fulfilled, and—well, our hands certainly aren't empty anymore. Come on, James, just one last thing."

"What? Anything. You can have—oh, *oh,* fuck." James whimpers and curls up, his fingers tightening in Regulus' hair.

"You're already going to give me what I want," Regulus tells him, and James groans like he's been wounded.

"What? What do you—" James cuts himself off, going taut all over, choking out a moan that sounds a lot like Regulus' name.

"You're close enough as it is, and I'm just here to watch," Regulus whispers in his ear. "Show me, James."

"Shit, fuck, Regulus, *Regulus—"* James shows him, alright. He arches up and shakes all over, and Regulus begins moving his leg to work James through it, listening to James whine and gasp his name like a prayer.

Regulus doesn't stop until James is gasping for air, clinging to him and trembling as he goes boneless against him. For a moment, Regulus closes his eyes and turns his face into James' hair, breathing him in, and then he snaps his eyes open and pulls away, letting James fall back.

James spills out on the bed like a puddle, his eyes closed and his mouth slack as he settles. It takes him only a second to blink open his eyes, looking absolutely amazed.

"Fucking hell, Regulus," James breathes out in a croak, reaching up to shove a shaking hand into his own hair. He blows out a deep breath. "That was—it was—am I dreaming? Did that actually happen?"

"It happened."

"Why did it happen?"

"Because you might die today," Regulus tells him bluntly, shrugging one shoulder as he stands up. "Consider it a parting gift. Now, get out."

Before James can so much as respond, Regulus turns on his heel to go get his clothes and head off to have a shower. He shuts the door behind him and locks it, waiting for the distant sound of the door to his room to be closed, signaling that James has, in fact, got out. Then, and only then, does Regulus turn on and climb into the shower.

Under the hot beat of water, Regulus takes himself into his hand and wrings out an orgasm so intensely good that he braces his arm along the wall and bites down on it to muffle the whimpers that spill out of his mouth. It's not a fantasy of James that gets him there, like it once would have been.

This time, it's a memory.

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"James?"

With a jolt, James blinks and snaps his gaze towards Remus, who is pulling toast out of the toaster, the final touches of breakfast; a grand breakfast with nearly every option in the world available; the last proper breakfast James will have.

Remus is looking at him in what seems to be genuine concern, but there's no *surprise.* It's as if it makes complete sense for James to be distant and quiet, a little dazed and lost in his own head, as if it's perfectly fair and expected because of what's waiting for him today. The arena, more accurately, and that's definitely something that's going to weigh on James as soon as the reality of it gets closer and starts to sink in—but, really, the cause for his distraction is *Regulus.*

Perhaps it's stupid to be fixated on what happened, considering everything else he's going to be dealing with today, but honestly? James sort of prefers this. For one, it's certainly a more pleasant alternative—a little death is favored over a bigger, more permanent one. Though, if

this little death Regulus has given—has gifted—to him is an omen of what's to come in the arena...well, James is well and truly fucked.

It's just—it felt so fucking *good,* and it was, to him, wildly confusing, but endlessly worth it, and even if he's still puzzling over it with whatever brain that didn't leak out of his ears, he doesn't need to fully make sense of it to know he's so, so fucking grateful that it happened.

He *is* puzzling over it, though. In fact, to him, it's a real head-scratcher. He just doesn't think that someone who hates him would do...that. Like, literally any of it, certainly not the way *Regulus* did it, not even in a kind gesture of some sort due to impending doom. *A parting gift,* Regulus had said. Well, it was a lovely gift, but someone who hates him wouldn't be giving him a gift at all, not even if he was *actually* dying right in front of them. Regulus is a conundrum, honestly.

James just can't figure him out. He knows Regulus hates him; he's been dealing with that for years. He knows Regulus used to have a crush on him; he's been dealing with that for years also. But this? This is new.

James isn't entirely sure what to do, or think, about it. Hence all the spacing out, glazed eyes, and uncharacteristic silence. Nice of Remus to show that he cares, though.

"Yeah, I'm fine," James says reflexively, and he realizes belatedly that Remus is going to know that this is a lie, because there's no possible way he's fine today. He settles for something a little more honest. "I mean, not really, but it hasn't...hit me yet, I think."

"It's not going to," Sirius announces as he sweeps into the kitchen, and James immediately drops his gaze for...so many reasons. For one thing, he's scared to look at Sirius, because if Sirius shows even the least bit of upset on his face for what's to come, James will fucking lose it. For another, Sirius' little brother just got him off less than thirty minutes ago, and James isn't planning on telling him, mostly because he's going to die soon enough, so he can get away with taking it to his grave. Oblivious to all of this, Sirius continues to speak as he moves in the room. "It likely won't hit you until you're about to go up, or maybe until you actually get up there. It didn't hit me until the countdown finished and the cannon sounded."

Carefully, James picks his gaze back up, letting it crawl higher until he can see Sirius move past Remus, a hand pressed to the small of his back as he goes by. The touch is visibly light,

but not hesitant, and Remus' lips curl up. Did they…?

Well, maybe—despite everything—they've all had a nice morning. James isn't going to think about it too hard. Instead, he's just grateful for what's *clearly* good developments for his best friend. He doesn't need to know the details, since it won't really matter anyway, and he's not sharing his own very good developments either. Just—good for them. All of them.

On the last day before everything changes for good, James is so fucking thankful to have something positive to cling to.

"What's going to happen?" James asks, bravely looking at Sirius' face, relieved to find that he looks—calm. Sort of. It's a facade, James can tell, but it's one they can both use to ignore what's really underneath. "Right before, I mean."

Sirius exhales as he pours himself some juice. "Is Reggie up yet? I want him to hear this."

"He's in the shower," James says, then snaps his mouth shut so violently that his teeth click together. Sirius' gaze flits to him, latching on to study him, and James tries so hard not to fidget or shift restlessly. He ends up doing both, and Sirius slowly puts the juice aside, tilting his chin up as he arches an eyebrow at him. "Um. It's—I mean."

"Why," Sirius says slowly, with the dramatic pause and everything, "do you sound so sure about that?"

James could lie. He could say he just walked by Regulus' room, paused to poke his head in, and heard the shower going. It would be easy to let the words slip past his lips—except it's *Sirius,* and James would feel so guilty about it, and Sirius would see right through him anyway. James just stares at him, utterly defenseless in this moment, and the only thing he can think to do is look to Remus for help, almost instinctively.

Remus—oh, Remus is a fucking *angel,* is what he is. He shifts rather abruptly and slides his hand up Sirius' back in a would-be casual way, if not for the fact that Sirius immediately straightens up with a sharp inhale and focuses right on him, distracted in an instant. Easily,

like he doesn't have a care in the world, Remus picks up an apple slice off the plate of fruit on the counter, holding it up to Sirius' mouth.

"I sprinkled a bit of cinnamon on some of these, just to see if it would be good. Try it for me and tell me what you think, would you?" Remus asks lightly.

"I—what?" Sirius rasps.

"I want your opinion," Remus tells him, holding the apple slice closer, a tiny smile on his face.

"Oh, I—from your—you want me to—" Sirius genuinely can't seem to string a sentence together, the poor thing, and Remus just puts him out of his misery by nudging the apple slice forward, gently resting it against his mouth. Almost like a reflex, Sirius bites into it, the crunch making him jolt, and then he blinks as he chews. His eyebrows are furrowed when he swallows. "Oh, wait, actually… Remus, that's *good."*

"I thought they might be," Remus muses, looking pleased, and he pops the remaining piece of the apple slice in his mouth, chewing it with a twinkle in his eye.

Sirius makes a noise, quiet and muffled. James tucks his lips in and ducks his head, struggling not to laugh. Remus Lupin. If there's one good thing to come out of all this, it's him.

"Oh, lovely, we're all here," Pandora announces in what is obviously forced cheer as she comes into the kitchen, Regulus trailing after her without a word.

James wouldn't be able to stop himself from looking right at Regulus if he tried, but he doesn't bother to try. It's sort of invigorating that Regulus is already looking back, not shying away from his gaze in the least. The exchanged look feels charged, at least to James, like they're both thinking of what happened this morning at the same time, a silent acknowledgement that James can feel like a tangible touch. It's warm in the kitchen, and James still shivers.

Remus clears his throat. Loudly. "Good morning, Pandora, Regulus. Sirius was just about to explain something important, but he was waiting on you, Regulus."

"Sorry," Regulus says, not sounding sorry at all, "I was in the shower." Sirius purses his lips, darting a glance towards James, but he doesn't comment. "What's this about?"

"I asked what would happen. Like, right before the arena," James explains.

Sirius heaves a sigh. "You'll both be with me until you have to go. They'll lead you into a Hallow heli-carrier and fly you off, then you'll be in separate rooms. No one close to you can be with you in there. Someone will come in to inject a tiny device in your arm that tracks everything to do with you. This means your vitals, your position in the arena, things such as that. It will hurt, just a bit, but you'll forget it quickly. They'll leave, and someone will speak over an intercom to tell you to get changed in the clothes provided for the arena. You'll have a few minutes, ten at most, and then you'll be instructed to step into the tube that will close behind you and raise the platform you're on to take you right into the arena. Do *not* step off that platform before the countdown finishes and the cannon sounds, or you'll be blown up."

"What if I trip and fall off of it?" James asks, eyes wide.

"Don't," Sirius replies, lips pressing into a thin line.

At the uncomfortable silence, Pandora clears her throat. "I'd like to be there with you as well, of course, but I have to go home for a few days, so I—I won't get to see either of you off. But that's—it's alright. I'll have breakfast with all of you before I go. Let's just—let's have a nice breakfast together, yeah?"

James' heart breaks a little at the quake in her voice. She's trying so very hard to sound light and unaffected, but it's clear that she's very emotional at the moment. Pandora does a lot for them, almost as much as Sirius, and James has come to appreciate her—more than that, he's grown fond of her. She's warm and kind and funny, and she gets a little fussy sometimes because she obviously cares about them, and it's blatant just how much she cares about them now. She looks like she's about to cry. The smile on her face trembles.

They do make an attempt to have a good—last—breakfast together, possibly just for Pandora's sake. But, sadly, at the table is an unwelcome guest; the unspoken knowledge of death that hangs over two of them. Pandora chatters nonstop, praising Remus for the food, talking about meaningless things like if she stops, she'll never find her voice again. Sirius barely eats, mostly just having the apple slices. Regulus and James likely wouldn't eat either—hard to have an appetite when time is running out—but Sirius insists that they tuck in.

"You need to eat for your strength, and for running, and for—a lot things," Sirius mumbles. "Trust me, you'll wish you had."

So, James and Regulus eat. Despite the fact that James is overly aware that this is the last meal he'll have outside of the arena, he can't bring himself to enjoy it at all. It tastes like ash that coats his teeth and leaves an acrid burn in the back of his throat. It's hard to swallow each bite and harder still to keep it down. He forces himself, though, closing his eyes and wishing with everything in him that he was back home, eating the warm and hearty soup that his parents would make for him or Sirius when they weren't feeling well. *Mum, Dad, I'm not feeling well,* James thinks and struggles not to throw up.

By the end of breakfast, silence has fallen, and no one's eating anymore. Pandora is staring down at her half-empty plate with a thick sheen of tears over her eyes. Yet, they do not fall. She takes a steadying breath and pushes to her feet, and everyone follows suit to see her off.

At the door, Pandora turns to James and reaches out without warning to cup his face in her hands. It's a startlingly gentle gesture, and for some reason, it makes James feel smaller. She's shorter than him, almost comically so, but he abruptly feels no bigger than a child standing before her.

"I am—" Pandora's voice catches, and she pauses to release a shaky breath, sliding her hands down to grip his shoulders. "James, I am so grateful to know you, and so sorry that I had to. Every name that I call is a name I wish I never learned. Yours—you—will remain etched into my heart forever."

"I forgive you, you know," James murmurs, watching her eyes shine with more unshed tears. "I know better than to shoot the messenger, Pandora. You've been so kind while delivering it."

Pandora swallows harshly and tugs him into a fierce hug. In his ear, she whispers, "I know what you're going to do, James. For them. For Regulus and Sirius—and yourself. You are so, so brave. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

James' eyes sink shut, and he tucks his face down against her hair, inherently comforted by her preemptive grief. It feels like he means something, like his impact on the world and the people in it carries weight he can be proud of. She squeezes him, and he squeezes her back. Her hair smells like lemons.

As she pulls away, James wonders how she knows. Sirius and James haven't breathed a word of it, and he knows neither of them ever would. Pandora holds his gaze as she draws back, and she gives him a tiny, watery smile. James returns it, suddenly sure that it doesn't matter how she knows. Maybe she's known for some time now, working it out herself, and she won't put a name to this, not daring to speak it. She's the reaper. When she speaks of something with a name, death follows, and he's so grateful she's not encouraging this to die.

When Pandora turns to face Regulus, he shakes his head and says, his voice tight, "No. Don't. There's no need."

"I know," Pandora says softly, and Regulus looks so startled by this. She smiles. "I'll see you again soon, Regulus."

Regulus' breath hitches, his eyes widening before they dart to James, like he can't believe she just insinuated what she has. That Regulus will be back, that he'll win, and James will not. No one, not once, has outright said anything of the sort.

Pandora reaches out and grabs Regulus' hand, squeezing it only for one second, and then she drops it to turn and pull Sirius in a hug. She holds him for a long time, even longer than she held James, and no word passes between them, but when she cups his cheek, he nods and she nods back. Lastly, Pandora breaks the somber mood by facing Remus and asking if she could hug him too, so he won't feel left out.

Remus agrees with a quiet huff of laughter, possibly only because it's lightening the mood, making James chuckle and Regulus' lips curl up and Sirius' eyes—previously devoid of any

spark—light up in delight. Pandora hugs Remus, but doesn't linger very long, which seems to keep him at ease.

After Pandora leaves, they don't have very long at all. Remus goes to clean up the kitchen, and Sirius just sits with James and Regulus in silence as they wait. None of them can really bring themselves to say anything.

There's far too much to say to even try.

~•~

Sirius wants to rewind time, selfishly, to this morning when he and Remus were in bed together, when Sirius hadn't let himself think about what this day was, when—for the first time in a long time—he let himself be happy, unhindered.

Time continues on anyway, a cruel mistress that won't let up. Here he stands before his best friend and little brother just moments before they will leave him to go face down death, and he doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know where to start.

There's too much with both of them.

James. *James.* James, James, James. His best friend. The air in his lungs. The one he needed when nothing else would suffice. The one who helped him when living was the hardest thing to do. If not for James, there would be no Sirius now, and it still feels that way. Even on the brink, Sirius can't let himself accept it, what James plans to do. He thinks it doesn't matter, in the long run. No James equals no Sirius. If he stops breathing, all the oxygen will dry up in Sirius' lungs, and he won't ever take a breath again.

Regulus. Reg, Reggie, his baby brother. His heart, and all the fractures in it. The one he would have gladly died for, and proved so. The one he lived for, even when it came at the cost of remembering how to live at all. They have too much between them, and at times, not enough. It all went wrong, and Sirius wishes with everything in him that they could make it right, but he doesn't know if they'll ever manage to. Ten years ago, Sirius returned with a

broken heart, and he learned to live with that. If Regulus' heart stops beating, the fractures in Sirius' heart will crack too wide, and it'll never beat again.

"Regulus Black."

It's some sort of horrible irony that Regulus' name is called first to be taken away. Sirius' hand snaps out immediately to latch onto his arm, holding onto him as he holds his breath. Regulus looks away from the Auror waiting on him to look at Sirius instead, pale and wide-eyed. He looks so scared, so small. Sirius' little brother. Always his little brother.

"Sirius," Regulus whispers, his voice a mere breath.

And Sirius can't let him go. He can't. He. It's not working. He knows he has to; he knows how bad things will be for all of them if he doesn't, but he can't peel his fingers away. His grip on Regulus is desperate, bruising, and he can't let go.

The Auror steps forward, hand on their gun on their hip, and James steps forward as well, snapping, "Give them a moment. For fuck's sake, that's his brother."

James could be talking about either of them. As much as Regulus is Sirius' brother, Sirius is Regulus'. An equal exchange. An instinctive, familial possession. It's in their blood; that simple truth. *Mine.* James puts his body between them like a shield, like he'll protect that truth with sinew and bone. His back is to them, and Sirius has never felt so scared and so safe all at once before.

"Sirius," Regulus says again, more frantic and distressed this time. He's shaking, and Sirius knows how to do this, how to put everything aside, his own fears and needs, just to comfort his little brother. To be steady and strong for him.

"It's okay. You're going to be okay," Sirius rasps, his voice thick, and he tugs on Regulus' arm to pull him into his own. They haven't hugged in ten years, but Regulus folds into him like ten years haven't passed at all, like he's still just a child slumping into the safety of his brother's arms.

Regulus' voice is small when he chokes out, "I don't want to go."

"I know," Sirius croaks, his eyes squeezing shut as he cups the back of Regulus' head. The confession wrenches at his chest, making him feel like he's being ripped in half, because he can't take his brother's place this time. "I know, Reggie."

"I don't want to die," Regulus breathes out, the words muffled into Sirius' shoulder. That doesn't stop them from being soul-shattering. Regulus is clinging to Sirius just like he did when he was fifteen and it was Sirius who was leaving. He'd said the same things then, too, just for Sirius. *I don't want you to go,* he'd said. *I don't want you to die.*

I won't, Regulus. I promise I won't, Sirius had vowed, and then he didn't. He refused. Sirius shouldn't make the same promises for Regulus, because he has no way of knowing, and yet.

"You won't," Sirius tells him anyway. "I promise you won't."

"Regulus Black." Again, the Auror makes their demand, and it's clearly the last warning.

A shuddering breath escapes Regulus, and he's abruptly ripping himself right out of Sirius' arms. Sirius tries to grab him again, unable to fathom letting him go, but Regulus jerks away. His face is like stone, and he looks at Sirius for only one moment, just a mere breath. In that breath, Sirius thinks *I love you,* and he can't make the words leave his mouth on an exhale before Regulus is walking away with the Auror.

There's never enough time.

They had ten years, and still, that wasn't enough.

"Sirius," James says gently, turning back after watching Regulus go. They'd stared at each other until Regulus took the corner, not looking away even once.

"James," Sirius practically whimpers, and in the next second, they're grabbing onto each other to embrace so tightly that it hurts, gripping each other so hard that Sirius can't breathe.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Sirius," James whispers, and Sirius' breath is snatched right out of his lungs, because he knows exactly what James is apologizing for.

James hasn't, not once. He hasn't apologized for his choice, for leaving Sirius, for *deciding* to die and never come back to his best friend. But he is now. There's so much remorse in his tone that it sounds like he's choking on it, and he is sorry, he's so blatantly sorry for what he's going to do, and that—

That makes it real.

Sirius has no choice but to accept it, then. It bears down on him all at once, and he breaks immediately, as soon as he lets himself feel it.

It feels like dying.

Sirius has brushed up against death many times, so he's aware of how brutal it can be. He's wielded death like a weapon, and he's been on the verge of death enough to know that it's not peaceful. It's blood and gore and pain. It's terrifying.

Not James, not James, not James, Sirius thinks desperately, and he'd offer himself up instead, if he could. *Me. Take me. Please don't take him. Please, not James.*

A sob works its way out of his mouth. James is still chanting his apology, saying it over and over and over, but never—not for a second—wavering in his decision. Sirius grasps at him harder, like he's trying to crush him, like he can grind him into dust and cup him in his hands and swallow him down as if he can keep them together that way. James is gripping him just the same, like he's trying too, and Sirius wishes it would work.

And, if Sirius has to accept it, if he has to face it— *my best friend is going to die, James is going to die, he's not coming back*— then the next logical conclusion is that Sirius will simply join him. No James, no Sirius. That's it.

Somehow, Sirius can live with that, until he's dead. Until they're dead. He can accept it that way, like a universal truth, something unshakable, more embedded in this world than the core of the earth. Regulus—he can live on without them, and has. He will live on. This is Sirius' only compromise.

Still. Even still, Sirius' instinctive defiance fights it, pushing at it with feeble hands. *Not James, not Regulus, not me. We'll live. Somehow, somehow, somehow...*

The will to survive is a fickle thing, isn't it?

"James Potter."

Sirius chokes on a raw sob, holding onto James as hard as he ever has, and then—

It's all gone.

Sirius blinks, sucking in a sharp breath as he stares around the hall, utterly alone. A broken whine falls out of his mouth, because no, *no,* that's not fair. His last moments with his best friend—and he can't remember them. They're lost to him.

No.

No.

No, please.

James was just in his arms. Sirius had him. Sirius was holding onto him. Did he try to keep him? Did the Auror have to rip him away? Did James say something? Did Sirius?

He'll never know.

And again, like a snapshot, Sirius stops when he blinks and finds himself walking. Gritty-eyed, face tight with tear tracks, he's moving, and he doesn't remember when he started or where he was trying to go. Sirius stumbles towards the wall, hyperventilating as he squeezes his eyes shut and—

"Sirius."

That's Remus. His lovely voice, so soothing, calling to him. Sirius blinks, and Remus is right there, right in front of him. When did Sirius make it back to the suite?

"I can't remember," Sirius says, his voice cracking. "Remus, Remus, I can't—I can't remember. I can't—"

Remus' hands reach for his face, and then—

Sirius is on the settee, pressed into Remus' side as he weeps into his shoulder. The screen shows Rita, her mouth moving, no doubt performing the usual introductions before the games that take place before they start—things like recapping information about each tribute and getting the excitement up for the arena, as well as what's about to happen inside it. She's muted, though, the tiny speaker with a line through it in the corner of the screen making it obvious.

Remus' arms are around him, holding him, one hand gently carding through his hair while the other sweeps up and down his back. Sirius feels like he's reentering his body, and as always, he's struck by the horrible thought of what occupies it when he's gone. No one ever knows that he's left.

When Sirius lifts his head, Remus' hand in his hair lifts away to cup his cheek, gaze flicking over Sirius' face. Softly, he says, "There you are."

"What?" Sirius croaks, blinking swollen eyes.

"You were gone for a bit, I think," Remus murmurs, as simple as that, and Sirius feels his heart stutter in his chest.

Sirius exhales shakily. "You—you could tell?"

"Yes," Remus says, eyebrows pinching. "It's alright, Sirius. Just breathe. You're here. I'm here; I'm right here."

"I don't know how I got here," Sirius admits, choked up, his eyes stinging again. "I can't—I don't remember. I—"

"Shh, it's okay. Breathe," Remus instructs gently, ducking his head forward to press their foreheads together, thumb swiping along Sirius' cheek so tenderly that he starts crying again.

It's a soft, steady sort of crying, though. From the eyes and not the chest. They just spill out, and he shuts his eyes, feeling his wet, clumped eyelashes against his cheeks. Every time Remus' exhale spills over his mouth, Sirius inhales. In turn, he exhales every time Remus breathes in. It's an exchange, guidance, and he falls into the gentle rhythm until it doesn't hurt as much.

Sirius feels himself become more solid around the edges, no longer a spector to his own life as he lives it, flitting in and out with no comprehension of what he's missing when he's gone. He doesn't get it back.

He'll never get it back.

~•~

James looks up from where he's slipping into the jacket provided for him, Sirius' last words ringing in his ears. The sound of the door takes his focus, and he feels himself start in surprise as Fabian comes sweeping in.

"You're here. How are you—" James sucks in a sharp breath of pure disbelief. "Fabian—"

"Special permission from Riddle himself, apparently," Fabian cuts in with a smile, winking at him as he moves over. "What, you didn't think I was going to let you go into the arena looking anything less than your best, did you?"

James releases a choked laugh. "I—I don't really think it's going to matter how I look."

"I know," Fabian says, softening as he reaches out to brace his hands on James' shoulders, just gazing at him.

"Why…?" James swallows and licks his lips. "Why would Riddle let you in to see me?"

Fabian hums. "Well, honestly, likely as an incentive. A little gift, if you will. You and Regulus really made *quite* the impression between your outfits and your little love story. You're both fan-favorites now, so the pressure is on to keep you two going for as long as possible, hoping some magic will happen, so to speak. I believe I'm here to boost morale."

"So, they—they're planning to milk us for all we're worth, then?" James mumbles, easily reading between the lines.

"Indeed they are, and indeed they will," Fabian murmurs, not bothering to lie to him. He slips his hands down and shuffles close, dropping his voice to a whisper as he fiddles with the front of James' coat. "But you're worth more than they could ever get out of you. You're the sun, James. Don't forget."

Following Fabian's glance down, James sees a small, bronze pin in the shape of the sun, a circle with triangles wrapped all the way around its outline. James reaches up to rub his thumb over it, then looks up. Fabian winks at him and zips his coat.

"Thank you," James whispers.

"The sun always comes back up, and so will you," Fabian tells him, then drags him into a hug.

James closes his eyes and hugs him back, his chest aching, because Fabian will never get to see him again after this.

"James Potter, step on the platform," comes a voice over the intercom, the same one that instructed him to get dressed.

It makes James jump a little bit, his heart racing as his anxiety spikes, sharp fear sliding down the ridges of his spine. Fabian squeezes him tighter for just a moment, and then he pulls away, giving James a nod of encouragement.

Swallowing thickly, James walks over to the platform, hesitating only a moment before stepping up on it. As soon as he's in, the tube slides shut, locking him inside. As soon as that happens, the door bangs open, and a flood of Aurors come in all at once. James sucks in a sharp breath, then releases a shout that reverberates off the glass and right back onto him as he watches, trapped and useless, as the Aurors beat Fabian to the floor. Fabian crumbles, curling up, and James bangs on the glass, begging them to stop.

They don't stop. They just keep hitting him with their batons, making his body jerk, his face twisted in a grotesque tableau of pain. He gets hit in the face and immediately slumps like all of his strings have been cut.

"Fabian," James breathes out, hand on the glass as he stoops down, trying to reach for him even when he can't. It doesn't look good, but Fabian is still breathing. He's still—

An Auror pulls their gun from their hip, points it directly at Fabian's head, then pulls the trigger. The sharp crack of the gunshot is loud, and James flinches away, freezing as his back hits the glass behind him.

Blood trickles from Fabian's forehead. From the bullet wound. One hand is stretched out, slack on the ground. He was trying to reach out for James, too.

The Aurors drag Fabian's body from the room, and James stays crouching on the platform, trembling so hard he can't breathe.

~•~

Regulus knows he's supposed to sit and wait, but he keeps pacing, turning his gaze to the platform he'll have to step onto soon. His stomach lurches with the thought. He doesn't want to do it. He wants to go back to being in Sirius' arms. He wants to go back further, back to when he had James' steady heartbeat under his ear. He wants to go back even further than that, back to his fifteenth birthday, or any time before then.

The door opens, making him whirl around, and Regulus' breath punches out of his chest when Gideon comes strolling in with a smile, eyes sparkling.

"Gideon?" Regulus whispers, hushed and reverent.

"There's my favorite doll," Gideon says softly, moving closer. "Don't you dare bite me for what I'm about to do."

What Gideon is about to do is, apparently, tug Regulus right into his arms. Regulus doesn't bite him, doesn't even fight it, because he's so scared and he doesn't want to be alone.

"How are you here?" Regulus asks in a rasp. He doesn't hug Gideon back, can't really bring himself to; it doesn't feel right, if Sirius isn't the last person he held onto. He lets himself be held, though, and Gideon doesn't seem to mind.

"Parting gift from Riddle himself," Gideon murmurs, pulling back with a small furrow between his eyebrows. "It's—it isn't really—when the request was made, Fabian and I instantly agreed; we jumped at the chance, if I'm honest. But now I'm thinking...it wasn't exactly a request. I'm here for a reason, Regulus, and I don't know if it's a good one."

Regulus gazes up at him, heart thumping hard as his blood immediately starts rushing faster in his veins. "What? Gideon, what does that mean? What's—"

"I don't know," Gideon admits, "but that's not what you need to worry about right now. You need to be focused, alright? Listen to me, Regulus, you can *win.* I know you can."

A lump forms in Regulus' throat, and he jolts a little when Gideon unzips his coat just a little. It's lightweight, but there's some sort of thermal material on the inside that suggests it's going to get cold in the arena. Regulus really hopes there won't be any snow. If Gideon is removing his coat—

Oh. Gideon is not removing his coat. Regulus glances down to see a bronze pin under his fingers, shaped like a star. Slowly, Gideon zips his jacket back up, smiling gently when Regulus looks back up to meet his gaze.

"Be a champion anyway," Gideon reminds him quietly.

"Regulus Black, step onto the platform."

The instructions steal Regulus' breath, and Gideon steps back with an encouraging nod. There's something on his face, in his eyes, an undercurrent of unease like something isn't quite right, but it's clear that he's trying to hide it, focusing on Regulus instead. He looks like he has a headache.

Cautiously, Regulus walks over to the platform, repeatedly glancing back to see nothing but support from Gideon. It's that support that manages to get Regulus to step onto the platform, and the tube shuts around him instantly.

A mere breath passes before the door opens again, and Regulus freezes as Aurors come in the room in waves. Gideon doesn't miss a beat, picking up the chair in the corner and slamming it to the first Auror who dares to come too close. He fights, and he fights hard, but he's quickly overtaken. They strike him over and over with their batons until he's a heap on the floor, and Regulus watches in horror, not even breathing.

He doesn't so much as twitch until a gun is drawn, and then he throws himself forward, shouting, "Wait! Wait, no, ple—"

Regulus doesn't even get to finish begging before Gideon is dead. Blood pools onto the floor, a small puddle left behind as the Aurors drag his body away without so much as a stutter.

Regulus is left there, frozen in place as tears gather in his eyes, his throat going tight, and then it can't matter, because the platform starts to move.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you coming to check the end notes for more in-depth warnings and where to skip:

Starting with the suicide implications: FIRST, IF YOU WISH TO SKIP THIS PART, SCROLL PAST WHERE JAMES APOLOGIZES TO SIRIUS AFTER REGULUS IS TAKEN AWAY BY THE AUROR!!!

If you DON'T want to skip, but you still want the spoiler-y warnings (which is valid): Sirius sort of feels it finally hit him that James is planning to die and never come back, and he has the thoughts that he will just die with him, rather than live without him. It's not explicitly stated how or anything like that, but he makes it very clear that he plans to die if James does.

The dissociative amnesia: FIRST, IF YOU WISH TO SKIP THIS PART, SCROLL PAST WHEN JAMES AND SIRIUS START HUGGING AND JAMES' NAME IS CALLED, AND DON'T STOP UNTIL IT SWITCHES BACK TO JAMES' POV!!!

If you DON'T wish to skip, but you want the spoiler-y warning (which is so valid): Sirius essentially gets too overwhelmed/upset and loses moments/blocks them out. His memory goes very spotty, and he comes in and out, like snapshots where he finds himself for a moment, then goes right back out. He is upset and panicking through this (it's mentioned once that he's hyperventilating), and he manages to make it back to the suite where Remus is, but he doesn't really remember how he got there. It's very, VERY upsetting for him. Remus does comfort him, but it's explicitly stated that Sirius will never get those memories back that he lost.

The death: FIRST, IF YOU WISH TO SKIP THIS PART, SCROLL PAST WHEN JAMES IS INSTRUCTED TO GET ON THE PLATFORM TO GO TO THE ARENA, AND THEN WHEN IT'S REGULUS' POV, JUST STOP READING WHEN REGULUS IS INSTRUCTED TO GET ON THE PLATFORM!!!

If you DON'T wish to skip, but you want the spoiler-y warning (which is so valid): Two people die this chapter. Fabian and Gideon. It's explicitly stated that they are beaten down to the ground and then shot by Aurors. It's violent, but mostly brief. Both James and Regulus see this happen and are extremely upset about it.

for those of you who HAVE finished the chapter:

how we feelin'?

whew, talk about a rough one, right? i mean, it STARTED out good. sirius and remus got handsy and flirted with each other, which was fun. also, sirius blurting out that he needs to brush his teeth when remus tries to kiss him is so fucking funny to me. he PANICKED 😭😭😭 poor babe. he was really overwhelmed as it was, leave him alone.

meanwhile, regulus gave james a little treat. 💀 he's foul for that lmaoooo. he really was just indulging that person who used to have feelings for james and giving james a nice little parting gift because hey, he's gonna have to die if regulus making it home, so like. it's the least he could do. see, he can be nice sometimes.

james was like: you know what? im not even gonna question it. im gonna accept this fortunate stroke of luck and cherish it. 😭😭😭 he deserves nice things, really. very happy for you, king. it's what you deserve <3

the rest, though? fucking awful. 😒 gonna find the bitch who wrote this and put them through a meat grinder bc he's a little shit. the fuck was that???

listen, i love angst as much as the next person, but this one genuinely took a lot out of me, and it somehow still gets worse??? like, the story can and will get heavier from here, im not joking. not exactly in the same way, at least not always, but still.

honorable mention to pandora, who just Knows Things. i love her so much, you have no idea. her saying goodbye HURT

sirius and regulus clinging to each other before regulus goes into the arena? sirius not being able to let him go? sirius reassuring him the same way he reassured him when it

was him going into the arena? sirius not getting to tell regulus he loves him? i would rather shoot myself with a nail gun, thanks.

sirius losing his last moments with james had me regretting all my life choices that led me to this moment. like, that shit was so sad. and the way he blanks things out in moments of high distress? yeah, ive been there. it hits hard, ill just say that. also yes, sirius did say something to james, but no i will not be telling you what it is because it's relevant later for more angst. feel free to make your theories, though!

and finally, fabian and gideon. ow. that was fucking brutal. rest assured, their deaths will not be brushed under the rug. it's actually a Very Important plot point. but still, that shit HURT.

also, side note, because im evil: james was indeed right, fabian WOULD never see him after that.

another side note, because again, im evil: gideon had a headache because fabian died first.

The Arena

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death
-references to previous deaths that took place
-actual deaths (we're in the arena now, so this makes sense, but it's not too detailed. only just mentioned, really)
-depictions of characters being afraid/anxious/panicked (but no in-depth descriptions of panic attacks or anything like that)
-very brief physical fight (it doesn't last last long and is quickly cleared up)

that's...it, im pretty sure. like, yes, we're in the arena, but this is actually a fairly mild chapter, despite that. enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Regulus notices is the sun.

It's warm on his skin, bright in his eyes, making him shudder at the temperature change and squint as he holds up his hand to block his face. The sound of the gunshot still rings in his ears, and the image of Gideon's dead body feels seared into his mind. Why? Why would they do that? Because of—Regulus?

There clearly was a reason for Regulus to see it. They made *sure* he would see it. To disorient him? To send him to the arena in a state of hysterics? It's working. Regulus is still shaking, his breath coming out choppy, but Gideon…

He'd never want Regulus to let them win.

Regulus thinks he knows. There's something… The outfits, the interviews, the impact he and James had on the Hallows… Of course Riddle didn't like it. This was a warning. But *why*

Gideon? Why...? It doesn't completely make sense. Regulus can't figure it out, but he can still hear Gideon's voice in his head, telling him to focus.

Inhaling sharply, Regulus can taste the salt in the air. Iron. It makes his teeth ache slightly, and he swallows thickly, his heart thumping along with the large countdown that hangs in the sky in the distance. Big, large numbers that glow, a gamemaker's voice counting down at a steady, sedate pace.

26, 25, 24…

A large field is stretching wide and far in front of Regulus' platform. In the middle of said field is a cave—a big one with a large opening, like a mouth threatening to swallow anyone who gets too close. There are poles with bags and supplies hanging off them scattered in front of the cave, but inside the cave are the weapons.

17, 16, 15…

In front of the poles, before anyone would be able to reach them, there's a wide river that cuts through the entire field. It arcs off in a circle, like it's wrapping around the cave. To reach the cave, they'll have to cross it. The water is red, stark red that flows like blood. A crimson river.

9, 8, 7…

Swallowing, Regulus swivels his head, trying to breathe as his gaze darts around. The platforms are spaced apart, but it doesn't take him long to find James at all. He's hunched over, breathing hard and looking like he's about to vomit. Like he can feel the weight of Regulus' gaze, James turns his head and looks at him. Their eyes meet.

3, 2, 1…

The cannon sounds, and Regulus is running before he even realizes it. Everyone else is, too, he's sure—but he can't focus on that. Running to the weapons first thing is exactly what Sirius said *not* to do, but the poles are scattered far enough that Regulus can snatch a bag and run directly into the woods surrounding the field on all sides.

Regulus is fast. Very fast. Likely faster than most, and yet there are others that still manage to beat him there, which turns out to be a blessing in disguise. There's a loud splash of water, a scream, and then the cannon sounds again.

It's so unexpected, so abrupt, so *quick* that Regulus stumbles and falls to the ground before he ever reaches the water. Again: *BOOM!* People are screaming, and Regulus pushes up on his hands, breathing hard as he looks over to see Mulciber catching Avery by the chest to stop him from going into the river. Someone else—one Regulus doesn't know—isn't so lucky, and their momentum propels them into the water.

Immediately, pale hands break forth from the river to claw at them, yanking them down as they cry out. The scream cuts off, and it takes a minute, and then the cannon sounds again.

Three dead already.

Frantically, Regulus whips his head around, searching for James, trying to see, to make sure of the three, it wasn't—but James is there, scooping Vanity up with an arm right around her stomach, snatching her back and whirling her away right before she goes careening into the water. They stumble and fall, and then Vanity launches to her feet and starts sprinting to the right, towards the forest. James follows.

"There's something in there!"

"Don't touch the water! Don't fucking touch the water!"

"How do we reach the weapons, the supplies?!"

In that moment, the widespread panic feels almost—unifying. None of them are above it, and for just a second, the first instinct everyone has—even the death eaters—is to keep everyone from stepping into the water, panicking about how they're all going to survive if they can't reach what they need. It lasts only a moment, and then it's utter mayhem.

Fights break out, and people start to scatter. Regulus is among them. He's a target, and it won't take long before people start hunting him down, weapon or no weapon. He would prefer not to be beaten to death, thank you. So, he turns and runs as hard and as fast as he can into the forest. To the left.

He crashes through the foliage, struggling a bit on the terrain. It's uneven ground, littered with the branches and rocks and dry leaves. Trees blur all around him as he bobs and weaves, his mind utterly silent, heart racing and thighs burning as he pushes himself to run. Keep running. Always running away. Run, run, run. Don't stop, don't stop, don't—

Regulus darts around a tree and collides into someone so hard that he legitimately goes flying, as does whoever he hits. He lands on the ground with a thud, his breath knocked out of him, and he hears the grunt opposite of him. The sound spurs him to his feet, scrambling to get up, and he freezes as soon as he has.

Evan stands to full height, breathing hard, his gaze sharp as their eyes lock. For a moment, neither of them move, or speak.

And then, "Regulus."

"Evan," Regulus replies shortly, a level of caution in his tone. There's a rock in between them. Either of them could lunge for it at any time, and yet, neither of them do.

Regulus shouldn't hesitate, but he isn't going to kill someone who isn't trying to kill him. The problem is, he doesn't know if Evan will try or not. They're not—it's not like they ever agreed *not* to, like proper allies or something. A few conversations and one laugh hard-won isn't exactly a contract signed in blood.

"Some river, eh, lover boy?" Evan asks lightly, holding his gaze. Regulus tries not to grimace at the moniker. Lovely. If he dies being called *lover boy,* he's going to be *pissed.*

"You saw it, then," Regulus says slowly.

Evan nods. He takes a step back, carefully. "Oh, I saw it. Puts a bit of a strain on everyone getting what they need, doesn't it?"

"I'd say so."

"If you ask me, it doesn't make sense."

"What?" Regulus mutters, admittedly a little baffled that they're just—standing here, talking, not...doing anything.

"They wouldn't put all those prizes out there for us if there wasn't some way for us to get to them," Evan points out, and Regulus...can't really argue with him there. "I have an idea."

"An idea to...get to the supplies?" Regulus asks.

"Yes." Evan is silent for a beat, and then he takes another careful step back, like he's waiting to see what Regulus will do. Regulus doesn't do anything. "I have a proposition for you."

Regulus narrows his eyes. "Do you?"

"I think I know how to get to the supplies," Evan says, not reacting to his suspicion. "If you help, I'll help you get to them, too."

"And why would you do that?"

"I'm generous."

"For some reason, I find that hard to believe," Regulus retorts, and Evan breaks out into a grin. It's boyish, playful, but not faked. Regulus *still* doesn't trust it. "Why me?"

Evan waves a hand lazily, like they're old friends just having a lovely little chat. "Oh, because you're the first person I came across, honestly, and you're not actively trying to kill me."

"Yet," Regulus adds.

"Well, I have to work with what I can get," Evan drawls, shrugging a shoulder. "Looks like that's you, lover boy. So, if you're willing to make a truce, I'm willing to get a dagger in your hands. How does that sound?"

Regulus sits on that for a long second, thinking about it, and then he sets his shoulders. "What do I need to do?"

~•~

Vanity stumbles over her feet and hits the ground, weeping quietly, and James backtracks quickly to reach out and grab her hand. He holds onto it as he pulls her back to her feet, and they're both running again, her small hand held in his grip.

James isn't—he isn't thinking, really, just *reacting.* Vanity is so young. She's only fifteen, and she's scared. She nearly died; the river nearly took her. If not for him, she'd be dead right now.

Fabian's dead body keeps flashing in his mind.

James couldn't help him. He'd wanted to. He'd tried to, and he couldn't. *Fabian,* James thinks. *Fuck, I'm so sorry.*

There's a harsh tug on his hand, weight pulling him to a stop, nearly making him trip. He whirls around, and Vanity looks up at him through her tears and says, "James, please, I—I can't. My legs hurt. I can't breathe. I—"

"Okay. Okay, hey, let's just—" James takes a steadying breath, his own body sore from all the running. He's already thirsty. Squeezing Vanity's hand, he looks around warily. "I know you're tired. I know that, and I'm sorry, but we don't—we can't stay out in the open like this. We have to keep moving."

"I'm scared," Vanity whispers.

"I know," James whispers back. "Me too." Maybe that's not reassuring, or maybe it is, but either way, Vanity seems calmer now after the small break. "Listen, we'll find somewhere to go, somewhere to take a break, and then—"

And then? And then *what?* James' brain seems to stutter over what comes next, what he's meant to be doing, unable to think past the next few seconds unfurling before him. His mind is already too full, a litany of *Fabian, Regulus, Vanity, river of blood, Regulus, three dead already, run, hide, Regulus, Regulus, Regulus.*

"Water," Vanith says, drawing him out of his own head. She squeezes his hand. "We need to find a source of water, and I don't really think the murder river back there is a good idea. Just saying."

James blinks at her, then huffs out a startled laugh. "Er, right. No, that's—yeah, bad idea, you're right. Okay, we'll find somewhere, and then we'll work on finding water."

"That won't murder us," Vanity adds.

"Right, that," James agrees, lips curling up. "Ready to run?"

Vanity nods. "Yeah, I'm good now."

So, they run. They're not pushing as hard this time, and Vanity isn't stumbling anymore. Pushing deeper into the forest doesn't prove to be fruitful, not at first. To start with, it's just a lot of trees.

Eventually, when they're both breathing hard and have been running for a long time, they do come across something. It's another cave, but a much smaller one than the first that they saw back at the start. The cave is nestled at the bottom of a sharp, overhanging cliff; it's surrounded by animal tracks and various bushes, nearly obscured entirely.

Frankly, it's the safest thing James has seen so far. Vanity, too, if her small gasp of delight is anything to go by. They exchange a look, faces splitting into relieved smiles, and then they start moving right for it. They're quiet and careful, for which James is grateful when he sees shoe prints on the ground, like someone came barreling carelessly through and ran right into the cave. It's silent inside, and James doesn't know if they're going to get another opportunity like this.

Cautiously, James lets Vanity's hand go and raises both palms at her, silently telling her to stay put. Vanity crouches down, her face strained and lips pressed together tightly. James gives her one last reassuring look—he hopes—then eases inside.

He barely makes it a few careful steps inside before there's a garbled shriek and a fist colliding off-center with his jaw. Weight slams into him so he goes stumbling back from the dark of the cave and right back into the light, landing hard enough that the air is knocked from his lungs.

Instinctively, James lashes out, his hand hitting something that earns him a muffled yelp. He jerks his knee up, slamming his hands against the body holding him down, shoving it away. He scrambles to his feet in just enough time to hear Vanity give something of a war-cry as she proceeds to repeatedly hit the person with a stick. Not a very big stick, mind you, and it breaks literally after three hits. James sort of gawks at her in disbelief as she starts kicking the body on the ground, looking absolutely terrified, but doing it nonetheless.

The body on the ground is on its front, curled up, and James feels himself jerk in surprise as he realizes that it's...Peter?

"Peter?!" James blurts out, eyes bulging. "Wait! Wait, Vanity, wait! It's just Peter!"

Vanity freezes, breathing hard as she stares at him with wide eyes. On the ground, Peter groans and sort of just—flops over, face scrunched as he pushes himself to sit up.

"James," Peter breathes out, looking relieved. "For fuck's sake, you scared the piss out of me. I thought—I didn't know who you were. I didn't know it was you."

"I—yeah, I got that," James says with a deep exhale. He raises his hands at Vanity in a soothing gesture. "It's okay. It's Peter. He's a friend, I promise."

"Oh. Sorry," Vanity replies sheepishly, dropping the broken piece of her stick from her hand as she takes a step back.

Slowly, Peter pushes to his feet, taking a moment to brace his hands on his knees and just—breathe. His shoulders sag as he stands up. "I am...so glad to see you, James, you have no idea. Um, sorry for punching you. I just—panicked."

"It's alright," James assures him, reaching up to prod at his cheek. He cracks a weak grin. "Not so bad, Pete. Besides, I got you back, and Vanity…"

James raises his eyebrows at her. She crosses her arms, looking only slightly embarrassed, looking like any stubborn teenager in this predicament would. At the look, Peter chuckles, then winces as he cups his side.

"Yeah, she has a mean kick." Peter shakes his head and eases out a careful breath. "To be honest, as soon as I heard someone approaching, I was pretty sure I was about to die. I'm very

glad to not be dead. Fucking awful about the river, yeah?"

"Yeah," James agrees quietly.

"Seems to be a fatal flaw in the design," Peter grumbles. "Why have supplies and weapons if we can't even *get* to them?"

James shrugs, just as bewildered by it as him. "No idea. Maybe they didn't want us to be able to reach them immediately? Maybe the river will dry up?"

"Murder river," Vanity mumbles, frowning.

"Do you think?" Peter asks James, not hearing her.

"Only way we'll know is if we go back, and I strongly suggest against that," James says, and Peter instantly starts nodding.

"Yeah, I'll take this cave over the other one any day," Peter announces, gesturing to it. "Not much in there, honestly, and it's dark. *But* there's water run-off from the cliff. Just a small trickle on the walls. If we boil it, it should be safe." He glances between them hopefully. "Anyone thirsty?"

"Parched," James says with a small smile. Trust Peter to immediately offer them refuge. Safety in numbers and all that, and James suspects he doesn't want to be alone.

A cannon sounds, making them all jump as they look around. James' smile falls, and immediately, he thinks *Regulus.* His heart lurches, a creeping dread making his muscles tense. James needs to get to him, to make sure he's—

"Let's not stand out in the open," Peter mumbles warily, reaching out distractedly to usher Vanity towards the cave with the same mindless instinct to keep her safe that James has.

James takes a deep breath and follows.

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"You want me to *what?"*

Evan looks exasperated. He plants his hands on his hips and raises his eyebrows at Regulus, canting his head to the side a little bit. "You heard me. Come off it, lover boy. Don't pretend you can't climb; I've seen James, he's taller, and you're not going to tell me you're not climbing *him,* are you?"

Regulus takes it all back. He rues the day he ever showed an interest in being possible allies with Evan Rosier. Regulus scowls at him, but that only makes him smirk.

"First of all, climbing a person is entirely different from climbing a fucking *tree—"*

"How so?"

"Trees won't keep me from falling. *James* has arms."

"Ah, so you *have* climbed—"

"Rosier, if you want to keep your tongue, you might want to shut up."

"Well, you can't cut my tongue out without a dagger," Evan sing-songs, tossing the ridiculous amount of vines he's collected and rolled up from hand-to-hand. "So, if you *want* a dagger, I suggest you start climbing."

Regulus glances warily from Evan to look at the tree, more than a little uneasy. Climbing isn't exactly...Regulus' *thing.* He may have a tiny, small, *infinitesimal* fear of heights—which is very fucking sensible, honestly. People don't have the ability to fly for a *reason;* obviously they're meant to stay on the ground.

The tree that Evan has chosen is the one closest to the back of the cave in the field. It's large and unnervingly tall, and there's a few different branches that stretch out over the crimson river that three have already lost their lives to. Evan's plan to essentially climb the tree, swing over the river, and drop safely down to the other side isn't a bad one, all-in-all. Regulus just hates it with every fibre of his being.

"You first," Regulus mutters, shooting a shrewd look at Evan, who looks vaguely amused.

Evan chuckles and winds the vine around his chest, tucking it in and pulling it tight so it stays in place, leaving his hands free as he approaches the tree. He glances back at Regulus and winks at him. "Sure, if you like, but that means if you fall, I can't catch you on your way down. Don't go backing out on me now, lover boy. I need someone to distract everyone else so I can get away if the river suddenly lets people cross."

"Oh, so that's what I am. A high priority target. A distraction. Your personal lookout," Regulus grumbles, watching Evan stretch up to grab a branch on the tree and brace his foot on a knot that juts out, effortlessly hauling himself up. He starts climbing with ease, like he was born to do it.

"We all have things that makes us useful," Evan calls down without so much as a grunt, or any strain in his voice, the fucking prick. "Like me, I'm being very useful to you now. And you—well, there's no denying that between me and you, there are far more people who are out for your blood than mine. But, you know, if all goes well, it won't be a problem."

"Comforting, thanks," Regulus says dryly, approaching the base of the tree as Evan steadily gets higher.

Evan doesn't respond, so Regulus takes a deep breath and tries to do exactly as Evan did. It's not like the tree has perfect footholds or little ledges for him to cling to. Regulus struggles with the whole ordeal, huffing and puffing and shaking like a leaf that would much rather be safely on the forest floor. Briefly, he imagines Sirius laughing at him for getting himself into

this mess, then dashes the thought away. Sirius used to tease him about his little fear of heights, but this is…

Well, this is different. Regulus isn't climbing a tree back home and getting stuck, needing his brother to come up and coax him down with quiet teasing and gentle words. Regulus is climbing a tree with someone who essentially needs him because he'll be the first that other people will try to kill if things just so happen to go wrong. Regulus is climbing a tree to get to a weapon, so he can defend himself against the people who will try to kill him at some point, especially when they inevitably find their own ways across the crimson river. Maybe they're planning to build a fucking boat, who knows?

Yeah, Sirius wouldn't be laughing about this.

Evan, who Regulus is starting to hate a little bit, continues to climb higher—uncomfortably high, at this point. Regulus makes the very stupid mistake of pausing to catch his breath, automatically looking down and immediately feeling his stomach drop out from underneath him when he sees just how far the ground is beneath him.

"Oh, shit," Regulus chokes out, squeezing his eyes shut as he presses his forehead to the bark, his limbs shaking from the effort to hold himself up. If he were to fall now, he would be seriously injured; he'd break *something,* without a doubt, and maybe just fucking die. So, brilliant, that's just *brilliant.* He groans and tips his head up, heart sinking when he sees that Evan is still climbing, utterly calm about it. "Okay. Okay, just. Okay. Keep going, don't look down; keep going, don't look down; keep going, don't look down."

Sirius told him the same thing that day, when Regulus got stuck in the tree. It wasn't even a particularly large tree; Regulus was just a fucking baby about the whole thing. He couldn't help it. He didn't even know he was afraid until he was already up there, too scared to come down, and he remembers thinking—rather dramatically—that he'd just die up in that tree, until Sirius talked him down from it.

Regulus was seven. The mantra Sirius used shouldn't really work now, after all these years, but somehow it does. He keeps going, and he doesn't look down. If Sirius is watching, if this moment is being televised, does he realize what Regulus is doing? Does he even remember?

Eventually, after too long, Evan swings himself up on a thick branch, yet again with annoying grace that Regulus would very much like to smack him for. He scoots back and swings his legs, looking down at Regulus with a snort.

"Need some help?" Evan asks in amusement, leaning down to offer his hand. Regulus would have to climb a little higher to be able to reach it.

This is a pivotal moment, and Regulus knows that. If he takes Evan's hand, it's a sign of trust—a shaky sign, but a sign nonetheless. If he *doesn't,* it shows a complete lack of trust that could be detrimental later on. The problem is, if Regulus takes his hand, Evan could easily just—drop him. On purpose.

Regulus doesn't trust anyone. That's for the best, generally, but in this situation… Well.

Taking a deep breath, Regulus climbs higher until he's within reach, then stops to squint at Evan's hand. His whole body is shaking, and he feels like, at any moment, he's going to give out and fall. He genuinely isn't sure he'll be able to pull himself up onto the branch, not on his own. Still, it's a risk. A very big risk. Evan wiggles his fingers and raises his eyebrows.

Regulus gives him a sharp look of warning that essentially says *if you try anything, I'll take you down with me.* Evan just looks amused again, so Regulus huffs out a harsh breath and flings his hand up, his heart racing. Evan surges down to grab it, clamping down tight and helping haul him up with a grunt. Regulus scrambles against the bark and throws his leg over the branch, his breath punching out of him once he's seated.

Stupidly, Regulus peeks down at the ground and nearly vomits, his head spinning as a weak noise slips out of his mouth. It's a weakness he would be ashamed of if he didn't feel like he was about to faint. Oh, that's high. They're so high up. Fuck.

"Ah," Evan says, strained, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't break all the bones in my hand, thanks."

Mortified, Regulus snatches his hand back from Evan's, choosing instead to place his hands on the branch between his thighs for some sort of stability. Evan flexes his hand with a slight

grimace, then snorts quietly and shakes his head.

"How are you so comfortable up here?" Regulus grits out.

"I've been climbing trees my whole life," Evan says simply, still swinging his legs like he's having fun. Oh, he's mental.

"Why?" Regulus asks in disbelief.

Evan shrugs lazily. "No one ever thinks to look up."

Regulus doesn't really have anything to say to that. He sort of gets what Evan means, even if climbing trees was never his method for hiding. He had his own methods—he's a Trojan Horse—but he knows that's what Evan is saying, basically. No one thinks to look up; if Evan's up, no one sees him. Yeah, Regulus gets that.

"Come on, we need to get as far out on the branch as we can, so we can swing across," Evan tells him, then proceeds to brace his hands on the trunk and just haul himself up, as agile as a cat, balancing on his toes as he goes to stand.

"Evan. *Evan,"* Regulus blurts out in distress, snapping his hands out frantically to grasp Evan by the front of his coat and tug him right back down. The branch shakes with the motion, which makes a whimper fall out of Regulus' mouth, but Evan just drops back down with ease, legs spreading and swinging yet again. "No. Just—no. Absolutely not."

"Regulus," Evan says, stifling a laugh.

"No," Regulus hisses.

"Well, how exactly do you expect us to get farther out?"

"Not by *walking,* you fucking lunatic. Can't we just—scoot?"

"Scoot," Evan echoes, mouth twitching into a grin.

Regulus glares at him. "I will push you out of this tree."

"You'd lose your balance and fall just trying. You're so shaky, poor lamb," Evan coos at him, utterly unperturbed by the threat. He shakes his head. "Alright, lover boy, we'll scoot. It'll be slower, but...sure."

"It's not as if we're in a rush," Regulus grumbles, watching with a frown as Evan starts scooting back along the branch, using his hands to briefly lift himself up and re-seat himself a few inches away. He glances behind himself as he does it, and the branch shakes a little each time.

"No, maybe not, but the sun is already starting to go down. I'd like to make it over there sometime before it's dark. This will be harder to do without some light, at least."

"You're making exceptional progress. Should you be going so fast? What if—I mean, can't the branch break?"

Evan rolls his eyes. "The branch is solid. It's almost as thick as the tree itself. I promise it's fine. Well, all branches eventually break, and it'll get thinner the farther we go, so we'll have to be careful. Just—come on."

"If this is how I die, I'm going to be *furious,"* Regulus mutters in complaint, but he dutifully starts...scooting. He does it with a lot less finesse than Evan, but he does do it.

"There's four already dead," Evan comments. "Three to the river. What do you think happened to the fourth?"

"No idea," Regulus says quietly, releasing a deep breath. He's trying not to think about it, because he doesn't want to think about the possibility that it's James.

"Worried about your boyfriend, lover boy?"

"You're lucky I can't reach you right now."

Evan laughs.

They're quiet as they get farther out, focusing on making their way across the branch. Admittedly, Regulus is a little grateful that Evan is indulging him. He surely didn't expect that he would have to metaphorically hold Regulus' hand through this whole process, and he could be a lot crueler than he has been. Honestly, he hasn't been cruel at all.

Eventually, they get far enough out to see the crimson river and cave. They both stop when they see the death eaters still at the front. It's just them now, and some of them are sitting, while others are walking as they gesture to the river. Clearly, they're trying to find their way across. It's not so easy to go hunting for people without weapons to kill them. Not impossible, sure, but they obviously have their objective.

Everyone else—well, Regulus assumes they all ran when the fighting broke out. Chances are, the death eaters managed to kill at least one, while the others made their escape. There's no body, but bodies are collected to be sent home—if there are bodies left to collect. Regulus reminds himself that James got away. He *saw* James get away, so he's probably fine.

Evan and Regulus exchange a look after both staring at the death eaters in the distance. Neither of them say anything, unwilling to draw attention to themselves. Like Evan said, no one thinks to look up, so they're as stealthy as they're going to get at the moment. Remaining undetected is the goal.

In silence—and a lot more carefully now—they continue to scoot along the branch. It does get noticeably thinner, shaking more and dipping a little under their combined weight. Evan

glances down to measure how far the river is. It's wide, and even with them positioned right over it, they still need to go farther out. He grimaces and looks up, making a face that quite clearly states how unhappy about this he is, but he still waves his hand to indicate that they have to keep scooting.

Regulus *really* doesn't want to keep scooting, but he's already here, so he has to see it through at this point. The branch dips further, swaying with a harsh creak, and they both freeze. Evan takes a deep breath and cranes his head down, then glances back at the rest of the branch behind him.

"We can't go further," Evan whispers. "The branch will break."

"Can we make it across?" Regulus whispers back.

Evan chews on his lip for a moment, then squints down at the crimson river below them. "We'll have to swing wide, which means we'll have to go lower down on the vine. It's—it'll be risky, and we'll need to be quick, or our friends over there will notice. And—um, it'll probably be uncomfortably close."

"None of that was good information, Evan," Regulus hisses.

"Well, I'm not sure what you want me to do, Regulus," Evan hisses back, waving his hands around jerkily. "Our options are fairly limited. We're already here, so we may as well. Either we die, or we don't."

"I vote we *don't."*

"Yes, me too, so just—listen to me, would you?"

Regulus clenches his jaw. *"Fine."*

"The vine will hold you, and you'll need momentum to get across," Evan explains, his voice low as he starts unwinding the vine around his chest. It's actually a few different vines that he twined together, winding them around each other to make them more structurally sound—or so he said. It makes sense, so Regulus believes him. "You'll want to get as far down as you can, almost until you're about six feet above the water. There should be about this much vine left below you."

Evan demonstrates by holding the vine out from one hand to the other, his arms outstretched to his full wingspan, which isn't very much vine compared to all that's left over.

"Hate that," Regulus admits.

"Yeah, I'm not a fan either," Evan agrees with a frown. He sighs and stoops down to start tying off the vine in between them. "Swinging is simple. You hold on and rock your body. You'll need to let your legs hang so you can use them for direction, or else you'll just swing all over. Do *not* let go of the vine until you've cleared the other side of the river and you're sure you'll propel yourself over. You'll want some air."

"Don't like *that* either," Regulus mumbles.

Evan grins at him. "Today's the day you fly, lover boy."

"You first."

"Sorry, it has to be you first, I'm afraid."

Regulus rears back. "I think the fuck *not.* Evan—"

"It can't be me," Evan says with a heavy sigh. "Whoever goes last has to keep a hold of the vine when they make it over, and I don't think you have as much experience as I do to be able to manage it. It's better for you to let go, or else you might swing back into the river. I've spent days—and years before the training room—doing things like this. You haven't."

"I'm not doing that," Regulus informs him bluntly. He doesn't care if that makes him stubborn. "I don't—I'm just not. I won't know how to do it if I don't see you do it first."

Evan runs his tongue over his teeth, eyes narrowed, and then he leans forward, lowering his voice. "Regulus, we *need* this vine to make it back over, do you understand? You need to trust yourself, and you need to trust *me.* I'm already trusting you by *letting* you go over first, because you could easily get a weapon and kill me the moment I touch down. Now, trust doesn't come easily to me—and obviously not you—but we need some level of trust between us to do this."

Regulus stares at him for a long moment, hands gripping the branch tighter. Evan holds his gaze steadily, without wavering, and Regulus tries to ignore the truth in Evan's words. It does make sense, unfortunately, because he understands what Evan is saying. A part of Regulus wants to refuse anyway; a part of him wants to just abandon this entire plan, all because he doesn't know how to work well with others.

That's the thing, though. Sirius told him that, at some point, he would eventually find himself in situations where he'll have to rely on other people to survive. The arena is a lot like life in that way, just more condensed, and a lot more brutal about it. Regulus—if he's going to survive—needs to learn to play well with others. He just didn't expect it to happen so soon, and really, these are less than ideal circumstances. It's so easy to die here. One mistake, and that's it.

You only do what you're willing to do. In there, you have to be willing to do more than you ever have, or you'll die, Sirius had told him. Fuck, Regulus hates when he's right.

Exhaling slowly, Regulus nods. "Talk me through it."

Evan does. He tells Regulus exactly what he has to do, not skipping over any detail, murmuring to him as he ties off the vine and secures it. And then, all there's left to do is—do it.

So, despite every instinct screaming at him not to, Regulus does it. He scoots forward to reach down and grab onto the vine, keeping a firm grip as he hooks one leg around it, then

tries to convince himself to swing the other one over. He needs a second, because his body protests it, rejecting *any* possibility of falling. Then, there's a hand hooking under his knee, and Evan gently helps him down, keeping him from swaying so much. He leans down as far as he can go, then lets Regulus' leg go, leaving Regulus to hold himself up in open air.

Regulus does *not* like this. His entire body clings to the vine, and his arms are still sore from climbing the tree. Evan nods down at him, murmuring to him, encouraging him to work his way down. Not too fast, and no sliding, or his palms might sting enough to make him instinctively let go.

Yeah, that's not possible. Regulus isn't sure there's a force in this world powerful enough to make him let go of this vine right now. It's actually a struggle to lower himself down, because his body would much prefer to cling to the vine and never move. His limbs tremble, but he goes down anyway.

Hanging into open air over a river that will kill him if he falls into it—well, he's not having a good time, to say the least. As he gets lower, Regulus can see where the vine stops, only just a few feet above the water, which isn't comforting *at all.*

When Regulus reaches where he thinks he's meant to go, he just hangs there for a moment, breathing hard. His legs are still wrapped around the vine, and it's a battle to convince them to let go, using only his arms to hold himself up. They're starting to go numb, even as they ache and burn. It's very, *very* unpleasant, and he still has to fucking swing.

Well, he's here now. He can't just *stay* here, and the ground is within reach; all has to do is get to it. So, with a grunt, he starts rocking his body. It takes him a bit to build up momentum, and he keeps his legs together like Evan told him to, which does keep him mostly going in one direction. The branch creaks and groans above him, but he forces himself to ignore it. He can only worry about so much at one time.

Regulus does build momentum, though, with effort. He can hear himself panting, and his hands are sweaty, which is very fucking terrifying since they're the one thing keeping him from plunging to his death right now, but—no, he's fine. He's actually—he has this. He can tell that he does, because he's starting to see across the crimson river, the ground on the other side like a beacon of hope.

He swings back over and over, sailing forward, then does it once more when he's sure that he's arcing up over the other side. On the next pass, Regulus feels his stomach swoop, and he huffs out a soft, startled breath as he lets go right at the peak—just like Evan told him to. He does, in fact, get air.

For a moment, Regulus is flying.

Well, it feels more like floating, honestly, and then gravity reminds him who's in charge by promptly tugging him towards the ground. Regulus somehow manages to not scream as he falls, but he can't stop himself from groaning as he hits the ground. Evan had advised the loose tuck and roll method, but Regulus doesn't quite manage it. He rolls, alright, but he does it with absolutely no grace whatsoever.

When Regulus stops, he just splays out on the ground, chest heaving as he stares listlessly up at Evan. He's so far up, and he's leaning down to reel the vine up to stop it from swinging too much. The movement might draw the attention they don't want. Regulus' whole body is sore, but he is, mercifully, on the ground. Safely. Not dead. Or hurt. Well, not *too* hurt, anyway.

"Fuck," Regulus whispers, closing his eyes, and then he releases a quiet, muffled, possibly hysterical laugh.

Regulus doesn't move, just staying where he is, recovering as the rush of adrenaline dulls. He does watch as Evan makes his way down (much faster and with more grace than Regulus, the bastard), doing basically the same exact thing that Regulus did.

As Evan is swinging, Regulus pushes himself up with a grimace, his body not at all pleased with him, *especially* his arms. Still, he eases to his feet, though he stays crouched. They're around the bend of the cave, so the death eaters are out of sight for now, but it's better not to be too loud or move too much. So far, no one knows they're here, and Regulus would very much like to keep it that way.

Regulus could, theoretically, rush to the cave to get a weapon to kill Evan with, but he won't. Evan has to trust that he won't, just as Regulus had to trust him on making it over here. He stays where he is, watching with a scowl as Evan swings himself over, letting his grip on the vine go slack, but keeping it in his hand with his arm stretched out as he sails down. He hits the ground *dangerously* close to the river, but he stumbles back with the vine still in his grip.

Evan gets his balance, pushing up on his knees with a grunt, then rolling to his feet. He pulls out the stick he'd shoved into his boot and stomps it into the ground, making sure it's secure before tying the vine to it so it won't swing away.

Regulus doesn't even want to think about the fact that they're going to have to swing back across the river soon enough. That's a problem for future Regulus. Present Regulus is about five seconds from getting his hands on a dagger, preferably more than one, so that's what he focuses on.

"See?" Evan whispers as he comes slinking over, a grin on his face. He claps Regulus on the shoulder. "Trust."

"I'm never trusting you again. That was awful," Regulus hisses, glaring at him.

Evan chuckles. "Sure, lover boy, whatever you say."

"Come on," Regulus mutters, turning to face the cave.

Getting into the cave won't exactly be easy. The cave itself has one entrance, and the back of it arcs down like a hill, closed off where it meets the ground. Their only option is to go inside from the front, which is where the death eaters are. Yes, they're separated by the river, but if they can sneak in without alerting them, that would be great.

It's getting closer to evening now, so they're not in broad daylight doing this, thankfully. Regulus can't help but notice the drop in temperature as the sun fades faster and faster.

In silence, Regulus and Evan share a look before moving over to crouch down beside the cave, moving slowly along the side. The outside of the cave is cold to the touch, like ice. It sends a shiver down Regulus' spine, and he makes sure not to touch it. He's in the front, so he holds out his hand to halt Evan behind him as they reach the side of the entrance.

Regulus peeks around carefully, peering at where the death eaters are. There's seven of them, so none of them have died yet, or were one of the ones to go into the river. Muliciber sits with Avery tucked up under his arm. Quinn, Hodge, and Axus are also sitting, and they're facing Mulciber and Avery. Willa is fully just lying down, looking to be lazily playing with her hair in her face. Bernice is the only one up, and she's moving along the side of the river like she's waiting for some sort of miracle to get her across.

If Regulus had to guess, they've circled the entire river that wraps around the cave, so they know there's no bridge or clear path to get to the other side. Regulus can't hear them, but he's sure that they're all trying to think up some way to get to the weapons. Bernice is thankfully walking along the river in the opposite direction from Regulus and Evan, but Regulus can't be sure that she won't turn around.

If they're going to go, they need to go *now.*

Frantically, Regulus waves his hand at Evan, then stays low to the ground as he whips around the mouth of the cave, hugging the wall even though it feels like ice. He pushes in as fast as he dares, going further where it's dark and ducking behind the rack of swords for cover. Evan joins him in seconds.

They stay still and silent, holding their breath, but there's no change in the distant sound of voices. No shouts. No threats. Nothing. Regulus exhales quietly and looks over at Evan, who is grinning right at him in pure relief. Helplessly, Regulus feels his mouth tug up at the corners.

Unbelievably, they've done it.

There's still much more to do, but they've made it, and that small victory makes it all worth it.

Inside the cave, there's no supplies. It's all weapons, which means that anything else useful will be outside attached to the poles placed sporadically around the cave. All things they could really need; flashlights, emergency blankets, matches or fire-starting kits, canisters to collect water, and no doubt some sort of nutrition. Having weapons is good, yes, but there's more to the arena than just fighting for your life. There's also fighting to *survive.*

Regulus is already thirsty, and after everything that he's done to get here, he's tired and hungry, too. It's getting colder by the minute. They're going to have to risk getting supplies, which is going to be hard, since the bags are mostly out in the open.

But first—weapons.

Behind them is a table with various weapons on it, and yes, there are daggers. Three of them, to be exact, and there's a thigh holster for each leg that will hold at least two. Regulus goes right for them, instantly feeling better as soon as he has one in his hand. He straps the two holsters onto his thighs, sliding the daggers in place, but keeps the third in hand.

When Regulus looks up, Evan is holding up the hook with the rope attached to it, lips pursed. That's for Axus, no doubt, and keeping it out of their hands is a good idea, because they're fucking deadly with it. Regulus inclines his head towards it in silent encouragement. Evan likes rope, right?

Shrugging, Evan hooks the hook on his shoulder and winds the rope under his armpit, holding it in place as he finds a tactical knife, multipurpose enough for all uses, including stabbing people. He claims that for himself, too.

Regulus slips his hand up and reaches out for the hatchet on the table, holding it carefully as he bites his lip. He really shouldn't. It's not as if they can just take every weapon, seeing as they only have two hands between them, and they don't have a bag and their pockets aren't big enough to hold them. Still, Regulus can't stop himself from stuffing the handle in the front of his coat, letting the sharp edge hang over the zipper.

When Regulus glances up, Evan mouths *lover boy.* Regulus swats him on the arm, which makes Evan grin at him.

"We need supplies," Regulus breathes out.

"The farthest pole had two bags," Evan mumbles, not daring to raise his voice. He's shaking a little, likely from the cold. "It's far enough away from our friends that, if we're very careful and very sneaky, we should be able to get them and get away without anyone even knowing we were here."

Well, they've made it this far.

With a nod shared between them, they start making their way back out of the cave, now with weapons that they have, world of wonders, *not* turned on each other. Hm. Trust, indeed.

They stay pressed up against the wall of the cave, which makes Regulus start shaking, but he ignores it because his teeth aren't chattering yet. Peering out of the cave shows that the death eaters haven't moved. By some stroke of luck, Bernice has joined the others, and they're all huddled close together. Regulus *thinks* one of them is trying to start a fire.

Again, if they're getting those supplies, they need to do it now, while the death eaters are distracted. Evan leans around to point out the pole he was talking about, and it is farthest from the others, nearly around the side of the cave. It's mostly out of view, and it's not even that far from the vine they tied off.

Regulus nods, and then they go.

They stay low, but they move quickly and quietly. Regulus almost doesn't dare to breathe, and despite how cold it's getting, he's sort of thankful that it's getting darker. Makes it less obvious what they're doing, for one thing.

In the distance, Mulciber lets out a shout that has both Regulus and Evan hitting the ground and lying flat. It turns out to be loud cheering, because it seems someone has indeed gotten a fire started. Cautiously, Evan and Regulus pick themselves back up and keep going.

Regulus' heart is thundering by the time they make it to the pole, and neither of them waste time as they snatch the bags off their hooks. They grab one each without any fuss and immediately continue on, heading right for the vine.

As they move, Regulus stuffs the hatchet in the bag, then copies Evan in looping his arms through the straps so it rests between his shoulders. He really should put his dagger in it in preparation for going across the river, the way Evan has, but Regulus wants to keep a hold of it. He'll just put the handle between his teeth when he swings over.

"Alright, this needs to be quick," Evan whispers as he unravels the vine. "We're not climbing back up, just swinging over and making right for the forest. We have to get a running head start and jump up, keep our legs up, and jump to the other side. I'd like to go back to the tree and pull the vine up so they don't see it and think to use it, but priority is getting across. Watch me, alright? I'll swing the vine back over to you and wait on the other side, so be ready."

"Why do you get to go first?" Regulus mutters.

Evan looks exasperated. "For fuck's sake, Regulus, just *trust me,* would you? We need to get this done as quickly as possible and this isn't just climbing down. You need to see it. Now, pay attention and *be ready."*

Regulus huffs, but he ultimately gives in, mostly because things are moving fast and Evan isn't giving him much of a choice, but maybe a little bit because of trust, too.

Staying low, Regulus remains off to the side, watching how Evan winds the vine between both arms and reaches as high as he can go as he backs up. With a running start, he heads right for the river, only to kick off the ground at the last second and curl his legs up as he sails across.

It's fine, at first. Regulus can see that he's going to make it. And then, with no warning whatsoever, there's a very loud *crack,* and the branch gives way as Evan arcs up over the side. He curses, his body flailing through the air, and he lets go almost desperately as the branch comes falling down. Evan only *just* makes it to the other side as the branch hits the water with a deafening splash. Pale hands break through the surface to drag the broken branch under, taking the vine with it.

"What the fuck was that?!"

"Did you hear that?!"

"Who's there? Oi, I think someone's over there!"

Evan scrambles to his feet on the opposite side of the river, looking utterly stricken as he meets Regulus' eyes.

Regulus, who's trapped on the other side.

The death eaters can be heard rushing closer, and still, Evan doesn't move. He just stands there, visibly horrified by what's just happened, and he chokes out, "Regulus, I—I didn't—"

I should have gone first, Regulus thinks, even though he *knows* that, if he did, he would have died. He wouldn't have had the skills that Evan just used to make it across. And there Evan is, frozen in place, his eyes wide and locked with Regulus'. He still isn't moving, even with the others getting closer.

"Evan, you need to go," Regulus hisses. "Go *now."*

"But—"

"Go!"

Evan stumbles back, breathing hard, and there are loud calls of, "It's Rosier! Get him! Get —"

That's all Evan apparently needs to hear before he's whipping around and tearing across the field towards the forest as fast as he can go. Two of the death eaters—Willa and Axus—go

after him, but Mulciber and the others don't. No, instead, they come to a halt across from Regulus as soon as they see him.

"Well, would you look at that?" Mulciber says with a loud, malicious laugh. "Now, Black, how did you get over there?"

Regulus' eyes slip shut.

Well, fuck.

Chapter End Notes

let me go ahead and get this out of the way now: yes, we will see sirius (and remus) while the games are taking place, i promise. just not every chapter. we get them in the next chapter, though <3

right, so, we have a title reference!!! the crimson river. fun fact, i actually had this arena pictured before i ever started writing this story. i did tell you that this fic would be different from the original story in a lot of ways, and that includes what takes place in the arena. there are some similarities, but overall, it is VERY different, and i have written it in a way that a lot of you won't be able to guess what happens next. i do love hearing your theories, though, so let me know your thoughts!!!

ahhh, we got evan!!! and then we immediately lost him again at the end 😭😭😭 evan, babe, come back, you were so funny. lmaoooo him having to work with regulus "i have trust issues" black is so funny to me. he really just got stuck with one of the most suspicious, grumpy bastards in the arena, and now he's on the run. regulus and evan were SO CLOSE. they would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for the gamemakers breaking the branch. tsk.

then there's james, vanity, and peter. vanity really is the only one with a braincell between the three of them lmaooo. she's just like: hey, first priority is water, remember? and james is like: oh, right, thanks. i totally forgot that life-saving information. LEAVE HIM ALONE HE'S BEEN THROUGH A LOT 😭😭😭 not peter decking james in his face, he really just started swinging first and asking questions second. vanity fully just beating the shit out of him—or trying to—is so funny to me. listen, they're all frazzled and on edge, okay? give them a break.

and then you've got the fact that regulus is now stranded on the other side of the crimson river. how do you think that's going to go for him? at least he's safe, right? 👀

anyways, that's all for now.

current remaining alive in the arena as of this chapter: 20
those that have died as of this chapter: 4, all unknown

Ice

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to torture (bluntly stated, but not described in detail)
-references to child abuse (physical and emotional; Walburga and Orion's A+ parenting again)
-references to addiction (drugs and drinking)
-references to the death of children (happens off-screen and not described, you might blink and miss it)
-child endangerment (due to the arena and those inside it)
-references to past violence (not explicitly described)
-references to past murder (explicitly described)
-explicit description of murder in current time (due to the arena)
-explicit descriptions of blood and violence

yes, i will be putting a brief summary in the end notes of who kills and who dies in this chapter for those of you who want/need to be prepared/spoiled, which is perfectly valid!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's starting to get really cold," Peter whispers, hunched over on himself in the middle of the cave, by the small, crackling fire with his arms wrapped around his center as he presses himself forward into his bent legs.

James exhales shakily and sees his breath lightly fog out in front of him. As the evening starts inching towards night, it's growing so cold that it's a legitimate concern. Next to him, Vanity is rattling so hard that her teeth are chattering, and she's practically touching the fire with how close to it she is.

"Y-You know," Vanity says through her shivers, "my m-mentor said th-that f-freezing is the l-leading cause of d-d-death in the ar-re-rena. So, it's n-not looking good f-for us."

"Oh, ye of little faith," James mumbles, his fingers numb to the point they're prickling. "Get over here, Peter."

Like it pains him, Peter shuffles over with a shudder, nodding when James gestures for him to sit down on the other side of Vanity to box her in between their bodies. They all scoot closer to the fire simultaneously without even talking about it, holding their hands out to leech off the heat. Vanity presses tight to their sides, still shivering violently.

"J-James," Vanity wheezes, "if th-the temper-er-erature drops even m-more, then it's n-not looking g-good f-for *me."*

"Hey, we'll keep you warm, alright?" James says softly, nudging her shoulder with his own. "Me and Pete. And we'll keep the fire going all night, yeah? Promise. Maybe freezing is the leading cause of death, but...not for you, okay? Your mentor was just trying to prepare you, is all."

Vanity gives a tight, jerky nod. "S-She was really kind t-to me and Ho-Hodge. Gave u-us r-really good adv-vi-vice."

"Wait, Hodge?" Peter asks curiously. "He was the other one reaped with you?"

"M-Mhm," Vanity hums.

"Who's your mentor?" Peter murmurs.

"M-Marlene McK-Kin-Kinnon," Vanity stutters out.

James blinks in surprise. Sirius had, of course, been very forthcoming about everything he knew and learned about his fellow mentors, as well as their tributes, but in some cases, there wasn't very much to tell. Some mentors are tight-lipped about these things, especially if they know what's good for them, or so Sirius said, because letting the wrong information slip to the wrong person could be the cause of their tributes dying. Sirius did mention Marlene, though, but he had very little to say other than the fact that she had two young tributes this year, who would—more likely than not—die very quickly.

"Yeah, Marlene McKinnon," James comments gently, watching the small, fond smile flicker on Vanity's face. There's admiration there, and it makes James' heart clench. "Sirius talked about her a bit to us—he's my mentor. Well, he's my best friend, but also my mentor, technically."

"I kn-know," Vanity says, sounding exasperated as she rolls her eyes, despite her shivering. *"E-Ever-ry-ryone* knows."

James huffs a weak laugh, leaning over into her a little harder, grateful when Peter does the same. They're practically squishing her between them at this point, fighting valiantly to make her warmer. "Right. Well, Sirius told us how amazing she was, you know. And they're friends, he said. You know what that means, don't you?"

"W-What?" Vanity asks, looking up at him.

"That means it only makes sense that we're friends, too," James tells her with a gentle curl of his lips.

At this, Vanity cracks a beaming smile, even while her teeth chatter. She turns and presses her grin into Peter's shoulder, stuttering out a laugh, and Peter laughs along with her.

The night carries on, growing colder with each passing minute, to the point that they're all shivering violently and Vanity has nearly stopped—which, James knows, is actually a very bad sign. She's fallen asleep, and that makes him anxious, but he keeps stoking the fire and rubbing one of her hands between both palms while Peter does the same to the other.

At some point, Peter rasps, "James…"

"Yeah?" James asks, looking over at him. Peter has a pained look on his face, and he drops his gaze down to Vanity before carefully glancing up again. James instantly shakes his head, refusing before Peter even says it. "No. *No,* Peter. She's—I know it doesn't look good, but she—she'll—"

"James," Peter says more insistently, looking heartbroken.

"She's making it to morning," James snaps, his voice firm, and he rubs her hand harder. It feels like ice between his palms.

Peter opens and closes his mouth, face twisting, and then he looks away without saying a word. He shakily adds another twig to the fire, eyebrows furrowed in the orange glow that bathes over his features and dance on the cave walls. James looks down at Vanity, his chest cramped with concern.

At that moment, a cannon goes off, making James jolt and go tense all over. The first thing he thinks is, immediately, *Regulus?* Then, following that, he flings a hand up to cup the side of Vanity's neck to try and see if she has a pulse. She's still shivering, just not as much, and her breath hits his arm. It's worryingly slow, but it's there.

"Is she—" Peter can't seem to finish.

"Yeah, she's—she's alive. She's going to live," James says with a deep exhale, dragging his gaze back up to Peter's as he drops his hand to go back to warming Vanity's stiff fingers again.

"Five," Peter breathes out, turning his head to look over at the mouth of the cave. "Who do you think…?"

"I don't know," James croaks, utterly fretful, his stomach cramping as his fear and anxiety spikes. *Not him. Please not him.* He swallows harshly. "I really don't know."

~•~

Regulus stares up at the sky, though his vision is repeatedly obscured by his every exhale, a billow of white smoke that drifts up every time his breath leaves his numb lips. He's shivering all over, so cold that he's aching.

The sky is littered with stars. It feels like being mocked. There are no constellations that he recognizes, as if the sky was designed without them, just nameless stars hanging like props in the sky. Not real. Even still, Regulus stares up at the brightest one and imagines it's Sirius anyway.

The cave—which feels literally like a fucking glacier—isn't exactly the best place to be right now, honestly, but he doesn't have much of a choice. He's lying back on the curve of the top, on the roof, above the midpoint inside the cave.

His bag fortunately came with an emergency blanket, which is probably his only saving grace at the moment. He's wrapped up in it, trapping the minimal heat he's capable of inside with him. It's possibly the one thing standing between him and death right now. There's a variety of death surrounding him at all sides, which isn't just him being dramatic.

"Come on, Black, no point in hiding!"

Case in point: that.

Regulus would scoff if he could, but he's genuinely too cold to manage it. He doesn't even bother to turn his head, already knowing what he'll see. Mulciber, Avery, Bernice, Hodge, and Quinn are exactly where he saw them last, standing on the other side of the river with rocks in hand, a large fire burning to keep them all warm. Willa and Axus haven't returned yet, and the most recent cannon—the fifth dead—rings in his ears. He hopes it wasn't Evan. He refuses to think it was James.

The death eaters, upon discovering him across the crimson river, had immediately begun heckling him. It didn't take them very long to start pelting him with rocks, chasing him around to no end. Going inside the cave didn't work, because Bernice and Avery have freakishly good aim; the only thing that kept him from being stoned to death was scrambling up the cave where they couldn't get the proper angle to hit him.

That doesn't mean they haven't stopped heckling him, though. There were a few breaks in between, of course—pausing long enough to start a fire when the temperature dropped (and continues to drop), for example—but they always resumed. It's been everything from taunting him, to threatening him, to trying to bait him into coming back down. At one point, Mulciber even dared him to throw one of his daggers, try to get a shot in, but Regulus knows better than that. He's not putting a weapon in their hands, not for anything.

It crossed his mind, of course, to just toss all the weapons and supplies into the river so no one could get to them, but he's wary to do it for multiple reasons. He doesn't know how his time in the arena will go, and this is only the first day, so he'll be quite furious with himself if he needs something in the future and can't get it because he already tossed it. Furthermore, the gamemakers surely won't like it, and he's not willing to give them more reasons to target him than he already has. On top of that, throwing everything away into the river would only be possible if the others aren't around to throw rocks at him. He's still considering it, if the death eaters fall asleep, but even still...he thinks he'd have to be in a very bad emotional state and completely desperate before he just tossed away supplies and weapons that could be useful in the future.

Avery—the idiot—had tried to recruit him. Said they'd spare his life if he'd provide them with weapons and supplies. Just throw it over to them. Regulus had told them to fuck off, just like James, but he *definitely* wasn't polite about it.

At first, Regulus had mocked them back. Taunted them. Did everything he could to rile them up and infuriate them, which was probably stupid, but it's not like they could get to him, and honestly? He'd sort of childishly relished in it. But, as more time passed, Regulus fell silent and stopped engaging, and now he's far too cold to speak.

Technically, Regulus has the advantage. He has all the weapons and supplies at his fingertips. That doesn't mean shit, though, when he can't make a retreat, or even access any of the weapons or supplies without rocks being thrown at him. He dodged and outran most, but a few clipped him, so he'll no doubt have various bruises blooming by tomorrow.

Yet, the threat of the death eaters seems so inconsequential compared to that of the elements. Regulus is genuinely worried that he's going to freeze to death by morning. It's so cold out now that he thinks a *lot* of the smaller people are going to freeze to death, frankly. Maybe someone already has. There's a fifth person dead. Who or how remains to be seen.

It doesn't help that Regulus can't start a fire on the cave. He has matches, but nothing to keep the fire going. So, here he is, shaking like a leaf and scowling up at the sky. If he dies like this, he's going to fucking *riot.*

"Hey! Hey, do you see this? The river is frozen over!" Avery abruptly shouts, and Regulus freezes. Well, he freezes as much as he can when he's shivering so violently.

"Do you think—"

"You try it."

"Get fucked. *You* try it."

Regulus scrambles up frantically, rolling up his blanket to shove into his bag as he flips over. He's still very cold and stiff, but the way adrenaline floods his nervous system and how his blood starts to pump really spurs him into action. He crawls further up the cave, staying low, dagger in hand.

He reaches the peak just in time to see Mulciber grab Hodge by the arm and shove him towards the river, snapping, "Well? Go on, then. See if it holds."

Hodge stares hesitantly at the river, his arms wrapping around himself, and Regulus tips his head down to examine it as well. It's still a vivid red, even in the dark, but a thick film of ice is layered over the top, almost making it look pink underneath. Slowly, looking utterly terrified, Hodge shuffles towards the edge of the river. He doesn't move for a long moment, and Bernice steps forward to shove him in the back of the shoulder roughly, spurring him into motion.

Regulus tenses when Hodge reaches the river and slowly, oh so slowly, pokes his foot out to press the very tip of his shoe against the ice. Immediately, pale hands smack up against the bottom, making Hodge yelp and stumble back, but the hands don't break through the surface. They just rest in place for a moment, then retreat again, disappearing into the depths.

"Oh, yeah, that's how we get across," Avery declares, a feral grin spreading across his face. Regulus sees his body tense, his foot pressing into the ground, and then he starts running, carelessly sprinting right onto the ice and ignoring the hands that bang up against the ice beneath him.

Alright, Regulus has seen enough.

Surging around, Regulus launches to his feet and takes off running, nearly tripping down the decline of the cave as it slopes down to solid ground. He manages to keep his balance and uses the stumble to give him further momentum, throwing himself forward with everything he has in him.

"He's running!"

"Weapons, weapons, get the weapons first, for fuck's sake!" Mulciber roars. "Avery! *Avery,* you fucking—"

Regulus doesn't look back or let himself hesitate as he darts onto the iced-over river, hearing the hands that pound beneath his feet, trying to get to him, and not stopping for a second. With his bag on his back and his daggers close, Regulus skids across the ice until he makes it to solid ground on the other side, and then he goes barreling right into the forest.

Someone—Avery, no doubt—doesn't stop to get weapons and, instead, continues to give chase, not letting up or slowing down. Regulus makes it into the forest and goes crashing further inside, barely able to see where he's going, but he hasn't been beside a warm fire for the last few hours. He hasn't had any water (to be fair, neither have the death eaters), and he also hasn't been lazing about all day. Despite being so fast, how cold he is and his exhaustion are serious issues, those that mean Avery manages to catch up to him.

Regulus knows when he's close. He can hear it. He's trying to outrun it, but it's no use. Avery slams into his back and takes him down to the ground, and Regulus lands with a harsh thud. He rolls frantically with the motion, attempting to shove Avery off of him, but Avery just scrambles to get on top of him. He straddles Regulus, slapping at the ground, and then he raises his hand in the dark and strikes Regulus in the face.

Avery is holding a rock. A big one. A cold stone that slices Regulus' cheek open and clips him on the lip hard enough to make the corner of his mouth bleed. Regulus can taste it on his tongue, the thick weight of salt and iron and rust. It's disgusting, honestly, but he swallows it in favor of breathing, because he can't exactly spit it out at this moment.

Breathing hard, Avery seems to grasp the rock better with both hands, lifting it high up above his head, and Regulus becomes abruptly aware that he's about to get his skull bashed in. The world doesn't slow down with his impending death; if anything, it seems to *speed up,* and Regulus' brain fails to *keep* up. His body has no such issues, though.

It's reflexive. Just—immediate instinct. Regulus throws his legs up to knee Avery harshly between his legs, making him fold forward with a groan, and then he swings his hand up and buries the dagger in Avery's throat all the way to the hilt.

Avery makes a choking noise.

Regulus can see him in perfect detail, even in the dark. He can see the way he's frozen, his arms still raised like he's a puppet on strings he hasn't realized have been snipped yet. His eyes are wide with shock, mouth opening and closing as no sound comes out. And then, Regulus wrenches the blade back out with a deep, heaving breath. Avery's arms fall, the rock hitting the ground with a thud. His eyes are glassy, and they're visibly dimming, going dull. When Regulus tilts and pushes on him, Avery slumps to the side, blood pouring from his throat.

Before Regulus even stands, the cannon sounds, and Avery doesn't move anymore. Avery isn't breathing anymore. Avery has that unnatural stillness that comes from a lack of life, because he's dead. Regulus just killed him.

The world seems to warp in and out as Regulus stares at Avery's body, frozen in place and wide-eyed. It doesn't really come back into focus until he hears pounding feet on the forest floor, heading right for him.

Swallowing thickly, Regulus glances at Avery for one more second, all too aware of the blood that drips from his blade, from the very tips of his fingers—and then, he turns on the spot and keeps running.

He doesn't look back.

~•~

James is the one who stays up even when Peter falls asleep. Vanity is curled up against him, and they've moved so close to the fire that it's probably technically a hazard, but the warmth has seemed to help. She's shivering again, and breathing more deeply, which James takes as a good sign.

Still, to keep the fire going, wood is a necessity, so he drags himself up to brave the cold alone. It's late out now, the moon hanging high in the sky, and James' eyes are itchy with the need to sleep. He won't be able to, though, not until he finds out who's dead and, more importantly, who isn't.

There's six now. Another cannon went off for the sixth a few hours ago, briefly making James panic when he thought Vanity wasn't breathing—but she was. She's strong. She's a fighter, and she'll fight her way to morning, until it's warm again. That doesn't mean James' panic overall has gone away, because it hasn't, and it won't until he's absolutely *sure* that Regulus is alive. James thinks he is. Oddly, he thinks he—well, he just feels like he would know, somehow. Just...fundamentally.

More accurately, James knows he's not going to be fully okay until he sees Regulus again. He needs to. As soon as tomorrow, James is going to go find him, because how the fuck can he get him home if he's not right by his side the entire time? Vanity has Peter now to look after her until James gets back with Regulus firmly in tow. Tomorrow, James will find him.

Outside the cave is awful, harsh, just absolutely fucking brutal. The wind is like shards against his exposed skin, unforgiving. It's so cold that his frame rattles like his skeleton is vibrating in an attempt to shed his flesh like a particularly stiff coat. James ducks his head down and grits his teeth against it, planning to make it quick, only gathering the first few sticks he comes across. They just need enough to make it to morning.

James has a tiny armful and is just about to go back into the shelter of the cave—not the best, but better than nothing, that's for sure—but then there's the sound of trumpets and horns that

make him drop all the sticks as he whirls around. He tilts his head up towards the sky, wide-eyed as he watches the banners of the fallen tributes begin.

"Please, please, please," James chants under his breath.

It plays out in the order that they died. First, there's someone James doesn't know—one of the ones that refused to talk to anyone—and, despite this, his heart still aches when their face hovers in the sky. Following that is a child—yet another one that James didn't know, but a child all the same, can't be more than seventeen years old. A lump forms in his throat. The third looks to be older—which doesn't make it much easier, honestly—but James remembers when she fell into the river, mere moments before Vanity nearly did the same.

The fourth—James recognizes the fourth. His breath punches out of him, a harsh clench clamping down on his chest as he stares up at Dylan's face in the sky. Dylan, only twenty-one, a best friend at home that will never get him back. Dylan, who didn't really have much of a family outside of his best friend, who was so good at starting fires, like he always wanted to keep people around him warm. James swallows harshly and feels his shoulders sag, trying not to let himself think about how it happened, how it might not have happened if James had been there. A mere few days ago, Dylan was smiling at him shyly, and now he'll never smile again.

The fifth isn't anyone he recognizes either. Another child, though. Very, very young. Heartbreakingly young. It's enough to make tears spring to his eyes, because between that and Dylan, he can't stop himself from feeling terribly upset. The tears sting his cheeks as they fall. Maybe they'll freeze there.

The sixth…

James blinks as he stares up at Avery's face, admittedly startled by this one. The death eaters—that doesn't make any sense. James can't work out why *Avery* would be dead. Quinn or Hodge, maybe, because they're the ones the death eaters will dispose of first. Avery wouldn't stray far from the rest of his group, so it would be hard to kill him, at least not without the others rushing to kill whoever tried. Did he fall into the river? Eat the wrong plant? It's just—baffling.

The sky grows dark again, and James bows his head, exhaling shakily as he gently closes his eyes. Irene is alive. Mathias is alive. Evan is alive. Vanity and Peter are alive. Yes, so is Mulciber, Bernice, Axus, Willa, Quinn, and Hodge—but that hardly matters. What matters the most…

Regulus is alive. He's still alive. He's still out there.

James lifts his head and looks up at the sky, entertaining the thought that maybe, just maybe, Regulus is doing the same, just as relieved to know that James is alive, too.

"Just stay alive. I'll find you," James whispers on an exhale, then dips down to scoop the sticks back up and go back into the cave, a new weight lifted off his shoulders.

~•~

Sirius regrettably remembers his first day in his games. It had been designed like a mountain, hills everywhere, the very top where the weapons and supplies were. There were a lot of trees, but they were thin and not the kind one would climb. The only shelter to hide in was the random cabins placed all over, completely gutted and offering no comforts, usually without doors as well. On his first day, he spent it curled up in a tiny room in one of those cabins, cooking the rat he'd managed to catch and barely getting any rest.

Sirius didn't kill anyone on his first day. No, that came later. Well, rather soon, actually—he killed two people on his second day, four on his third, three on his fifth, one on his sixth, none on his seventh or eighth, then the final two on his ninth. Twelve people in less than two weeks. Sirius Black, everybody.

Regulus has killed someone before the night is even over.

Rather against his will, Sirius remembers each of his kills in the arena. Every single one, in excruciating detail, so vivid that he can close his eyes and transport himself right back to those moments even ten years later. Sometimes, that happens to him anyway, especially in his dreams. It happened a lot more often in the first few years after the arena, completely out of his control, usually hallucinations that James had to talk him out of. A few times, Sirius was

so out of it that he'd nearly hurt James, because he was back there, or because he wasn't free from his own head. James never blamed him for it, and Sirius will never forgive himself for it. What a pair they are, eh?

Sirius' first kill, though. Gunther Biloby, twenty-three years old, coming right at sixteen year old Sirius Black with a mace on a chain made of steel, swinging it at Sirius' head with wild and frightening precision. Sirius had nothing but the wooden spear he'd carved sloppily for himself the first night with a sharp piece of stone.

Nothing could remove the memory from his brain of taking that spear and shoving it right through Gunther's eye, all the way down until Gunther finally stopped moving. The flimsy spear had broken off into his skull, so Sirius picked up the mace before he walked away from his first kill.

Ten minutes later, he was back in his cabin, staring at the blood on his hands and rocking back and forth as he struggled to remember to breathe. He never did really catch his breath after that, and he doesn't think he's breathed the same since.

Sirius wonders, as he watches his brother on the screen, if he feels as fundamentally altered as Sirius did after his first kill. Not his last, and certainly not his worst, but there's *something* about that very first one. It's—damaging. You can't come back after that. The first one is where it all starts; and yes, the ones that follow aren't easier, or less impactful, but…

Well, the first one has weight. It's a permanent weight, in fact, one you can't shake. That shift from something innocent, to a killer. Because you've killed someone now, and you can't ever change that. It doesn't matter if you weren't really innocent before; murder rips at the soul, and Sirius' is a shredded tapestry, but he remembers the brutality of that first tear.

Regulus has successfully evaded the remaining death eaters by taking refuge in a tree. Not *up* in a tree, but *literally* inside a tree. He'd found one with a hollowed out trunk, a small space he could tuck himself into, and he's curled up into it now. The death eaters ran past him a while ago now, and they're not circling back. They're not going to, as far as Sirius can tell. They're settling down for the night, trying to get some sleep.

Meanwhile, Regulus is scrubbing furiously at his trembling hands, despite the fact that he's cleaned all the blood off already. His dagger, too. There's no more blood, but Regulus

continues to frantically try to scrub it all away, like he's still seeing it there. Sirius' heart breaks, because he knows what that feels like. He knows what it is to look at your hands and see them stained with blood, permanently.

The only thing that seemed to bring Regulus comfort was the fact that James' face wasn't splayed on a banner in the sky. He'd watched avidly, stiff and frozen in place, and at the end, all the tension had drained out of his body for a brief moment. Sirius knew he was relieved about James, and possibly Evan, too. Still, he hadn't been able to see Avery's face in the sky. As soon as it appeared, he'd looked away and went right back to trying to clean his already-clean hands.

Eventually, the cold seems to catch up to Regulus, and he curls up inside the tree, wrapped up in his blanket and looking so, so small. There's a camera in there, of course, so it's easy to see the anguish in his eyes that don't drift shut.

Yeah, he's probably not sleeping tonight.

As for James, he's fine with Vanity and Peter. Sirius isn't entirely sure that Vanity will make it through the night, but for her sake—as well as James and Marlene's—he hopes she does. At the moment, Peter has woken up again to take the next shift so James can get some sleep, but James is telling him about the six people who died on the first day.

But, really, that's all. The games aren't televised twenty-four seven. The tributes *do* have to sleep, and there's generally a lot of time where they're just casually surviving—nothing *'interesting'* to the Hallows—so it's not long before it's coming to an end as various tributes settle in for the night.

Sirius grabs the remote and watches the screen go black.

For a long moment, he just sits there in silence, trying to make sense of all that's happened already. James, who is with Peter and Vanity, essentially weaponless and taking care of those who Sirius—uncharitably, but realistically—doesn't suspect will make it very far. James can drag them kicking and screaming, but it's only going to hold him back, too. That's a fucked up way to think, and James won't think that way at all, but this is about facts. About survival. James is carrying around dead weight, and if he does it too long, he *will* sink.

Then there's Regulus, who—to Sirius' surprise and mild despair—has been *busy,* so far. Day one, and he's already done so much that it's hard to organize it all. There's the bond he's seemed to form with Evan Rosier—which, again, Sirius did *not* see that coming, not so soon. Maybe not a secure bond, but a shaky foundation of trust, nonetheless. In the arena, things like that can get you far. Case in point: Regulus.

He has weapons and supplies. He worked *hard* to get them, too. Sirius finds the river around the cave indescribably cruel. He's never seen any arena do something like that before; Horace Slughorn is a sick, creative bastard to think up something like that. It's all so—meticulously designed, the terrain reliant upon the weather. They needed the ice to make it across the river, and the drop in temperature also worked against them. They don't have it easy this year.

Sirius will admit to nearly having eighty heart attacks while watching Regulus get to the weapons and supplies. Knowing he's afraid of heights, but still doing all of that anyway, and also not being entirely sure about Evan's intentions… Yeah, Sirius was holding his breath the whole time, basically.

It was so *close,* too. That's the tragedy of it all. Regulus and Evan nearly made it. Almost, almost, almost—the most devastating word in the world. Fucking *almost.*

Watching Regulus get discovered, then get rocks thrown at him, that was hard. Sirius flinched each time Regulus was hit, or nearly hit. That didn't even compare to the absolute horror and dread that stole over him when the death eaters realized they could get to Regulus. And then Avery…

For one brief, terrifying moment, Sirius had been so sure that Regulus was about to be killed. Avery struck Regulus with a rock, after all. It has left him with a split lip and a thankfully small cut on his cheek, nothing that won't scab over and heal fairly quickly. But in that split second, when Regulus was just there on the ground, Sirius' heart had nearly fucking given out from the stress. He was relieved instantly, instinctively when Regulus killed Avery with little to no hesitation.

Still, it makes Sirius feel hollow and exhausted to know that Regulus did it, that he *had* to. Sirius was under no illusions that Regulus and James would make it through the arena

without killing people. They're targets, so there's just no chance of that, honestly. That doesn't mean it's easy. That doesn't mean it doesn't rip Sirius up inside.

"Sirius?"

Exhaling shakily, Sirius sits the remote aside and glances over at Remus, who is still here. Remus, who stayed. Remus, who held his hand no matter how hard Sirius squeezed it. Remus, who murmured encouragement and endless reassurances in Sirius' ears the entire time. Remus, who never judged him for any sound of distress he made, or for every flinch he gave, or for any tears that he had to blink away. Remus, Remus, Remus.

"I need a drink," Sirius says hoarsely, peeling himself up from his seat to shuffle towards the kitchen.

Remus follows him. He's quiet and watchful as Sirius draws out a glass, grabs a bottle, and pours himself some scotch. Something briny, smoky, a curl of the sea set on fire in his throat. It's heavy, but his tolerance is… Well, it takes a lot for him to get inebriated, which comes from consistently doing a lot in the past. But, sometimes, just the whole ritual of it can have a soothing effect on him—get the glass, pour the drink, drink it, feel the burn in his chest. Routine. Or it used to be.

Sirius heaves a sigh and sits down the glass after his second pull from it, feeling himself squint. He always feels—guilty, when it comes to his self-destructive behaviors of the past. Not all of it was his fault, but he's responsible for some of it, and it's probably one of the bigger reasons he doesn't spiral out of control again. Well, that, and James. Regulus, too, he thought at one point in time, but he doesn't try to fool himself thinking that way anymore. It's not like he did anything with his sobriety. Even when Sirius managed to get sober (with James' help and support) and *stay* sober, he didn't go to his brother to make things right. Regulus barely even knew how bad off Sirius was, honestly. Besides, not being sober wasn't ever the source of his and Regulus' issues. Maybe just a small reason *behind* their true issues, but that was all.

Remus doesn't say anything, but he leans up against the table with his arms crossed over his chest, fingers cupping his own elbows. It's almost like he's holding himself. Sirius has the most ridiculous urge to just duck down and sneak up in between those arms, so they'll hold him, too.

"Well," Sirius says eventually. He holds up his glass in front of his face and narrows his eyes at the liquid inside, studying how it moves in the patterned crystal glass. In the light of the kitchen, the scotch is the same color as Remus' eyes.

"They're alive," Remus murmurs.

"Yeah," Sirius agrees quietly. He takes in a deep, shuddering breath and reminds himself that *they're alive* has to be the most important thing. He can't linger on what it costs, what it takes, for that to be true. Later, when they're in front of him—no, when one of them is in front of him, because it can't be both, fuck—when one of them is in front of him, alive but not well for all the ways in which they had to survive, if they do—if they one of them does, only one, and the odds—

Sirius squeezes his eyes shut and drains his glass, hissing through the burn and sitting the glass down with a thunk. He does the mental equivalent of slapping his own mind to get it in order, forcing it to be still for one *fucking* second. When one of them is home, if they make it home, then Sirius will worry about the repercussions of all that it took to make that happen. The priority *first,* and always, is—they're alive.

He can't think about Regulus, alone and cold inside the trunk of a tree. He can't think about James, hungry and cold inside a cave. He can't think about what they've already suffered, or what they're going to suffer as each day passes until the end. The only thing he can think about is that they're alive, they're still alive, and how he can help make sure they stay that way.

"Sirius," Remus says gently, and fingers wrap around the glass in Sirius' hand, overlapping with his, starting to pull it from his grip.

Sirius snatches his hand away, eyes blinking open as he harshly snaps, *"Don't."*

There's a moment, a brief stillness, where their eyes are locked and nothing—nothing at all—is happening. Something shifts in Remus' gaze, and then something *is* happening, but Sirius doesn't know what it is. In the next second, Remus reaches out to grab Sirius' wrist firmly, not enough to hurt, just enough for Sirius to feel it. He doesn't let go.

"Give me the glass, Sirius," Remus tells him.

"No," Sirius bites out, bitchy about it. "No, I'll keep it, thanks, and just who are you to tell me —"

"I'm your—" Remus falters, only briefly, then huffs. "I'm important to you, am I not? Or am I just a fucking *servant* to you?"

Sirius blinks, admittedly smacked right out of his bad mood for a moment to be very bewildered instead. "Um, what?"

"You heard me," Remus says sharply. "Do I or do I not have a right to be concerned about you? Someone very dear to you, that's what you said. But, what, just a servant who gets no say when it's convenient for you? Is that it?"

"I—what? No? Fucking—of course not, *no,"* Sirius spits out in a mixture of disbelief and...anger, actually. Genuine anger that Remus would think that of him. "I—fucking hell, Remus, is *now* the best time for this? Really?"

"It's the best time when I say it's time. Give me the fucking glass, Sirius," Remus snaps.

"Alright!" Sirius bursts out, mildly incredulous and also baffled and agitated and tense and—

He gives Remus the glass.

Remus sits it aside, then drops Sirius' wrist. "I have *every* right to care about you. You gave me that right, and I'm not letting it go, especially not when you're hurting. You're upset. You're under an unimaginable amount of stress right now. If you want to challenge me, that's fine, but I won't back down."

"It was one fucking drink, Remus," Sirius grumbles, and Remus just arches an eyebrow at him. "It *was.* I'm not a child. I know moderation, alright? I can have one drink, or even a few more, and it doesn't have to mean—"

"But it does mean. Today it will mean. This week—when they're in the arena—it's going to mean," Remus cuts in, and Sirius clenches his jaw, because he's right. "And I'm not—I'm not *blaming* you, Sirius. I'm not judging you. What you're going through right now, I wouldn't *ever* hold it against you how you handle it. But." He swallows, his face softening. "But I won't stand by and do nothing, if I can help. I know there's nothing I can do to fix what's wrong, I know that, but if I can be here for you, and take care of you, then I'm going to. And nothing, not even you, will stop me from trying."

Sirius feels a lump form in his throat, and he just wants it to go away. He's so tired of feeling choked. He's so tired of having things repeatedly shoved down his throat, one horrible thing right after the other, until all he can do *is* choke. He wants to drown it all out, dull the senses, and swallow it all down until it rises back up like bile when he's clear-headed.

Remus reaches out as if he's about to touch Sirius' hand, and Sirius reflexively pulls away from it. Remus' hand retreats immediately, and Sirius chokes on that, too.

"Sorry," Sirius rasps. "I'm sorry, I'm just—"

"You don't have to apologize," Remus murmurs. "Of course you don't, Sirius. If you don't want me to touch you, then you don't. You can pull away. You can tell me no. You can have boundaries, even in respecting mine."

"It just—I just feel so… I feel *raw,"* Sirius confesses, the words wrenching out of him in anguish. "I feel like an exposed nerve, Remus, and it—it's *agony.* Because all of this… It's not fair. It's not—all of it is just wrong."

Remus looks pained. "I know."

"I'm not the first," Sirius whispers, his eyes prickling with building heat, and he's so tired of crying, too. He's fucking *exhausted* with having things to cry about. "That's the thing, isn't it?

I'm not the first to have a brother in the arena. Or a best friend. Regulus and James did it first, didn't they? But it's not just them either. It's—it's everyone. Brothers and sisters. Lovers. Mothers and Fathers, some that never got to be. How fucked is that, yeah? It's not *fair.* It's not."

"No, it's not," Remus agrees softly.

Sirius shakes his head. "And we just. We swallow it. We choke on it, year after year after year, because what else can we do? That's all we can do. And *that's* not fair either." He exhales harshly and curls his fingers into the counter. "And I'm no better than anyone else. I am what they made me."

"Sirius," Remus protests.

"No, no, I am," Sirius insists. "Don't you *get* it, Remus? I play my part just like everyone else. This—I'm a part of it. A *Victor.* A fucking murderer that *they* turned me into, and I—I hate them. I hate them. I want to tear them all apart. I want to make them see what they've created, and I want them to die looking at it. I want *them* to choke on it; I want to choke the life out of them. All of them. Every single sponsor and gamemaker and government official and fucking *Riddle."*

Remus' eyebrows pinch together. "Do you think you're the only one? Do you think that makes you—bad? Because if so, I am as well. In this...you're not alone."

"I—I just—I feel...dangerous, sometimes," Sirius chokes out, his face twisting. "I scare myself, most days."

"You don't scare me," Remus tells him.

Sirius scoffs out a resigned laugh. "Don't lie. Yes, I do."

"I…" Remus pauses, then sighs. "Yeah, alright, you do. Just not in the way you scare yourself. I'm scared of how you make me feel sometimes, but never, *never* because of what I know you're capable of. I've seen you drenched in blood, Sirius. I still find you to be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Did you back then?" Sirius asks. "When I was just a person on the screen, covered in blood, did you find me beautiful then?"

Remus is silent for a long moment, then, "No. I didn't."

"I was ugly, wasn't I?" Sirius whispers.

"Yes," Remus says softly.

Sirius shudders out a deep breath, wondering and always wondering how Remus forever knows what to say. Or maybe he's just perfect, and what he says is the truth. The exact thing that Sirius needs to hear. He wasn't beautiful when he was forged into a weapon, dripping in blood he never wanted to spill. He was ugly, ugly, ugly. Grotesque and misaligned. He would never want to be anything else when doing that.

The Hallows found him beautiful. Thought him beautiful before and after and during his violence. Still find him beautiful to this day, for all the wrong reasons, for all the reasons he hates. He wasn't fucking *beautiful.* He was scared, and dying, and losing parts of himself he'll never get back. It wasn't something to marvel over. It was *disturbing;* it was something people should have never reveled in; it was something everyone should have been horrified by.

"If you were drenched in blood now—their blood—I would find you breathtaking," Remus murmurs.

And that. Well, that's something else. That's...something much different, a very important distinction to make. Being forced into murder, into becoming what he is—that's an ugly process. But Sirius doing it himself? Being what he is out of revenge, or his personal perception of justice… Well, that *is* different.

Sirius is learning that choice and autonomy means something to Remus that it doesn't to most. Considering his position in the Hallow, that makes sense. Individual identity and control over oneself, freedom and equality, that's *important* to him. He can find beauty in that, and Sirius didn't have that in the arena, which is why he can't find beauty there.

"I don't want to be what they made me, Remus," Sirius admits.

"You're not," Remus tells him. "You may think that you are, but that's not true. Maybe it shaped you. No, it *did* shape you, because there's no way around that. We are all altered by the hands that teach us layers to pain, me and you and everyone. There's no escaping that, and *trust me,* I know how infuriating that is, but… That's not *all* that we are. You, Sirius, you're so much more. Don't doubt that. I don't."

"How can you not?"

"Sirius, literally the day we met, you tried to take my mask off to let me *breathe.* If you were what you think they've made you into, you never would have done that. We wouldn't be talking right now if you weren't better than them."

"That's just—that was just the right thing to do," Sirius mumbles. "It's barely anything. If I could do more—"

"More?" Remus laughs, high and sharp. "Don't you dare. That was *everything* to me."

Sirius' mouth snaps shut, swallowing thickly. Remus shakes his head ruefully, and Sirius feels his heart clench. "Oh."

"Never undermine your impact again, not to me," Remus tells him, low and firm, gaze sharp and piercing. "Maybe it didn't mean much to you, but me? It was more than I've had in five years, and you've found ways to give me even more than that *since* you tried to take my mask off. And it's—sometimes, Sirius, it makes me *angry.* Do you even know how frustrating it is that I—I can't give you anything *back?* I—I—"

"You don't owe me anything," Sirius says, the one who's speaking gently now, "and you've already given me so much. What I did—that's just...quite literally the bare minimum, and I don't want you to—to praise me for it, or feel indebted. You *deserve* that, Remus. You deserve to breathe, to speak, to have freedom and control and so much more. You deserve *better."*

Remus looks down at his hands, lips pressed into a thin line. His eyes drift shut. He doesn't say anything.

"It's immoral," Sirius continues quietly. "What the Hallow does to servants. Well, what the Hallow does to...a lot of people. I don't know your crime, Remus, and frankly, I don't give a toss what it was. You can tell me, or you can never tell me, and that doesn't change that what you go through is just as fucked as what I do. It's not a competition, though the Hallow would love it if it was, but I won't pretend like it doesn't matter just because they put you in masks and treat you like you're a machine. I know they torture you, or they have before, and you don't talk about it outside of broad terms, but don't think for a *second* that I'm not aware. I'm not ignoring it. If I could kill them, it'd be for you, too."

Remus' head snaps up as he sucks in a sharp breath. He takes an abrupt step closer to Sirius, then immediately takes a solid step back before Sirius can even react. He blinks. "Sorry. I was about to do something quite stupid, I think. That's—I—you can't *say* things like that, Sirius. It's… It's really…"

"It's the truth," Sirius tells him.

"Yeah, well, give me a bit of warning next time," Remus mutters, blowing out a deep breath and widening his eyes comically as he reaches up to run his hand through his hair.

Sirius' lips twitch. "Sorry that—well, sorry that you felt like you had to stop. I'm not—it isn't—I'm just—"

"Again, you don't have to apologize for needing—what you need," Remus says, dropping his hand. "You need to not be touched right now. That's okay."

"It doesn't feel—right," Sirius murmurs. "James and Regulus are… Well, it wouldn't feel right if I—"

"Oh, well, that's something else entirely," Remus announces with a frown. "Don't do that. You can't punish the Hallow by punishing yourself."

Sirius feels those words like a punch. Oh, that's—that hits *hard.* Because that's it, isn't it? That's what he does, because he's been shaped so much by the Hallow and all that it's done to him that he feels like an extension of it. He wants to hurt it, so he hurts himself, because he's already hurt, so why not? Because it's so much easier to hurt himself than anyone else.

"Letting yourself be comforted isn't wrong, Sirius."

"James and Regulus—"

"—don't need, or want, you to suffer in solidarity with them," Remus cuts in, holding his gaze. "Do you think that would make them feel better? They wouldn't want that. They would be comforted to know that *you're* comforted."

"It's—I—" Sirius swallows harshly, struggling to explain his guilt with the mere thought. They're suffering, and so shall he. James would be devastated, if he knew. Regulus…

"The last night, after dinner, Regulus helped me clean up," Remus informs him, and Sirius' head whips around to focus on him, fully invested immediately. Remus' lips curl up. "We talked a bit. He's really quite interesting to talk to, you know. Very blunt. I like that about him."

Sirius softens helplessly. "Yeah, he's brutal sometimes."

"It was—intriguing to see the differences between you, and also how similar those differences are," Remus muses. "He's blunt, like I said, but also very—guarded. He gets his point across by just saying it, usually with sarcasm. You, on the other hand, are simply transparent."

"I—" Sirius blinks. "What?"

"Sirius, you're as subtle as a brick to the face," Remus declares in fond amusement. "You're guarded, too, though. Just not the same way as him. He shuts down. You...lash out. But, when it comes to getting your point across, you're just very honest and earnest and *obvious.* I can see right through you. Maybe that's just because I take the time to look, I'm not sure, but I don't think those things are mutually exclusive."

"Do you...like what you see?" Sirius asks carefully.

Remus raises his eyebrows at him. "I can't tear my eyes away from you the moment you're within my line of sight. What do *you* think?"

"So, you do?"

"Yes, Sirius, obviously I do."

"Oh. Good. That's—yeah, good," Sirius says, clearing his throat. Remus looks exasperated. "I like what I see, too. When I look at you, I mean."

"I *know,"* Remus tells him with a stifled laugh. "As I said, you're not very subtle." His face softens when Sirius instantly starts blushing. "Don't worry about it, yeah? And don't—don't try to change it. Don't try to change who you are, who you *really* are. I like you for you."

Sirius bites his lip. "Okay, now I *really* want you to touch me."

"And your guilt?"

"To hell with it. My incessant desire for you has it in a chokehold currently. I'll deal with it later."

"Oh?" Remus chuckles, then shakes his head. "Well, I'm terribly sorry to delay your *desire,* but I have a point to make that will—hopefully—help with the guilt."

"And how do *you* make your points, Remus?" Sirius asks, just on the verge of teasing. Remus arches an eyebrow. "Shall I tell you, since you told me how I do? You're not the only one who's observant, you know."

"Go on, then. Give it a go."

"You make your point like you'll never get another chance. Like it's life or death. Like you only get one shot, and you *refuse* to miss. You make your point like you're arguing for it before it's even a debate, and you *know* you're right."

Remus stares at him, then purses his lips. "Well, I *am* right, so—" Sirius snorts, and Remus rolls his eyes. "Right, and how exactly did you come to that conclusion?"

"Remus," Sirius says slowly, "you're the first servant who has removed their mask on their own, *ever.* You're the first to give their name immediately when asked. You're the first to sit down and have a meal with us. You're the first to just keep taking your mask off on your own, because ah, well, who cares who does it if you'll be killed for it anyway, yeah? Those were your actual words you used, by the way."

"Was I wrong?"

"You also poured a drink on someone, despite knowing you'd be punished for it. You called me *sir* just to fuck with me. You wanted me to touch you, so you literally just rolled on top of

me and demanded I touch you. For fuck's sake, you got me to keep my clothes off the floor by being *passive aggressive."*

"Well, it worked, didn't it?"

"And now—literally just now—when I eluded to wanting to murder people, you essentially just told me to calm down because so do a lot of people, including you. Oh, and when I said I wanted to murder *for you,* you looked like you wanted to eat me, and then you weren't even ashamed of responding like that. Actually, you scolded *me,* like I should have known that would rile you up instead of frighten you. I mean, Remus, I say this with deep, *deep* admiration, but you're fucking mental."

"Mm, well, sanity hardly gets results," Remus says, lips twitching when Sirius gazes at him with helpless affection.

"I like you *so much,"* Sirius whispers fervently, feeling every inch of how true that is. He likes Remus so fucking much that he feels like he needs to just—punch something.

"Yes, I know." Remus' smile grows, only more lovely when there's more to see. "I do have a point to make, still."

"I know. I'm dreading it. It's going to make me awfully emotional, I can already tell," Sirius murmurs with a sigh.

"Possibly," Remus admits. "Circling back—and nice try with the deflecting—I was telling you that I had a conversation with Regulus after dinner last night. He's fairly...succinct, honestly, but I think we understood each other quite well. He said something, you know, about how you were going to have a hard time while he and James were in the arena."

Sirius swallows harshly. "Did he?"

"He did," Remus confirms. "He told me that I would make it easier, because I'm important to you."

"Suppose he knows me better than I thought he did," Sirius says, and his voice cracks.

Remus' expression is so, so soft. "He asked something of me. He said he couldn't make me, he could only ask, and so he asked. Sirius, he asked that I would take care of you."

A broken, yet muffled sound escapes Sirius' throat. He traps it behind his teeth as much as he's able to, ducking his head forward as he squeezes his eyes shut. His heart stretches in his chest like it's waking up with a yawn and a shudder. It hurts a little bit, and feels so indescribably nice, because Sirius—oh, he didn't even realize how desperately he wanted proof that his brother still cared about him until he got it. Because he didn't know, until this moment.

Regulus, who hasn't asked for anything since he was fifteen years old, not from anyone—as far as Sirius knows. What he was asking for then wasn't from Sirius himself, but from James. Sirius remembers it, one of the few things that he *can* remember in that awful, awful time right after the arena.

"Please," Regulus had said, his voice strained. *"Please just let me see him, James. Why can't I see him?"*

James had sounded equally strained when he replied, *"I'm sorry, Reg. He's just—he isn't feeling well, is all. Really, he's sleeping a lot right now. When he feels better,* he'll *come see* you, *alright?"*

Regulus made a low, frustrated noise that was dangerously close to tears. *"James—"*

"If you need to talk—"

"Fuck off, you're the last *person I want to talk to."*

"Give me an hour, and I'll come by," James had said anyway.

"Don't waste your time," Regulus had snarled in response, and then there was the sound of his footsteps stomping away.

Sirius, at that point in time, was curled up in bed and dealing with a brief moment of lucidity. He hadn't moved out of bed other than to relieve himself in a week. James tried. Bless him, he really tried to coax Sirius out of bed, tried to coax him to eat more, tried to coax him into a shower or coming down to see Effie and Monty, at least, if not Regulus or old friends, because he wasn't quite ready yet. It didn't really work. Sirius couldn't stand to be around anyone who wasn't James, and sometimes even that was very fucking difficult.

This was before the drinks and drugs; he wouldn't discover them for a few more weeks yet. No, this was during the haze where the only time he felt alive was when he woke up enough to wish that he was dead. When it was all nightmares and hallucinations. Ghosts in the corner of his eye. Gunther used to sit in the chair by the closet with a broken spear poking out of his skull until Sirius asked why James never seemed upset about the dead man in the room. James, upon learning what he meant, removed the chair from the room altogether.

But, on that day, Sirius had come out of his daze at the genuine distress in Regulus' voice. Even then, even so smothered by his depression, he felt a spark at the thought that his brother needed him. That spark went out as quickly as it formed, though, and when James swiveled away from the door to see him staring, Sirius turned over to stare at the wall instead.

Regulus never made that request again. Regulus never made *any* request again, after that, especially not from Sirius. He hasn't asked for anything involving Sirius since, and yet, he asked Remus for this. To take care of him.

"Why would he do that?" Sirius chokes out.

"Because you're his brother. He wants you to be okay, and he wants you to be taken care of when you're not—just as you want the same for him," Remus replies simply.

"I didn't—he wasn't okay, and I didn't take care of him," Sirius confesses, like he's confessing his greatest sin. "I—I—"

"After the arena?" Remus asks. "When you were likely dealing with insurmountable trauma and reintroduction into society unrelated to the environment that you had no choice but to adapt to whilst *in* the arena? Having to adapt in reverse isn't easy just because it was something you knew before. In some ways, I imagine it must have been harder."

"It was," Sirius croaks. "Remus, it was so hard. It's *still* hard."

Remus holds his gaze. "I know he's your younger brother, but it isn't your job to take care of him. It's no one's job to take care of anyone, unless they're a parent or quite literally getting paid to do it. Where were your parents, Sirius?"

"Oh, them," Sirius says hoarsely, then gives a gruff laugh. "Yeah, let's just say they were useless and move on."

"Did they mean well?"

"No, they did not. They—well, before Regulus and I were ever in the arena, we knew what it was to be targets. Our parents… Like I said, useless, but if you go past that, then I think the proper term is abusive. It's—that stopped when we got older. By older, I mean *bigger*. Like, when we looked like men, they stopped beating us, because it's easier to beat children who can't fight back. I, um—I put my mother through a wall, so… Yeah. That's—that's when it stopped for us."

"You put your mother through a wall?" Remus murmurs.

"She—" Sirius closes his eyes, grimacing at the memory. "I had gone over to—to see Reggie. It was after I moved out. Regulus and I weren't exactly...speaking at the time, but I…"

"You went to him anyway," Remus fills in.

Sirius clears his throat. "I tried to. I went up to his room, and he was asleep, but I saw the bruise on his cheek. My lovely father, no doubt. Mother never left bruises; she was mostly verbally abusive or slaps and scratches. And—well, I...don't know. I can't really remember all of it. I do remember yelling at them, and them yelling back. Regulus woke up and came down to see what all the fuss was about, tried to get me to leave, told me I was making a mess where I shouldn't…"

"Family drama," Remus mutters.

"You have no idea," Sirius tells him. "She—I *vividly* remember her telling me that I couldn't tell them how to treat their son, and I told her that they weren't allowed to hurt him, or me, ever again. It'd been nearly two years since I got out of the arena, but I was going right back there every night in my dreams, so I don't think it was an empty threat when I told her I'd kill them if they tried. My mother, because she is who she is, grabbed Regulus by the arm, too rough, and then…"

"And then you put your mother through a wall," Remus says.

"And then I put my mother through a wall," Sirius agrees with a weary sigh, tossing up a hand. "It was—I mean, it was just plaster, you know, the sort you can easily put your fist through. She was fine. I think I just—frightened them. Which is. Well."

"Well," Remus muses, "I mean...it worked?"

"I—" Sirius blinks at him, then snorts. "Um, yeah, it did. That's—you find out I put my mother through a wall, and you're just...very calm about this information?"

"It's hardly the—" Remus stops, then seems to think twice, then clears his throat. "Don't forget the important details, Sirius. You put your *abusive* mother through a wall in the defense of your brother. It's not entirely unjustified."

"I feel like you're just excusing literally everything I do."

"I'm not excusing it."

"You're justifying it," Sirius points out.

Remus squints at him. "Well, if it's fucking *justfied—"*

"Yes, yes, but who's to say it is?"

"I say."

"Aren't you biased?"

"Shamelessly."

Sirius laughs. "Oh, you like *me* so much."

"Shamelessly," Remus repeats, gaze warm. It's enough to light Sirius up from the inside out. "Right, well, this has given me new insight to you and Regulus, admittedly. It's—I feel it bears repeating, especially now, but it's not your job to take care of your brother, or anyone."

"I can tell you want me to agree with this," Sirius informs him solemnly, "but I just—don't. I won't. It is my job."

"It's *not,"* Remus argues, because of course he does, because he has a point to make. "You were not brought into this world to take care of your brother, or anyone else, and no one was brought into this world to take care of you. *No one* is required to take care of anyone else, Sirius. It is a choice to do that, or else there's no meaning in it. None."

"Remus—"

"No, listen to me. The people *I* take care of here in the Hallow? Was I born to do this? No. It's an obligation. I am *forced.* I don't do it because I want to; I do it because I will die if I don't. James—I've seen him take care of you. Do you think he does that because he feels he *has* to? Do you take care of *him* because you feel you have to? Lily and I—we took care of one another by *choice,* not out of a sense of responsibility. When you put your mother through a wall, you didn't do that because you felt it was your duty as Regulus' brother. You did it because he was hurt, and it angered you, and because you refused to let either of you be hurt by them ever again. *That* all has meaning. That's important."

"What you're saying about the meaning in it, that's all true, you're right," Sirius admits. "It is important that people care about each other on purpose, not because they're predestined to. I just—it just feels like… Well, that's the thing, isn't it? I always made that choice to look after him, to take care of him, and then I...couldn't anymore. And that wasn't a choice, Remus. I—I genuinely couldn't."

"You blame yourself for it, even while you're very aware that it's not your fault," Remus murmurs, his eyebrows furrowed. Sirius just shrugs, because yeah, pretty much. "I may be mental, but you're a mess, Sirius Black."

"Never denied that," Sirius says with a huff of laughter.

Remus quirks a tiny smile. "You've been taking care of your brother—and James—a lot recently."

"Is it by choice, though?"

"You could...not."

"No," Sirius declares simply.

"Well, there you go," Remus tells him, eyes soft. "You made your choice, and no matter the circumstances, that means something. Regulus? He made his choice, too. He made the choice to ask that I would take care of you, because it means something to him that you're taken care of, even when it can't be him to do it. And Sirius?"

Swallowing, Sirius whispers, "Yeah?"

"You're going to let me do this for him," Remus murmurs, holding his gaze. "You're going to let me do this for him, for James, for *you,* and for me. And you're not going to feel guilty about it, because that takes what it means from all of us."

"Okay," Sirius breathes out, feeling like some sort of weight has just fallen off of him. Not very much. More like cutting the dead-ends off of his hair when they start getting tangled so much, then relishing in how easy it is to run a brush through the strands afterwards.

"Do you still want me to touch you?" Remus asks.

"Really very much, yes," Sirius blurts out, then tries so hard not to feel selfish for it. James wouldn't be upset; that ray of sunshine would be utterly delighted. Regulus—well, he cares about Sirius and wants him taken care of, as it turns out, so it's not as if he would be offended.

Remus does touch him, then. Just reaches out to slide his hand up Sirius' arm, then tugs him close until he can wrap him up and hold him. Sirius sags into him with a deep exhale, closing his eyes as he returns the embrace.

Sirius is like wet clay in Remus' hands, completely at his mercy and guidance. Something in him settles as soon as Remus is holding him like this, like the most peaceful place in the world to be is the circle of his arms. If there's really a paradise out there after you die, Sirius wouldn't know he was dead if he died in Remus' arms, because nothing would change. He's found his paradise right here.

Remus' lips graze his forehead, then press harder the moment Sirius sways into it, his heart *thu-da-thumping* away at the realization that it's a kiss. Remus is kissing his forehead. And

then Remus is kissing his temple. And then Remus is kissing the corner of his right eye, one hand slipping to the back of his neck to guide him into tilting his face up. Sirius does, and then he's rewarded for his compliance by Remus kissing his cheek.

He doesn't go any further than that, though, for which Sirius is grateful. Not tonight. Not now. Maybe not ever, because Sirius can't handle that right now, with his brother and best friend in the arena, with them suffering and him *knowing it.* He just can't do it, and he's so thankful that Remus seems to just *know* that, and respect it. He pushes for Sirius to let himself be comforted, and that's all, nothing else. For right now, Sirius can handle that, but only just.

"I must say," Sirius whispers, "I feel very taken care of right now."

Remus laughs that lovely laugh of his and folds forward to bury his face into Sirius shoulder and hair. Sirius presses a smile against his cheek and lets himself be held.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you checking the end notes: regulus ends up killing avery in this chapter by stabbing him in the side of his neck with his dagger.

for those of you who finished the chapter, how are we feeling?

so the river ices over at night. not very helpful for regulus, who was just trying not to freeze to death. poor babe. 😭😭😭

speaking of the threat of freezing to death, poor vanity, am i right? james and peter trying to keep her warm has me like. also the fact that marlene is her mentor, AND hodge's. talk about a juxtaposition. that will get touched on more later. we do see marlene (and dorcas) again very soon, actually!

back to regulus. he's having a rough time, isn't he? talk about starting with a bang. day one and he's already killed someone in self-defense. me, as the writer: please just let this man REST 😟

and then sirius and remus. oh, my loves. they're just so... i mean, the way they just talk to each other and open up and slowly, over time, grow closer and trust each other more and more???? im obsessed with them. if anyone is upset because they thought sirius and remus were going to kiss, just be patient. it's the first day of the games, sirius was in no condition to be dealing with all of that on top of everything else.

also, i feel like that topic of, you know, caring about people not out of a sense of obligation but due to choice is just...so important. it's so important that people care about other people because they WANT to, rather than because they feel they're required to. people do that every day. can you believe that? humans look at other humans and want to take care of them when they need it, and that's so fucking special to me. like, the world can be awful, yes, but there's always things such as that to be grateful for. <3

also, not sirius being like: i would kill for you. and then remus has to physically restrain himself from dropping to his knees right then and there. they're both SO unwell, but i love them 🥰 sirius is a mess, and remus is mental. well-suited, i would say.

updates on the numbers and stuff:

remaining number of tributes as of this chapter: 18
those that have died: four unnamed tributes, dylan, and avery.

Stubborn

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past injuries (mostly implied)
-references to catching/trapping/killing wildlife for food (nothing explicitly described)
-death of a snake—like a literal one, not a slytherin lmaooo (brief and not explicitly described in detail)
-explicit description of a spider-like creature (for those of you who, like me, are terrified of spiders)
-references to possible future death (due to the arena)
-explicitly stated death (though not explicitly shown)
-mentions of blood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once, years ago, Lily told Remus these exact words: *Remus, you can't keep doing things you know won't end well and expect them to end any other way.* At the time, she was quite upset with him and also in the middle of treating the wounds on his back, and he was just a tad bit delirious from the pain, but the words had weight to them. Weight that he let roll off his (injured) back.

That would come back to haunt them both in the end, because Remus did, in fact, keep doing things he knew wouldn't end well as if the results would be different, and they never were. Well, until they were. Different results didn't mean *better,* though, which he learned the hard way—blood under his nails and Lily's desperate gasps for air ringing in his ears. You'd think, after all of that, he wouldn't make the same mistake.

Remus knows that this, with Sirius, isn't going to end well, not really. At the very least, they're both going to get very hurt, and that's genuinely the bare minimum of what they can expect. There's also a very real risk of being tortured, or killed, or both, or worse. It's actually foolish of them to be doing what they're doing, what they've been doing from the start, and nothing can really come from it. It's not proper, and Remus shouldn't.

As established, Remus isn't good at being proper, or doing what he should. He never has been.

Sirius looks rough when he comes into the kitchen, like he didn't get much sleep. Remus hates that he couldn't stay with him last night. Eventually, he did have to return to his cell, which left Sirius alone with...literally so much stress that Remus can hardly fathom it himself. It's visibly weighing on him, leaving him with exhaustion in the lines of his face and a slumped slope to his shoulders.

Even still, Sirius comes to a screeching halt, a spark entering his eyes when he sees Remus, and he breathes out, "Oh. Hi."

"Hi," Remus replies, lips twitching. "Are you hungry?"

"Not at all," Sirius admits.

Remus hums. "Too bad. You hardly ate yesterday, or the day before that, and I've already made breakfast. Sit."

Sirius sits, blinking at Remus as he moves over to sit a plate down in front of him. Again, he says, "Hi."

"Hi," Remus repeats, smiling again before turning away to go get his plate, joining Sirius at the table right across from him. Sirius doesn't move, just staring at him, and Remus raises his eyebrows as he points his fork at him. "Eat."

"Right. Thanks," Sirius mumbles, picking his fork up. He dutifully takes a bite, and they eat in silence for a while. Remus is just glad he is eating, so he doesn't plan to interrupt. Sirius does, eventually. "You, um. You didn't wake me up."

"I do recall being told I *wasn't* an alarm clock," Remus says lightly, and Sirius smiles weakly. "I thought I'd let you sleep in without disturbing you, and you needed breakfast."

"We could have made breakfast together," Sirius points out, almost petulant about it. He heaves a sigh and puts his fork down when Remus stares at him. "I just—I mean, obviously you don't have to do anything, and you're *not* an alarm clock, but I won't lie and say I didn't like waking up to you. I don't want—" He halts, then swallows. "I'm going to be busy a lot over the next few days, and I won't be *here* very much, so I'd like—well, if you want the same thing, and you're okay with it, I'd like to spend as much time with you as I can."

Remus takes that in for a long moment, then nods. "I get that. I was just hoping you were getting some sleep, honestly."

"Not really," Sirius murmurs. "Not good sleep, in any case."

"What's your plans for the day?" Remus asks.

Sirius grimaces. "I have to meet with other various mentors, sponsors, and gamemakers for the daily watch party. It's where I'll be trying to make Regulus and James' time in the arena less difficult. I won't be able to—well, I have to act like I'm...just alright with everything, so it's going to be fucking awful. I'll be out all day, most likely, then make it back here in the evening."

"Will they still be airing the games when you make it back?"

"Yes. I'll continue to watch it here."

"Right." Remus purses his lips. "Well, I'll be here cleaning, and cooking so you have something to eat when you make it back, then we'll watch together, yeah? And you won't have to pretend to be alright with me."

"You don't have to—"

"I know, but I want to. It's all a part of taking care of you, remember? And, as for the chores, I don't have much else to do while I'm here."

"Are you going to watch the games, too?" Sirius asks. "While I'm gone, I mean?"

Remus nods. "I thought I would, yeah. It's—I'm not supposed to, and I usually don't care to, but it's...James and Regulus."

"Yeah," Sirius agrees softly, looking down at his plate with a tiny frown. Remus nudges his foot forward to knock it into Sirius', then gestures to the food with his fork when Sirius glances up. Sirius starts eating again, and they're quiet for another long while.

They don't speak for the rest of the meal, and Sirius only manages to eat half before he gives up. Remus stands, grabbing his plate and leaning forward to scoop up Sirius'. He moves away to combine the food on both plates onto one, keeping it stored so he can eat it for lunch, then starts getting ready to clean up. It doesn't surprise him when Sirius follows behind with the glasses and proceeds to help.

With a rising surge of affection, Remus watches as Sirius rolls up each sleeve of his shirt and dunks his hands in the soapy water, needing no instructions on how to do this particular chore and seeming oddly pleased with this fact. Remus thinks he would still be utterly enamored with Sirius even if he didn't, and that's how he *knows* he's a goner. He'd never accept a man who didn't know how to do dishes otherwise.

"Thank you," Sirius says abruptly.

Remus blinks. "You're welcome. Wait, for what?"

"For taking care of me," Sirius murmurs as he washes a plate and passes it to Remus. He's not looking at him, and there's a far-away look in his eyes. "You don't have to, and yet you are, and that—means something. That has meaning, like you said. I'd say I'd like to return the favor, but I'd never wish for you to be in a position where you need to be taken care *of*. But I hope you know that I would. And I hope that has meaning, too."

Remus sits the plate down in the sink, shuts off the water, then flicks his fingers. Without a word, he turns and pulls Sirius into his arms. The glass Sirius was holding lands back into the water with a *glub* and a dull thunk as it settles against the bottom of the sink. In the next second, Sirius' hands come out of the water with a splash, dripping suds as he presses closer eagerly and slides his soapy fingers right into Remus' hair.

Sirius melts into the embrace in a way that, quite frankly, makes Remus feel like a god. It's supremely satisfying to have Sirius sink into him as if there's no other place he'd rather be, and that's nothing compared to how devastatingly wonderful it is to be holding Sirius at all.

"You do," Remus says when he pulls away, completely breathless. "You already do take care of me, Sirius, more than you could ever know."

Sirius hums, eyes still shut as he leans into Remus, looking soft and satisfied like Remus touching him has gotten him a little high. A smile curves his mouth, a tempting slope that Remus wants to press his mouth to—but he doesn't. He refrains, somehow, and settles for pressing a quick, fleeting kiss to Sirius' temple, far too tender to be anything other than a big, flashing sign for how he feels about Sirius.

"Oh, *hello.* Hi. Greetings. Good fucking morning, everybody," Sirius announces when Remus pulls away, and he's grinning now, then he's tossing his head back and cackling like he's just told the *best* joke. He sounds exhilarated.

"Stop it," Remus says, amused. He gives Sirius a little push. "Go get changed."

"The dishes—"

"I can do the dishes, Sirius, it's fine."

"I'll help you, *then* go change," Sirius says anyway, then bites his lip as he gazes at Remus in amusement. "I got suds in your hair, Remus. Let me just—"

Somehow, Sirius' hands in his hair lead to them laughing quietly together, playful and happy, and it takes them a while to actually finish the dishes.

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Regulus jerks awake to the feeling of something cold and strange sliding around his throat. He freezes as he peels his eyes open, and in the dark hollow of the tree, he can only just make out something moving along the length of his arm. He has the sneaking suspicion that he knows what that is.

Because it is what it is, Regulus can't be blamed for how he responds. In the next second, he's flailing as he launches himself outside of the trunk of the tree, hitting the ground and frantically yanking the snake from around his throat before it can complete a full circuit and strangle him. He scrambles up when it hits the ground in front of him, hissing and curling up stiffly, and then it tries to *strike,* and—

Well, the strike never lands. Regulus has already snapped his hand out, sending his dagger flying into the snake, where it proceeds to pin it to the ground. The snake writhes under the blade, and Regulus stumbles back, breathing hard. He turns his head away, face scrunching as he avoids watching it die, feeling his stomach churn. A few minutes pass with Regulus just standing there, breathing, his fingers touching his throat.

A snake. They nearly killed him with a fucking *snake.* Sirius wasn't joking about them punishing him. No doubt a gift from Horace Slughorn himself, in exchange for his haircut. Regulus scowls and proceeds to flip off the sky, then quickly stops when he realizes that the gamemakers could, in fact, set loose a thousand snakes on him at the moment.

Exhaling shakily and still trembling a bit from the leftover adrenaline, Regulus runs his hands through his hair and looks around warily. It's morning, but not too early by the sunshine that pours through the gaps in the trees, and it's no longer cold. It's as if it wasn't freezing last night at all, and instead, it's warm and sunny, almost cheerfully so.

There's a theory that Regulus wants to put to the test, but he'll do that later. For now, the most important thing he needs to focus on is getting water and food.

His supplies have a few options for nourishment, but he doesn't want to eat those until he has no *other* options. With a grimace, he looks at the snake, which is now dead.

Well. It's an option.

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Vanity makes it to morning, much to James' relief. It starts warming up when the sun appears again, and Vanity finally stops shivering and gets some color back to her cheeks. She even gets hot when she sits too close to the fire for too long.

They keep the fire going for a bit, boiling more water to help with their thirst. It's not a short process, considering they're using flat, curved stones that barely hold a swallow for each of them, but it's better than no water at all, and just drinking the water that trickles down the cave walls is a *very* bad idea. Sirius told them not to drink water without boiling it unless they could see the source of where it comes from.

James is admittedly hungry, and Sirius was right to say that he was going to wish he had eaten more, because he really does. He also wishes he'd enjoyed his last meal, but there's nothing to be done about that now. They've talked about setting up traps to catch something to eat, which James isn't really thrilled about, but there's nothing to be done about *that* either. They need to eat, so.

Peter and James both know how to make traps, seeing as they both learned in the survival portion of the training room, but Vanity never left the bug station to learn how. It makes James anxious, honestly, and so he insists that she let Peter teach her.

"But I don't want to know how to kill little bunnies and cute squirrels," Vanity tells him, horrified.

"Yeah, it's not my favorite party trick either, Vanity, but we could easily die of starvation," James replies apologetically, lips curling up when she wrinkles her nose. "It could be a while before anything is caught, so you two need to get traps set up as soon as possible."

"You're not helping?" Peter asks curiously, without accusation or judgement, like he already knows that James *would* help if he didn't have a reason not to.

James sighs and passes Vanity the rock for the third—and his last—rotation of water. "No, I have to go, but I'll be back."

"James, I don't think leaving is a good idea," Vanity comments with a frown. "We're safe here."

There's nowhere safe here, James thinks, but he doesn't say it. The words are spoken in Sirius' voice, and oh, James misses him like a gut-punch. Clearing his throat, he stands up and smiles tightly. "There's something I have to do. If you two catch something, don't wait for me, alright? Eat it. All of it. Don't save any. I'll try to see what I can find while I'm out."

"Be careful," Vanity whispers.

"I will," James assures her, his smile softening before he turns to leave, stepping out of the cave.

He doesn't make it very far before Peter is following and saying, rather sternly, "James."

"Yeah?" James asks, swiveling to face him.

"You're going after Regulus, aren't you?" Peter mumbles. His arms are crossed, and his lips are tipped down in a frown.

"Yes," James admits, not even bothering to lie. "I know he's alive out there, Pete. I need to find him."

"You can't actually expect to find him in one day," Peter says, looking incredulous. "James, you could be *killed* out there. You have no weapons, or—or *anything."*

"I know, but—I have to," James insists. "It may take longer than one day, you're right—"

"You'll freeze to death at night if you're alone! You start a fire outside the cave, and that will draw people right to you!"

"Peter—"

"If you leave, you're going to die," Peter snaps. "Is he worth that?"

James just stares at him and says, "Yes."

"For fuck's sake…" Peter drags a weary hand over his face and heaves a sigh. "Look, stop thinking with your cock for a moment, yeah? Just—have you considered how *stupid* it is? Not just for you, but for the rest of us? Me? Vanity?"

"I—excuse me?" James blurts out, startled.

Peter narrows his eyes. "James, you *know* Regulus is a target. The death eaters want him, and they *will* search every inch of this arena to find him. If you bring him back here, you're going to bring them right to our doorstep."

"So, what, I'm supposed to just leave him out there all alone?" James retorts sharply.

"Yes," Peter hisses. "This is the hunger games! It's not a fucking retreat in the forest. I am willing to bet anything that the death eaters are hunting Regulus as we speak, and as long as they're doing that, they're not coming for us. I say—"

"You might want to stop before you say anything more," James cuts in coldly, and Peter snaps his mouth shut. "I understand that you're scared, and worried, and so am I—but I'm not changing my mind. I'm going to find him."

"So, his life is more important to you than mine, than Vanity's?" Peter challenges.

James swallows and rasps, "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to," Peter replies harshly.

"I—" James looks away, a deep sigh escaping him. It's not about weighing lives, not to him. He knows, realistically, that only one person can make it home, and since he's already decided that he's going to do everything to make sure that person is Regulus… Well, that makes taking care of others who also want to survive much more difficult. He shakes his head and looks at Peter helplessly. "I need to go."

"You're blinded by your feelings for him," Peter announces with something like resignation, "and that's going to get you killed." *Oh, you have no idea how aware of that I am,* James thinks, because that always was the plan, wasn't it? "I don't like it, because I like you. I want you to be alright, James. I want you to be safe, and—and I don't want to do this alone. Vanity needs us *both."*

"You and Vanity will be safe here until I get back. You're right, I don't know when that will be, or what it will take, but I will eventually come back," James promises.

"You can't do that if you're dead," Peter whispers, his eyes wide. "I *really* don't want you to die. You're my friend, and I—I understand that Regulus is important to you, I really do, but I just... I'm worried, alright?"

"Do you *not* want me to come back, then?" James asks, holding his gaze.

Peter frowns, then shakes his head. "No, James, that's not what I was saying. Just…" He deflates a little, swallowing hard and looking at James as if he's already mourning him. In the end, all he says is, "Just be careful, yeah?"

"Yeah," James mumbles, "you too, Pete."

~•~

Regulus hasn't had anything to drink in over twenty-four hours, which doesn't sound too bad until it's taken into consideration just how active he's been in the last twenty-four hours. The running, the swinging, the freezing—it's all taken a toll already, so quickly, and he isn't really letting himself rest. As sore and exhausted and dehydrated as he is, Regulus wastes no time in trying to find a source of water.

It's turning out to be a difficult task, honestly. He's being very careful today, staying silent and watchful wherever he goes, never lingering in one place for too long. The forest is alive with noise, creaking trees and whistling wind and various wildlife on the run, him among them. He's acutely aware that the death eaters are still out there, looking for him, and there's no doubt that they know he killed Avery, so he's sure they're doing everything they can to find him.

All-in-all, Regulus is having a shit day. His head hurts from the thirst. His face and mouth hurt from the fight with Avery. His whole body hurts from all the effort of climbing, and then being pelted with rocks, and *then* nearly freezing to death through the night. Everything just fucking *hurts,* and Regulus is in a very bad mood because of it.

It doesn't help that every snap of a branch, or every rustle of a bush, could be someone coming to kill him, so he's on edge on top of everything else.

His vigilance does pay off eventually, though, when he follows all signs towards water. He knows he's getting closer when he presses his hand to the ground and lifts up leaves, rubbing them between his fingers as he examines them in silence. They're damp. Somewhere around here, there's water.

He finds it less than an hour later, stepping through a break in the trees to find a small brook. It's very thin and runs down the weak incline of the hill before him, a tiny waterfall that trickles past stone. It's fresh, though, and *clean.* Safe. Regulus can't stop himself from diving for it a little recklessly, cupping his hands together to take a deep gulp, eyes sinking shut.

You should have checked the area, says the voice in his head that sounds very much like Sirius.

"Shut up," Regulus mutters out loud, to no one. Lovely. One day in the arena, and he's already going mad.

After drinking a bit more—not too much and not too fast, or he'll get sick—Regulus takes the time to clean his hands. Properly clean them, getting under his nails and between the wrinkles on his knuckles. Still, if he unfocuses his eyes, he can see flashes of Avery's blood stained on them.

He can't clean his hands forever, so he forces himself to stop and goes into his bag to get the container that will hold water. He fills it, nurses at least half, then refills it. The threat of dehydration held at bay for now, Regulus stands back up, only to go still when he hears a branch snap behind him.

Slowly, Regulus turns around, dagger in hand, then feels a bolt of shock run through him when he sees what's waiting there. It is quite possibly the largest spider Regulus has ever seen in his life, except it's—it's something else, too. The spider only has six legs, instead of eight. Where the face of the spider usually would be, there's a torso protruding out high up, along with two arms, and Avery's face. It's like a...centaur, if instead of the bottom half being a horse, it's a fucking *spider.* Oh, and Avery's face is practically split in half with deadly pinchers that click in blatant threat, his eyes black and gleaming.

"You've *got* to be fucking joking," Regulus hisses under his breath, utterly appalled. He knew the gamemakers were sick, and it's not like he's going to be the first in line to say Avery wasn't a shit person, but to disrespect the dead like this? To make them out to be a caricature of themselves? And also, why the *fuck* can't Regulus catch a break?

Regulus can understand that they're using the visage of Avery to unnerve him, but frankly, a spider the size of a fucking bear would have done the trick. He could do without the extra

theatrics, thanks. The...Avery spider...thing sways forward, the legs shuffling in a, frankly, creepy way, and the pinchers click yet again in an ominous pattern.

It's still not lunging, so Regulus tries to think of what the best route is in this situation. Fight? He can throw his daggers, sure, but attacking head on will get his head bitten off, and he knows it. Run? He won't exactly be able to run *quietly* with this thing fucking chasing him, and it's going to draw attention at some point, unless he can get away in time. Climb? Oh, he fucking hates climbing, and can't spiders climb? He is *not* about to put that theory to the test. Who does he look like? *Evan?* No. So, running it is. Brilliant.

With a deep breath, Regulus turns and he *runs*.

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James has located berries. *Safe* berries, which he knows for sure because he learned about them in the training room. He's still cautious just to be safe, pressing a berry to his lips, waiting a few minutes, then to his tongue, waiting another few minutes, and when nothing tingles or stings or goes numb, he trusts the berries enough to eat one. When, after a few minutes of nothing going wrong, James gathers more to eat.

It's not exactly a full meal, but it's better than nothing, and he's had a whole lot of nothing to be sure about that. He eats a few handfuls until the throbbing in his temples subside, then takes another handful with him to pick over as he carries on.

He's been walking for a long time now, making his way back towards the murder river and cave everyone started at. Maybe the river has dried up by now, and if no one is around, it'd be a good idea to get some supplies and weapons for himself, but also Peter and Vanity. Besides, when you're a target, having ways to defend yourself is *crucial,* and James seriously doubts Regulus would go too far from it without at least one dagger.

James himself is lugging around the sturdiest stick he could find on his travels. He doesn't particularly want to use it, but it's dense and strong enough to do damage if he *has* to.

Boom!

The sound of a cannon going off startles James enough that he drops his berries, his head snapping up as his heart starts to race. Again, his first thought is, immediately, *Regulus?* A moment later there's a shrill, high-pitched shriek in the distance that makes his blood turn to ice.

Before James realizes what he's doing, he's running right towards it at full tilt without a second thought. That scream was one of pure *distress,* nothing short of abject terror ringing through the trees. Something is wrong. Really wrong.

James doesn't know how long he's crashing through the forest before he realizes someone is crashing right back towards him, running in his direction like their life depends on it. He makes out that, no, there's the sound of *two* sets of footsteps, which is confirmed a moment later when he collides with two people so hard that they all go rolling.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!* Run!"

"Wait, wait, Irene—"

There's a groan, and James picks his head up to see Irene scrambling to her feet, frantically patting herself all over her body and looking close to tears. Mathias is working their way to their feet, face scrunched into a grimace as they cup their side. There's a gash under their fingers, looking rough but not fatal, sort of just like they were scraped against a tree.

"Mathias," Irene chokes out, "what the fuck?! What the *fuck* was that? Did you—did you see what I—"

"The giant fucking spider Avery turned into? Yeah!" Mathias bursts out. "Yeah, I saw it, but—but I don't think it was chasing *us,* Irene. Look, it's gone, see?"

Irene releases a whimper and gives a full-body shudder, still swiping at her arms. "Oh, I *hate* spiders. Hate them so much. It was so big. It was so—"

James clears his throat.

"Oh, hi, James," Mathias greets, sounding winded.

"Avery turned into a spider?" James asks, confused. "I thought Avery was dead? Died last night, didn't he?"

"Oh, he's *definitely* dead," Irene spits out in revulsion. "The spider is Hallow-made, James. One of their creepy fucking creations. So, it's—it's like the top half is Avery, and the bottom half is a spider. And it has these pinchers—it's so bad, you have no idea. It just ripped someone's *head* off!"

"Who?" James demands. "Who's head?"

"No idea. Some girl," Irene says.

"Nearly got me next," Mathias mutters wearily, gesturing to their side with a wince.

"But it's after—" Irene stops and looks at James, falling silent as she meets his eyes. The look on her face makes dread settle into his stomach immediately. "James…"

"The spider," James croaks, "who is it after?"

Mathias exhales deeply and shares a look with Irene, and then they hold up a hand like they're trying to keep James calm. "It was really unfortunate timing, honestly. Irene and I were just running back after checking the river—"

"It's still there, by the way," Irene mutters.

"Which doesn't make sense, because he had—" Mathias glances at Irene, eyebrows raised. "You saw it, didn't you?"

"I saw," Irene confirms.

"Saw *what?"* James asks desperately.

Irene clears her throat. "Well, we were running back when, out of nowhere, Regulus comes sprinting right past us like—"

"Regulus? You saw Regulus? Is he—"

"James, shush, I'm *getting* there."

"Well, talk faster!" James bursts out.

"He came rushing past us like something was chasing him," Mathias picks up where Irene left off. "It happened so fast, and then this girl comes sprinting right across from us, just the wrong place at the wrong time, and the—spider literally ripped her head off right in front of us. Irene screamed, Regulus was still just running, and then the spider lunged at me next. I jumped out of the way in time, but scraped myself on a tree pretty badly, and then Irene helped me up, and we ran in the opposite direction. It's—James, it's after *Regulus."*

"Fuck," James says. "Fuck, okay, what direction?"

Mathias gapes at him. "James, you can't be serious! That thing is *huge,* and—and there's no way—I'm sorry, but there's no way Regulus can survive that. He's as good as—"

"I haven't heard a cannon yet," James grinds out. "Which direction, Mathias?"

"Towards the river," Mathias mumbles.

"James, I don't think you'll be able to kill it," Irene says warily.

Blowing out a deep breath, James starts backing up. "Only one way to find out. Hey, if you keep going further into the forest for a few miles, then turn left and keep walking for an hour or two, you'll find a cave. Not the easiest to find, it's fairly secluded, but Peter and Vanity are there. If you find it, make sure to announce yourselves when you're going in. There's water there, and Peter is already setting traps to catch something, and you can burn a fire there without it drawing any attention. Just—it's the safest thing we've found so far, so you can go there if you like. Okay, okay, I have to—"

"James," Mathias hisses, "come *with* us. Don't—"

"I can't," James calls back. "I need to find Regulus."

Irene makes a sound of frustration. "You're going to get yourself *killed!"*

James doesn't bother sticking around longer to explain that that was technically the plan from the beginning anyway.

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Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuckshitfuck, Regulus thinks as he runs faster than he ever has in his life, possibly. He can hear it behind him, the scuttle of legs clamoring over the forest floor, and it's fucking *horrifying.* It's getting too close, and Regulus is—

Regulus is going to die.

"Fuck!" Regulus bursts out, fully just *pissed off* at this point. He swivels around and throws his dagger with all his might, grunting as he stumbles from the force. It's not an ideal situation to be aiming in, running and zigzagging past trees sporadically to slow the spider down, *but* Regulus has good aim anyway. It hits the Avery part directly in the chest, which flings it back with a low hiss. Do spiders hiss?

Well, this one does. It hisses as it rolls, the pinchers clicking, and Regulus resumes running. He manages to get some distance this time, and he's instantly relieved when he breaks through the trees circling the original field they all started in. He doesn't slow down. Instead, he picks up his pace, sprinting right for the river that is no longer iced over. So, his theory is correct; it thaws in the day, and the bridge of ice forms at night, meaning weapons and supplies are only available then.

Regulus can hear the spider gaining on him again, especially without any trees to navigate around. Gritting his teeth, Regulus runs straight at the river, chanting, "Come on, come on, come on, you fucking—"

His whole body sways frantically and with no finesse as the spider gets close enough to dart out with its pinchers, only *just* missing him by a few inches. The river comes closer, closer, so close he could dive right into it, and then—

Regulus abruptly slams himself down, sliding along the ground in a harsh skid as the spider tries to strike down at him, but the momentum keeps it moving forward right above him. He splays out on the ground as the spider goes skittering past, tumbling into the water with a loud splash. Immediately, hands shoot up out the water to grab onto it and drag it under.

On the ground, Regulus slumps on his back, breathing hard, then he starts laughing. It's either laugh, or cry, and so he laughs. It's a hiccupping sort of laugh, and it tapers off fairly quickly as he tries to calm down. Fuck, that was *insane.*

He can barely wrap his head around what just happened. He can't believe it *worked,* and that was his only shot as it was, so some part of him had fully expected to die. Not being dead is so much better, frankly. There's something heady and horrible and nausea-inducing about nearly dying, particularly by having your head ripped off by a giant spider mutated with the man you previously killed. It's literally a living nightmare, and Regulus keeps waiting to wake up.

He can't wake up, because this is reality. How? Fucking *how?*

Blowing out a deep breath, Regulus pushes himself up onto his elbows and squints at the river. He's uncomfortably close to it, so he starts scooting back, not willing to risk it. Once he's far enough away, he stands up and is immediately grateful for the foresight to move away, because he stumbles a bit. The rush of adrenaline is coming down, leaving him shaky and exhausted, but he can't can't afford to rest right now. He gets his balance and draws out a dagger from his right thigh holster.

Great, now Regulus is down a dagger. He huffs and tosses his free hand up, genuinely just—agitated with this entire experience. Not that he expected it to be a vacation or anything, but *honestly.* It's only the second day, and he's already come close to being dead more often than he hasn't.

He wonders if the gamemakers are annoyed that he used their designs of the arena to his advantage. Well, they can get fucked, if they are. Bastards.

Regulus shoots one final glare at the water, then starts jogging back towards the woods, but on the opposite side this time. He knows better than to stick around. All that running and that scream Irene so helpfully released was surely enough to draw attention, and the last thing Regulus needs is more company.

It's as he's making it to the other side that he hears a shout in the distance, and Regulus doesn't even stop to find out who it is or what it's about. He just puts on a burst of speed with a groan and keeps moving.

Regulus takes a sharp left and sprints for a while, at least until he finds a large gathering of rocks. Very big rocks. Boulders, really. They're all leaning against each other, and Regulus dives behind them, because he needs just one fucking *second.* If something else is chasing him already, he's going to lose his mind. He just—he *has* to catch his breath, or he'll die. But, if someone catches him while he's doing so, he'll die.

Frantically, Regulus hunches down to draw his water from his bag, drinking some of it in between his heaving breaths, doing his absolute best to stay quiet. Just for a second, he rests

in place, eyes sinking shut as he leans his head back against the boulder he's crouched behind. His body is so sore, but his heart is slowly, oh so slowly, calming.

A cannon abruptly goes off, making him jolt as his eyes snap open, and there's a harsh *crack* of a stick breaking underfoot. Regulus holds his breath. Waiting. Ears straining. The whole world seems to go quiet, and he flexes his fingers around his dagger, perched on his toes as he slowly turns his head.

There's no water nearby. Regulus knows this, because the leaves are dry. Regulus knows *that,* because he can hear them crunching as someone moves closer, step after step.

Regulus' heart thumps as his jaw clenches, and he slowly and silently eases himself to his feet, eyes narrowing. The person gets closer to the edge of the rocks. Too close. Regulus has come too fucking far and done too fucking much to die in the middle of pausing for a drink of water. He's just—not doing it. He is *not* about to die, and he isn't going to run either.

One more step. If that person takes one more step, that's the last step they'll ever take. Regulus will make sure of it.

~•~

James' back thuds against the rock so hard that he loses his breath, and in less than a second, there's a blade tucked up under his chin, giving his throat a cold kiss.

Regulus looks—feral. That's the first thing that James thinks when looking at him. His eyes are sharp to a chaotic point, his pupils shrinking down to a tiny pinprick, the whites of his eyes showing. Like a hunted animal lashing out—that's what he looks like right now. His hair is a mess, there's dirt and grass in it, and his cheek has a bruise blooming under a small cut on it. The corner of his mouth is swollen, his bottom lip split.

Frankly, Regulus looks like he's been through *Hell.*

He's absolutely gorgeous.

Of course he is. James doesn't think there's a state Regulus could be in that he wouldn't find absolutely, unequivocally lovely, just because it's him. That being acknowledged, James admittedly feels concern more so than appreciation, no matter how beautiful Regulus is, always.

James thinks Regulus was going to kill him. No, he *knows* Regulus was going to kill him, because he was looking into Regulus' eyes, and he *saw* it. Regulus fully intended to kill whoever had found him, no hesitation, and then he realized it was James. He saw James, and he froze like someone pressed his pause button. He's still frozen, not even breathing.

It fills James with a sense of mounting dread to think about what has already pushed Regulus to this point. This desperate, ferocious point of defense and survival where murder comes to mind first. A form of self-defense that's become so normal already, only on the second day, that he's doing it instinctively.

There's a shift. Regulus finally exhales, and his fingers flex around the handle of his dagger, which is still poised right against James' throat. Their eyes are locked, and James can feel a tension in the air around them, something charged, like the whole world is holding its breath to see what Regulus is going to do. James already knows what Regulus is going to do, because he's staring into his eyes, and he can see it.

So, James smiles and presses forward into the blade until it digs in just a little, then whispers, "You're hesitating, love."

"Fuck off," Regulus snaps immediately. "I still *could."*

"Well? Go on, then. *Do it,"* James says, then raises his eyebrows and grins wider, waiting.

Regulus' nostrils flare, his jaw clenching so hard that a muscle in his cheek jumps. He steps closer, eyes narrowing, and the blade presses in further, dangerously close to breaking skin. James holds steady, still just grinning, watching as frustration visibly flashes across Regulus' face.

A beat. Another beat. Then, with a low, furious sound, Regulus snatches his hand back, taking his dagger with him as he whirls away with a sharp curse. He paces away, then paces right back, pointing a finger in James' face.

"I nearly killed you, you fucking idiot!" Regulus scolds, and James doesn't know what makes him angrier—that James nearly died, or that he didn't, because Regulus didn't kill him. He's a complex, complicated man, honestly. "You can't just *go up* to people like that, James. Not out here. Are you mad? Do you want to die? You could have fucking *died!"*

"Right, yeah," James says carelessly, peeling away from the boulder to reach out and capture Regulus' chin in his hand, tilting his face to the side so he can look at the state of his cheek and mouth. Regulus huffs, scowling as he turns his eyes away, but he doesn't try too terribly hard to pull back. James lifts his hand to brush his fingers along the outside of the bruise. "How did this happen?"

"Got into a fight," Regulus mumbles.

"With the spider?"

"You saw it?"

"No," James admits. "I ran into Irene and Mathias on the way to you. They told me. Is it—did you lose it?"

Regulus snorts weakly. "Yeah, something like that."

"Reg?" James raises his eyebrows at him.

"It's in the river," Regulus murmurs. "I tricked it into falling in. It's not a problem anymore."

James hums and slides his hand down to gently brush his thumb over Regulus' split lip. Regulus doesn't flinch, but James *is* being very careful. "So, this?"

"Got into a fight," Regulus repeats, quieter this time. James flicks his gaze up from Regulus' mouth to his eyes, and Regulus looks back without wavering. "With Avery."

"Did you kill him?" James asks softly.

Regulus swallows thickly, but his voice is steady when he says, "Yes."

"He did this to you?" James mutters, tilting Regulus' face again, and Regulus apparently has had enough, because he rips his chin out of James' grasp and steps back.

"Yes, well, you should see the other guy," Regulus says sarcastically as he stomps over to grab his bag. He fakes a gasp, then his voice goes flat. "Oh, wait, you can't. Because he's dead."

"Regulus," James murmurs, his voice as gentle as his hands, because he can see past all his sarcasm and mockery. Looking into his eyes, Regulus is brittle. "I don't doubt it was done in self-defense. You didn't—"

"Shut up, James. You weren't there," Regulus hisses, grabbing up a canister that he screws the lid back on. "How do you know I didn't chase him down and kill him, hm? You *don't."*

"I do," James replies, just as simply.

"No, you don't."

"Really? Coming from someone who couldn't kill me?"

"Avery isn't *you,"* Regulus says sharply, then immediately grimaces as soon as the words fall out of his mouth. He shakes his head and stuffs the canister in his bag, zipping it up and putting it on. "Don't take that like it means something. It *doesn't.* You're not a stranger. He is. Well, he *was."*

"Right, because killing strangers is less difficult than killing someone you know," James replies flatly.

"Well, it's certainly easier," Regulus retorts.

James heaves a sigh. "Look, let's just—we can circle back to morality and murder in a moment, yeah? I have questions. First of all, how did you get daggers? The river—"

"It ices over at night," Regulus cuts in. "You can get across the ice without being grabbed, so that's when supplies and weapons are available. I—are you thirsty?"

"I mean, a bit, but I had water before—" James blinks when Regulus turns his back to him. "Er, what?"

"My bag, James. For fuck's sake, get the water out of my bag," Regulus says, sounding exasperated. When James apparently doesn't move fast enough for him, Regulus looks over his shoulder with a glare that could curl paint. James springs into action, reaching for the bag. "There's a granola bar and a small bag of dried strips of meat. Pick one of those. Oh, and there's a hatchet at the bottom. Take that, too."

"You got me a hatchet?"

"Shut up."

"Aw, *Regulus—"*

"James, I can still stab you."

Chuckling, James resurfaces from the bag with his loot, politely zipping it up again. "Mhm, sure. So, the river ices over. How did you manage to work that out?"

"Rather against my will, actually," Regulus grumbles as he turns back around. "I got over the river before it iced over. It was—there was this whole thing with Evan and vines and just…" He sighs wearily. "It's a long story. To make it short, Evan made it back across, but I didn't. The death eaters found us, so Willa and Axus went after him, and I was stuck at the cave. When it iced over, they chased me. Avery didn't stop to grab a weapon, so he caught up to me and tried to bash my head in with a rock. Didn't quite work out for him."

"Fucking hell," James mumbles with a wince. Oh, Regulus has been going *through* it, hasn't he? "And—and the spider?"

"Just showed up," Regulus says. He arches an eyebrow when James stares at him. "Yeah, I'm not pleased about my shit luck either. That's not to mention that Mulciber, Bernice, Quinn, and Hodge are all out looking for me right now."

"And Evan?"

"I'm not sure. I'm assuming he got away, or I'm hoping Willa and Axus met up with the other death eaters again. There's been two deaths since last night, one which was a woman we never spoke to. The other… We won't know until tonight."

James shakes his head. "Eight dead already, and it's the second day. Sixteen left, including us. Vanity nearly didn't make it through the night, almost froze to death, so this is…"

"Brutal?" Regulus asks flatly. "Yeah, I noticed. You said—so, you're with Vanity?"

"Vanity and Peter," James says with a nod. "I sent Irene and Mathias to them when I saw them. There's a really nice cave, very secluded and hard to spot, and there's a source of water

there. Traps are being put up, so we'll have food, too."

Regulus nods sharply, shouldering his bag. "Good. Go back."

"Sure, come on," James replies, reaching out to grab Regulus by the strap of his bag and forcibly tug him along.

"James," Regulus snaps, smacking his hand off his bag with a scowl. Of course. Of *course* he would be stubborn about this. Why wouldn't he? "I said *you* go back. I didn't say anything about me coming with you."

"Well, you are," James declares, willing to be just as stubborn when the need arises. He makes a swipe for Regulus' bag again, but Regulus dances out of range. James slowly narrows his eyes. "Regulus—"

"Don't take that tone with me, James."

"Oh, that's *rich,* coming from you."

Regulus mocks a pout. "Oh, you poor, poor baby."

"You're coming with me," James informs him, not at all joking. He means it. "If I have to tie you up and carry you all the way there, Regulus Black, you are *coming with me."*

"I'd like to see you fucking try."

"Oh, you would, would you? I never took you for the type to be into bondage, but you know, I can make that w—"

"That was quite literally the last moment you should have used as an excuse to flirt, James. What is *wrong* with you?"

"Listen, I see my opportunity, I take it."

"Oh, *please."* Regulus scoffs and rolls his eyes, then darts backwards when James lunges for him again. He raises his eyebrows, looking smug. "Stop making a fool of yourself. You know I'm faster than you are, and I will simply *run."*

"Then I'll chase you," James announces with a shrug.

"That's stalking, and it's creepy."

"Regulus, stop being stubborn. There is water, shelter, and *safety* that I'm trying to get you to. Why won't you just—"

"There are at least four people—if not six— trying to hunt me down and kill me," Regulus hisses, "and that's not counting that everything seems to go wrong around me. All your little allies, your *friends,* they'll all be as good as dead the moment I come within five feet of them. I will be *fine* on my own, as I have been, and *you* will be fine looking after your little group, of which includes a fifteen year old girl, whose death I *refuse* to have on my conscience. Now, go *back."*

James is pretty sure his heart breaks a bit. He can feel his face softening. "Regulus, you're not going to get anyone killed, alright? I *told you,* it's safe. Let's just—regroup there, yeah? I won't make you stay if you don't want to, but just—at least take a fucking break. You're *exhausted.* Please just come."

"No," Regulus declares, then turns on his heel and leaves. James follows, of course. "James, I said *no."*

"Yeah, I know what you said," James mutters, tapping his hatchet against the side of his leg as he walks.

"If you heard me, why aren't you going away?"

"If you won't come with me, then I'll just come with you."

Regulus comes to a screeching halt. He stares at him, that stubborn glint in his eyes again. "No."

"Yes."

"No."

"You know, saying it with more emphasis isn't going to change my answer," James tells him, amused.

"You're not coming with me," Regulus orders, allowing no further argument as he whips around and starts walking again.

James follows yet again, because of *course* he does. He can be stubborn, too, and he just found Regulus. He's not about to leave him now, not for anything. He's staying with him, all the way until the end, no matter what it takes. His goal is still the same; it's not changing for anything.

Regulus ignores him for a few minutes, then predictably gets agitated enough that he swings back around, and then he has his dagger to James' throat again in a clear warning. James doesn't even flinch, and really, it's sort of cute that Regulus actually thinks the threat of death could keep him away.

"I'm not leaving you," James declares honestly, holding his gaze. "You'll have to kill me."

Regulus inhales sharply.

James touches his tongue to his top lip, then feels his lips tug up into a smirk. "So, what's it going to be?"

Chapter End Notes

okay, you should all know that irene freaking out about the spider is literally how i react about spiders, no matter their size. she's so valid for that, actually. i NEVER rewatch chamber of secrets because the spider scenes genuinely freak me out. like, ron is such a good best friend, because if that was me, i would have abandoned harry in that forest. actually, no, i wouldn't have followed the spiders in the first place 😭😭😭 yall are sleeping on ron. he was braver than me at TWELVE. i would have taken one look at aragog and immediately fainted, like no joke.

the avery-spider was inspired by my own fears, admittedly, because a spider the size of a bear would make me leave this world in a swift exit. i see one the size of my fingernail and im ready to set everything on fire, so kudos to regulus, irene, and mathias for continuing on in spite of what they saw. rip to the nameless woman who died, though 😔

circling back, james basically spent this entire chapter reminding all his allies what his priorities are, and they all basically went: the mean guy with daggers??? the one who looks like he's willing to kill everyone??? bro, you're gonna DIE. and james was just like: yes, im aware of this, did i stutter?

circling back even FURTHER, i find it hilarious that remus and sirius were having a cute little morning—as they deserve—and then it just cuts to regulus nearly being strangled by a snake 💀 remus and sirius: 🥰❤🥺🤱 regulus: 😳😟🐍🤺 lmaoooo the WHIPLASH

also, that scene where regulus was running to the river and he sent the spider into it—i want you all to know that sirius was freaking the fuck out the entire time. we get a mention of that in the next chapter, but i think you should all know he nearly had a heartattack while he was watching.

also², i think it's funny that regulus is just so annoyed by everything that's going on. like, he's so fussy and irritated. if he could give a review, he would NOT be giving this arena five stars 😭😭😭 he isn't having a good time, HELP. he's so grumpy, but to be honest, i would also be pissed off about everything if it was me. actually, if it was me, id

probably be dead by the first day, so maybe not. regulus, losing one of his daggers: 🙄😒😤

and finally, the jegulus reunion!!! yay, they're back together again. what could possibly go wrong? lmaoooo not regulus three chapters ago being like: i will not hesitate to kill you. regulus now: i nearly killed you, you idiot!!! like, king, where was that energy a couple of days ago??? leave him alone, he is NOT having a good day. meanwhile, james: oh, he was going to kill me... anyway, he's so pretty 🥰 like, babe, you're SO unwell. GET HELP. regulus put his dagger to james' throat TWICE, and this man is thriving.

anyway, let me shut up rambling. let me know all your thoughts and theories, i love them all so, so much!!! thank you for all the comments and lovely feedback!

oh, and the number/people update!

tributes remaining in the arena as of this chapter: 16
those who have died in the arena as of this chapter: avery, dylan, and six unnamed/unknown others

A Reveal

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter:

-references to murder and death (because of the whole arena thing, ya know how it is)
-references/discussions of children dying/being in danger (again, because of the arena)
-references to wildlife being killed for food (arena again, but nothing heavy)
-references to past deaths that have already happened
-a little bit of spice 🌶 (nothing too explicit, though it seems like it will be, but i promise it's not)
-angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus remembers the first—but certainly not the last—time he thought James was stupid. He was thirteen and James had just kissed a girl in front of him. It was the first time since he was ten years old that he thought James was anything other than wonderful. With one kiss to someone who wasn't him, Regulus felt very justified in finding him stupid, at the time.

For about a week, Regulus hated James, actually. Glared at him whenever he came near, not that James noticed. Stopped talking to him, not that James cared. He even called James stupid right to his face in a fit of pubescent anger, and all that did was make James laugh. But, for a week, James was the stupidest boy in the world, in Regulus' mind, and he hated his guts with a burning passion that rivaled the sun.

Then, of course, James brought him a flower he found on the ground, because he knew Regulus liked to press flowers in between the pages of his journals, and Regulus melted so quickly that being set on fire couldn't have exposed him faster. James didn't mean anything by it, just a mindless gesture of kindness that he was sometimes prone to, usually without any warning whatsoever, but Regulus tumbled right back into his feelings like the slippery slope it already was.

James has always been that infuriating mixture of wonderful and stupid, for as long as Regulus can remember. When he was very young, ten to thirteen, he was completely blinded by his feelings to see all the stupid parts. At twenty-five, he doesn't have those issues anymore.

"James, for the last time, *shut up,"* Regulus hisses, glaring at him over his shoulder. The idiot is *beat-boxing.* They're in the middle of a death arena, and he's beat-boxing. Regulus should have killed him.

"Sorry," James says sheepishly, tossing his hatchet from one hand to the other. "I'm just...anxious. Do we really have to?"

"Yes."

"But—"

"James, we have to eat," Regulus cuts in firmly.

"Right," James mumbles, "but—"

"Shh," Regulus shushes sharply, reaching back to grab James' arm to yank him down into a crouch. As predicted, the wait has paid off, and there it is—a small deer approaching the edge of the small brook. It could be a doe, or a fawn.

Slowly, Regulus shifts to raise himself up from his perch, lifting his hand as he inhales. Just as he exhales, preparing to launch his dagger forward, a hand catches his wrist and James whispers, "Wait. Reg, wait, *look.* It's—they're a *family."*

Sure enough, a doe comes creeping out of the shrubbery to join what's clearly a fawn, their black button-noses meeting for a moment like something out of a wholesome child film. Regulus swivels his head to stare at James, who is looking at him with big, brown eyes and stupidly long eyelashes.

"James," Regulus warns quietly.

"Regulus, it's a baby. A little baby with its mum." James' eyes grow more beseeching, and he sounds so, so sad.

"We have to *eat."*

"I—I know, but...it's a baby. They just want a little water. Come off it, we have the berries I showed you."

"We need *protein,* and you know that," Regulus says softly.

James makes a small sound. "We have that dried meat, don't we? We can just—we'll eat that, and the little family can carry on, yeah? Please? Regulus, it's a little baby."

"Perfect size for us to share," Regulus mutters, and James looks more stricken by this than he did when Regulus admitted to killing Avery. Regulus rolls his eyes, then heaves a sigh and reaches out to grab a rock, tossing it towards the doe and fawn without hitting them, shaking his head as they run off quickly. Regulus glances at James. "Your spine has the consistency of a marshmallow. Just what the hell are you going to do when you need to defend yourself, James? Or when you're *actually* starving?"

"Well, it's not a current issue, so I don't see the point in *making* it one," James tells him. "We have the dried meat, as well as the berries, and also water. We didn't *need* to kill them."

"The dried meat is also deer, you do realize?"

"Not *those* deer. I saved them from their fate."

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Regulus scoffs and swivels on the spot to sit down on the ground with a huff. James looks pleased with himself, the prick. Regulus cannot *believe* that he's stuck with quite literally the most soft-hearted man in this arena. He tilts his head up to the sky, like he's looking directly at Sirius with an expression that clearly states: *are you seeing this shit?*

If Regulus closes his eyes, he can almost picture Sirius' grin and hear his faint laughter. Regulus can't close his eyes, though. Not here. Not when it's not safe.

Ten minutes later, Regulus is sitting across from James, sharing the dried meat and berries, as well as passing the canister of water back and forth. It's not exactly a glamorous meal, honestly, but it'll do.

"I wonder what Sirius is doing," James mumbles in between bites, his eyebrows furrowed.

Regulus snorts. "Two days, and you already miss him, don't you?"

"Dreadfully," James admits.

"You always get like this," Regulus says, shaking his head. "Every year when he's mentoring in the Hallow, you just roam around the district like you're missing half of yourself."

"Feels that way."

"Oh, spare me."

James clicks his tongue. "Don't be a prick. I genuinely do get sad when he's away."

"Poor baby," Regulus coos at him, lips curling up when James squints at him. "Fucking hell, you're ridiculous. If you love him so much, why isn't *he* the one you had feelings for, hm?"

"Well, for one thing, what we have is special and goes beyond the bounds of romance, reaching unfathomable lengths that no one can understand but us, so jot that down," James says primly, and Regulus tries so hard not to laugh at his snooty, defensive tone. It doesn't

work, really, and James' eyes grow softer when he sees him laughing. "For another thing, I had my eye on his little brother."

"Scandalous," Regulus comments.

"An outrage," James agrees, chuckling. "I think—I don't know, maybe if our lives had gone differently, maybe we would have ended up together. You and me, I mean. That's wishful thinking, isn't it?"

Regulus rolls a berry in between his fingers, thoughtful. He knows what James means. If Sirius hadn't volunteered, if the games hadn't existed at all, what would they be now? He thinks he knows, and it's sort of heartwrenching. "No, that's not wishful thinking. I think you're right."

"What? Really?" James bolts up, his eyes wide as he stares at him in blatant shock. "You—I mean, you really think so?"

"Like I told you," Regulus says, "we're a great, big tragedy."

It seems to catch up to James then that this revelation isn't something to celebrate, but rather something to mourn. His delight fades out into disappointment like a wilting flower, and Regulus has never hated this world more than he does in this moment. This stupid, fucked up world that took something from them before they even got to have it.

Regulus can picture it clearly, the life they could have lived. One so sweet that it makes his teeth ache. Two days after his birthday, if his name hadn't been called, James' lingering looks would have turned into lingering smiles into lingering touches. He would have shown up at Regulus' door, ruffling his hair nervously, and Regulus would have known instantly what that meant, what it all meant. He wouldn't have believed it at first, but James wouldn't have left him in suspense for long. James is very impulsive, and it wouldn't have taken him much time at all to make a move.

Of course, Regulus would have felt like all his dreams were coming true, and he would have been wrapped around James' finger with no shame. So in love that he was sick with it. Their

first kiss, a secret in the dark that left them both with grins and butterflies in their stomachs. Tentative smiles and small brushes of their hands, just two young boys growing up and falling in love, slowly and safely.

It wouldn't all be easy, because nothing ever is. There would be the hurtle in getting Sirius to be okay with it, especially when he was so young and fiercely territorial of his and James' friendship. He would come around eventually, though, because at the end of the day, he would see that they were happy, and he would have understood. Probably would have taken some time and plenty of arguments, but he'd get there.

Then, of course, Regulus would have had issues with his parents, because they *never* approved of James. They barely tolerated him as Sirius' best friend, but as Regulus' boyfriend? Regulus would have been no better off than Andromeda, completely thrown out for his choice in a partner, but Regulus wouldn't have cared. He would have gone right to James, and Sirius would have come with him, and that would be that.

It would have been a good life. A really, truly good life. Calm. Peaceful. The three of them happy, and safe, and together. Regulus can see it. He can almost reach out and *touch* it. James chasing him around in the rain before swinging him into a kiss. Sirius running past to shove them in a puddle while cackling. Late nights by crackling fires, soft kisses in the low morning light, the steady comforts of family, and no pain. It would have been a life full of love.

Instead, there's this. There's a name called and a volunteer. There's a freshly fifteen year old boy crying into his pillow every night because he's scared his older brother is going to die. There's a nearly sixteen year old boy coming apart at the seams because he's watching his best friend fight for his life every day, not knowing if he'll win. There's Regulus, so *angry* at the world that he shuts down and hides away from everyone, even the one boy he adores. There's James, so *desperate* to do everything he can that he's too much, too relentless, never quitting, even when there's nothing he can actually do.

That's it. That's where it all unravels, until the close-knit reassurance of the lives they could have had comes loose, and this is all that's left. A great, big fucking tragedy.

~•~

"Do you think we would have gotten married?"

It's been a few hours—James thinks, considering the way the sun is starting to set—and they haven't talked since their last conversation, in which Regulus just casually stated that they would have been together if their lives had gone differently.

At first, James had been *ecstatic* about it, then inevitably got upset when he realized that it would never, *could* never, be a reality for them. What's more heartbreaking to James than all the things he could easily picture for that life they'll never get to live is all the things he *can't* picture. The little details he'll never get to know. The different paths they could have taken that he can't even imagine, because they'll never get close to it.

Frankly, it's devastating. James wants something solid, some sort of foundation he can cling to, no matter how much it hurts. Would they have gotten married? It's a niggling thought in the back of James' mind, and he's been working up the courage to ask for a bit now. He's fully expecting rejection.

He isn't expecting Regulus to trip.

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Regulus goes down like a sack of bricks, cursing under his breath as he falls. James' eyes bulge, and he rushes over, but Regulus flings a hand out and glares at him. James comes to a halt.

"What the fuck?" Regulus asks through gritted teeth as he picks himself back up and brushes himself off.

James shifts nervously. "Just, you know, wondering, is all."

"Well, stop wondering," Regulus says with a huff, whipping around to start walking again, but not before James sees the red points high on his cheeks. Oh, he's *blushing.* James loves it when he blushes. He's the only person in the world who's ever managed to make Regulus do that.

"But I can't," James mumbles as he jogs forward to fall into step beside Regulus, who is *still* blushing. "It's on my mind, and I'll never let it go until I *know.* This is important."

"Yes, because theorizing on our *fake* life we could have had at one point in time is *so* important."

"It is, actually. I need to know. Besides, if I married you, I would be Sirius' brother-in-law. *Regulus,* do you even—oh, that would have been *perfect."*

Regulus sighs. "What are you? *Twelve?"*

"Sirius would understand," James mutters petulantly, looking up at the sky with a frown. His chest aches because he really *does* miss Sirius so fucking much. His last words—those two last sentences—still ring in his ears, bringing him such comfort. "Sirius, if you're listening, we could have been *brothers* in another life. Like, legally. On *paper.* Oh, we would have never shut up about it."

"It sounds to me like you would want to marry me just for that reason," Regulus says flatly.

James clears his throat. "It wouldn't have been the *only—"*

"You know, for a self-proclaimed romantic, you are painfully bad at this," Regulus informs him.

"Well, obviously I wouldn't marry you if I didn't *want* to marry you, Regulus. I wouldn't do that in any life, and neither would you, so I'm asking. Would you—I mean, in that other life, would you have gotten married at all?" James asks.

"If it was you asking," Regulus murmurs, "I know I would have."

"Oh," James breathes out, filled with immediate delight and this fizzy, bubbly sense of giddiness that makes him grin. He swings his hands (and the hatchet), beaming out at nothing like a man who has just gotten the best news of his life.

Regulus glances over at him, then shakes his head and looks away. "Your ability to find things to be happy about, even in the middle of literal life or death fucking *astounds* me."

"Well, we can't all be miserable little shits like you," James teases, reaching out with his hatchet-less hand to tug on a curl of Regulus' hair. Regulus swats his hand away with a warning look, and James waggles his eyebrows at him. "Some of us like to find things worth smiling about, perhaps especially when smiling is the most difficult thing to do."

"Miserable little shits, as a rule, do not," Regulus points out dryly, and James cracks up helplessly, muffling his laugh behind his hand to try to stay quiet. Regulus' lips twitch as he looks away again, his eyes warm with humor.

There's a rustle ahead of them that makes them both stop, and a tiny bunny darts out and disappears. Regulus stares after it, then looks at James, who mutters, "Don't say it."

"Protein," Regulus says anyway.

"Innocent animals," James corrects. "They're just trying to go about their day, Reg. Literally just let them live."

"You're going to be begging me to do the exact opposite in a few days, when you're so hungry you can't think of anything else," Regulus informs him.

James huffs. "Yes, well, when we reach that point, do me a favor and make sure I don't have to...see it, please. Especially if it's a baby. I'll cry."

"I ate a snake, you know," Regulus says.

"What?" James blinks at him.

Regulus shrugs. "Well, it's protein, and it tried to kill me. I woke up to it trying to choke me, so I had it for breakfast."

"It tried to choke you?" James asks, his voice rising in pitch as he stares at him with wide eyes. "Like, to death?"

"It certainly wasn't giving me a hug, James."

"Fucking hell, just how many times have you nearly died?"

"Too many to count already," Regulus mutters, then he purses his lips as he swivels his dagger lazily—prettily—between his fingers like an afterthought. "I think you might be my good luck charm, though. I haven't gone this long without something bad happening since the games started."

"It's starting to get dark now," James points out. "And cold."

"I'm aware, but that hardly stopped things from going wrong before," Regulus says quietly. "Although, I think it will now."

"Why?"

"The only way to get to the supplies and weapons is to wait for the crimson river to ice over—or do like Evan and I did, but I doubt anyone would. The death eaters know that, so I'm fairly sure they're going back to claim the cave at night to keep others away, or possibly lure them in. They'll be hunting by day and staying at the cave by night, so we're safe from them for now. All we have to worry about is not freezing to death."

"Which would be a lot easier to do in a group setting inside a cave where there's shelter and the opportunity to burn a fire without drawing attention."

"James—"

"I think it's a good idea," James insists. "At the very least, there's safety in numbers, right? We could—I mean, maybe we could do something to...incapacitate the death eaters in some way. Like, if we all came together to form a plan…"

"Incapacitate," Regulus echoes, arching an eyebrow at him, and James grimaces. "Do you mean kill?"

"That's not what I said."

"But that's what you meant."

James clenches his jaw, grip tightening on the handle of his hatchet, and he forces himself to exhale. The truth is, he can't keep circling around reality in his mind, and wanting to get Regulus home means that there are twenty-three other people who won't be making it. As much as he'd love to be a pacifist, he knows that's not possible. Eight people are dead. Six of the remaining sixteen want *Regulus* dead. So…

"Yeah," James says softly, "that's what I meant."

"Right." Regulus flicks his eyes over James, one eyebrow lifting slightly, just a small twitch. His gaze drags down the length of James' body, then right back up. "Well, looks like you do have some survival instincts in you after all."

"So, you're in?" James asks.

"I'll think about it," is Regulus' flippant response.

~•~

Regulus is very particular about his hiding spots, and he's not changing that just because James is around. If he doesn't like it, he can leave, which he still refuses to do.

Secretly, Regulus is grateful that James is here. He's worked it out by now that people are invested in his and James' little love story, or whatever, so there's no doubt in his mind that the gamemakers are televising every moment between them. If this is what it takes to get a break, Regulus has had enough of a hard time that he'll tolerate how annoying it is. He knows it won't last forever, but for the moment, he's basking in it.

Regulus finds a nice little spot for them to settle into for the night. It's just the ground tucked under an overhang hill that has vines and thorns grown over the front of it. They have to push past it all to get inside—James pricks his finger—but they're relatively safe and secluded inside. It's not the best for warmth, though, and they'll have to get close. They *could* risk a fire for an hour or two just to warm up, but they can't let it burn for too long, or people will be able to find them.

James is sucking on his pricked finger and pouting in the dark when he settles down, and Regulus rolls his eyes as he reaches over to tug on James' wrist. "Let me see. Oh, it's fine, you big baby. You're not even bleeding."

"Still hurt," James mumbles.

Regulus lets his hand go and starts digging through his bag to find the matches he has. He sits his bag aside when he finds them, and then he starts shuffling around to grab sticks and leaves and proper kindling around the small concave of earth they've tucked themselves into. When he looks back up, James is pawing through his bag curiously.

"What are you doing?" Regulus asks.

"Looking through your stuff," James replies simply, drawing each item out one at a time. "Water canister, tiny flashlight, compass, tape—ooh, small first-aid kit, nice."

"It's just bandages and a bit of antiseptic," Regulus says.

James hums. "Better than nothing. Let's see… Oh, a blanket. Just one. Not very...big." He looks up. "Are we—"

"No, James, I'm going to leave you out in the cold," Regulus cuts in sarcastically.

"Well, I didn't want to *assume* that we'd share," James tells him with a small smile. "We'll have to get close."

Regulus looks away, fiddling restlessly with his dagger, doing his absolute best to ignore it. That flutter. Damn that flutter in his chest. He *recognizes* it. "Warmer that way."

"It is that," James agrees, sounding ridiculously cheerful about the fact that they're going to be freezing tonight. "Alright, there's one more thing at the…" There's a pause, and Regulus looks over to see James holding up a pair of handcuffs, his eyebrows throwing a party with his hairline. "Well, now what's *this* about? Handcuffs, Regulus?"

"Oh, fuck off. It was in the bag," Regulus grumbles. *"I* didn't pick them out. What would I even do with them?"

James swings them around his finger, eyes sparkling. "I can think of a few things. Actually, if you want to get creative—"

"Shut up," Regulus says, reaching out to snatch the handcuffs and stuff them back into the bag, glaring at James, who just grins at him. "In case it escaped your notice, the whole world is watching you insinuate—things, including your parents. Is this how you want to present yourself to them, hm?"

"Mum, Dad, look away, I'm having impure thoughts," James announces, gasping theatrically as he presses the back of his hand to his forehead. "Oh, the *shame."*

Regulus tries so hard not to laugh, he *really* does, but it bubbles up past his lips anyway. He ducks his head forward and pinches the bridge of his nose, shaking his head like he can shake away his smile. It doesn't really work, and then James' head is propped on his thigh, head turned so he can look up at Regulus with that infuriatingly lovely grin of his.

James is just leaning over on his side and elbow on the cold, hard ground, but he looks rather peaceful with his head pillowed on Regulus' thigh, gazing up at him. Regulus looks down at him and fights valiantly not to remember being fourteen and utterly enamored with him.

He fails.

"I really do miss your glasses, you know," Regulus whispers, dropping his hand down beside James' head, careful not to touch. James blinks up at him, and Regulus *does* miss his glasses. Seeing James without them is disarming, in a way, because James' eyes are big and warm and framed by the prettiest eyelashes Regulus has ever seen.

With his glasses, that's harder to make out, almost like a secret. Regulus has always known it, and it felt like *his* knowledge, and his alone. He hates that it's so obvious to everyone now, because it was *his* discovery first. He had so few ways to claim James in his youth, so he instinctively clung to whatever he could, and the muted beauty of James' eyes behind his glasses was one of them.

Also, James just looks unfairly good with his glasses.

"Me too," James says softly, with a pained sort of smile like he may never see his glasses again, and the thought wrenches at Regulus' heart before he can smother the sensation.

Taking a steadying breath, Regulus shoves the feeling away, because that's *dangerous.* James won't see his glasses again. He can't. Regulus has to accept that. "You know what else I miss?

Heaters. I would kill for a heater right now."

"Er, I sure hope not."

"I meant metaphorically. Well, mostly."

James snorts. "I love it when you threaten my life. Really sets the mood, Reg."

"Yes, I thought so, too," Regulus quips back, lips twitching when James starts shaking against him with silent laughter.

"You could start the fire," James suggests, when he calms.

"I want to wait until it gets colder. If last night is any indication of what we should expect, we don't want to have to put the fire out too early," Regulus mumbles.

"The blanket, then?"

"That's fine."

James looks up at him for a moment longer, and Regulus has to ball his hand into a fist down by his leg so he won't do something as foolish as running his fingers through James' hair. Oh, he used to *dream* of doing that when he was younger, caught in a daze more often than not until Sirius was snapping his fingers in front of his face and telling him to come back to earth. James would laugh each time, and he always winked if Sirius wasn't looking, like he knew exactly what Regulus was doing. Not that it was hard to work out, considering that Regulus was staring at James' hair wistfully like a little idiot.

It's been ten years. Regulus is no longer that little idiot, so the impulse to touch can fuck off, is what it can do. He keeps his hand balled into a fist and looks away, and eventually James pulls himself up to grab the blanket after putting everything back in the bag, excluding the

matches. He scoots himself up and backwards, tucking the blanket around himself and holding the rest of it up so Regulus can slide in.

James is a line along the dirt wall, meaning the open space in front of him is where Regulus is meant to go. That means Regulus will be closest to the fire when he starts it, which James surely did on purpose. Regulus gives him a *look,* and this only earns him a sweet, lopsided smile from one James Potter.

As always, it feels like he doesn't deserve it.

"Come here," James murmurs, and so Regulus does.

It's some sort of cruel irony how good it feels. Despite the cold, despite being in the arena, despite all the fear and horror and grief, there's still so much comfort in this. In James' arms. He'd always known there would be, all the way back when he was just a child with hopeless feelings. A part of him is gratified to know that he was right, to know that, no matter the circumstances, if he could just have James' arms around him, he would be alright. A part of him hates it, too.

Regulus closes his eyes and sinks into James anyway, wryly imagining the soft sighs and gentle coos of the people who are surely watching right now. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, knowing that people are watching something that feels so vulnerable to him. A moment where he gets to let his guard down, just a bit, and they're all *witnessing* it. He hates it. He hates that he's having this moment at all, that they're thriving on it, no doubt, and he can't stop himself from enjoying it, too.

Sometimes, Regulus becomes uncomfortably aware of how human he is. How weak and brittle he can be. How tired he can get. How he has wants and needs just like everyone else, no matter how hard he fights to rise above such things. He's never felt more human than he does right now, James' arms around him and Avery's gushing throat flashing behind his eyelids. The ultimate tenderness and the grotesque violence, both like a stain on his soul he can't get free of.

"Go to sleep, love," James whispers, sweeping a hand down his back. "I'll wake you when you need to start the fire."

"James?" Regulus rasps.

"Yes?"

"I killed a man yesterday."

There's a long beat of silence, and then James releases a deep breath, sliding his hand up further to cup the back of Regulus' neck, gently squeezing it. "I know."

"I don't think he was a good man," Regulus admits, and he sounds fragile, like he might shatter at any second.

"Well, considering that he was trying to kill you, I can safely say he wasn't," James murmurs.

Regulus swallows harshly. "James?"

"Yes?" James asks, and his tone is heavy.

"I—" Regulus' words catch, and he has to blink rapidly past the stinging in his eyes. "I don't think I'm a good man either."

"It was self-defense," James reminds him gently.

"But I'm so glad I'm alive," Regulus chokes out, and that's it. He loses it immediately, the tears building until they're overflowing, and he tips his face forward to hide it against James' throat and shoulder so all those people watching won't be able to see. He remains quiet, refusing to let them hear, but James can feel it. Regulus knows he can. The shaking, the hot tears on his skin, the way Regulus bites his jacket to make sure no noise escapes at all.

"If that makes you a bad man, then I am too, because so am I," James whispers, pulling him closer. "So am I. You have no idea how fucking grateful I am that you're alive."

"I'd never—that was the closest I'd ever been to—" Regulus sucks in a deep breath, his whole body trembling. "No. That's a lie. Before—even before the arena, I saw—"

"Regulus?" James asks cautiously.

Swallowing thickly, Regulus croaks, "Before I came up into the arena, I was waiting to get ready, and Gideon—"

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Dorcas frowns as she watches the camera abruptly cut to black, the rest of Regulus' whispered words going unheard. Instead, the video feed switches to Evan, who's up in a tree and nodding off. Apparently not interesting enough, the camera cuts to the group hiding in the cave.

Beside her, Marlene goes tense. One of hers is in there. Vanity. She's tucked up between Peter and Irene, close to the fire and still shivering violently. The other one—Mathias—they're sleeping back-to-back with her to try and share warmth. Irene's mentor had sent her warm soup, which they'd all shared, because their traps hadn't caught anything yet.

The camera cuts again to a man by himself, who's wide awake and shivering as he huddles close to his own fire, then it cuts away to another girl, around Vanity's age, who has literally dug herself a hole in the ground to shelter herself in. She's the one who carries around a stick like she's itching to use it and also the one who stomped on a frog earlier, then cooked it to eat.

The last lone tribute is...not looking great. A woman who's curled up in a tight ball as she frantically tries to get a fire going, despite her shaking hands. She hasn't had any water, and she stopped begging her mentor to send her some hours ago. Marlene releases a quiet sigh.

"She's not making it through the night, is she?" Dorcas asks.

"No," Marlene murmurs, "she's not. She's not hydrated enough to regulate her body temperature, and she's not going to be able to get the fire started. She'll be dead within five hours. Over the next five hours, really. It'll be slow. Painful."

Dorcas is a Hallow like no other, and she knows that. She's never been one to shy away from the horrors and misgivings of the Hallow, as well as the Hallows who live within. That being said, the dead tone in which Marlene speaks—how lifeless she sounds—is enough to unnerve even Dorcas.

It's the fact that Marlene knows what it's like to be thirsty, to nearly freeze to death. Dorcas remembers her games. She came so close to dying so many times that it's a miracle she's here now. Freezing nearly got her in the end, and if it hadn't been for the fire she found one person at, she might not have made it. The person hadn't been willing to share, and Marlene looked like an easy target—cold and shaking and hungry—so they tried to kill her. Dorcas vividly remembers being very sure that the 'McKinnon girl' was about to die, only to be stunned when that 'McKinnon girl' shoved someone twice her size right into the fire and warmed herself up while they burned.

Marlene's not your typical girl, that's for sure.

"Hodge," Marlene breathes out when the camera cuts one final time to the death eaters.

Dorcas' heart clenches at the strain in Marlene's voice. It's only night two, and she's surprised her tributes have made it as far as they have already, which Dorcas notes has only made her more stressed as her hope starts to take root. Vanity is fifteen and surrounded by people who are doing everything to help her survive. Hodge is fourteen and surrounded by people who aren't, *but* he's possibly as safe as he can be, given the circumstances. Being with the death eaters isn't very morally upright, but in Hodge's case, it's how he can survive longer.

The death eaters—like Regulus predicted, Dorcas can't help but note, shamelessly proud of how smart he is—are back at the cave now that the river is iced over. They've got a fire going, and they're taking their time going through all the supplies and weapons. Mulciber has

pounded two sticks into the ground, tilting them towards each other at the top, then twining a smaller twig to connect them in an undeniable *A*.

That *A* remains on the screen until the camera fades out to reveal Rita Skeeter, who starts the closing segment for the night. Marlene releases her first full breath for what's likely the first time tonight, since they left the party. Dorcas gets the remote and cuts Rita off, in no mood to hear her mouth.

Silence falls around them, thick and heavy. Dorcas wonders if Marlene regrets coming with her here when they left the watch party, because she's just sitting here with a Hallow who literally works with these people that are sent into an arena to die. Marlene has been very composed for the most part, and Dorcas had hoped that she could be a source of comfort, if nothing else, but now she's wondering if she made a mistake.

The *Hallow is Hollow* necklace she's wearing suddenly feels so much heavier.

They didn't leave the party too long after Sirius did. In fact, they were mostly with him, especially during that time when Regulus was being chased by a fucking spider with Avery's face. Dorcas is pretty sure that Sirius nearly burst into tears when Regulus hit the ground right before the river, sending the spider into the water. He'd had to bend over and press his hand to his chest, winded and laughing breathlessly at the same time and cadence as his brother on the screen. Dorcas remembers rubbing his back and feeling how hard and fast his heart was thumping, and she remembers thinking that it had to be *very* hard and fast if she could feel it from his *back.*

Nonetheless, Sirius did leave after James and Regulus reunited, which the entire party had been buzzing about. This early in the games, wasting sponsors on something would be too much of a risk, especially when things are sure to get much worse down the line. The gamemakers were already chattering about what they were hoping the tributes would find, or get into, or do. One way or another, things are going to happen.

Mostly, though, everyone was *very* excited about Regulus and James. No one quite knows how Regulus feels for James, so they're all invested in cheering James on in winning him over. Hoping for love. It makes Dorcas want to scream at them all, because how can that source of entertainment be more important to them than these people's *lives?*

Marlene stuck around to sweet-talk some more sponsors, trying so fucking hard to get *someone* to help her at least send Vanity a blanket. No one would go for it, though. Not one fucking person would offer up anything.

Dorcas would have, if she could. She'd give every damn bit of her money to Marlene, to Sirius, to the mentor of that woman who isn't going to survive the night. But there's a specific process it takes to become a sponsor, and not every Hallow qualifies. Dorcas is among those that don't, though she suspects that's because she would donate too much. It's a delicate balance, the way these games are run, and there's nothing delicate about Dorcas. She's bold, always.

In the end, defeated and exhausted, Marlene had come back to Dorcas to tell her that she was leaving, but it was nice talking to her. This is when Dorcas—bold as she is—outright asked if she'd like to come back to her suite and watch the games with her, in case she didn't want to be alone. She said it just like that, laying it all out, and Marlene had only paused for one moment before she nodded and followed her out the door.

And here they are. Dorcas wonders if Marlene feels less alone. She doesn't think Marlene does, and she can't even blame her.

"Marlene," Dorcas murmurs, turning to look at her.

"Yeah?" Marlene replies, her voice hoarse.

"Tell me what I can do to help you," Dorcas says simply, because that's what it comes down to, and she'll do whatever it is that Marlene needs from her.

Marlene glances at her, eyebrows furrowed. "Are you worried about them? Regulus and James, I mean?"

"Yes," Dorcas admits. "They're—I care about them."

"Can you care about Hodge and Vanity, too?" Marlene asks, and the words come out thick, a shiny layer starting to form on her eyes. "I'm so tired of being the only one."

Dorcas reaches out to grab her hand, only briefly startled by how tightly Marlene grips it back, clinging to it. "You're not the only one. I care about them, too. Hodge is safe right now. Vanity—she's strong, and she'll make it through to the morning again, Marlene. I care. I promise I care."

A wet breath escapes Marlene's mouth, nearly a whine, and then she folds forward into Dorcas like she's not strong enough to hold herself up anymore. Dorcas immediately lets her hand go to wrap her arms around her instead, stroking her hair and letting her cry, her own eyes stinging.

It's such a harrowing thing, utter desolation, because Marlene is doing something, anything, *everything* for these children, and everyone else is doing—nothing. Dorcas can tell how tired she is, how much it's weighing on her, how it's stripping her piece by piece until she's too worn down to pretend to be anything else. It's Dorcas' first year involved in this outside of being a viewer, but it's Marlene's *third* year of being a mentor, and the insight to how awful it is makes Dorcas want to set the entire Hallow on fire—well, more than she already does.

"Thank you," Marlene chokes out as she pulls away. "Thank you for caring about them. Dorcas—"

"Shh, it's okay," Dorcas murmurs, reaching up to cup her face and gently wipe away her tears. Her stomach twists with the knowledge that they've come to live in a world where caring about people—living, breathing people whose names are picked in an unfortunate stroke of bad luck—is so rare that she's being *thanked* for it.

How did it come to this? Why isn't it normalized to the point that it's *expected?* Dorcas doesn't know how to explain to other Hallows that they should just *care about people,* no matter what, without question. She tries to, through fashion and expression, one of the few things that seems to move Hallows and make them *feel* something past their own privilege.

"They're all okay." Marlene releases a scratchy laugh and reaches up to scrub at her face, clearing her throat. She cleans herself up and blows out a deep breath, eyes sinking shut as her shoulders slump. "For now, they're all okay."

"Yeah, they are," Dorcas agrees, her gaze turning back to the blank screen, eyebrows furrowing. Again, her mind turns back to Regulus and James, their final conversation.

"Dorcas?" Marlene asks quietly.

"Did that ending seem—strange to you?" Dorcas murmurs cautiously, glancing back at Marlene, who frowns. "When they cut away from Regulus and James, I mean. Why would they do that when everyone is chomping at the bits for every little second of screen time for them? They were still talking."

Marlene opens her mouth, then closes it, then eyes Dorcas with a more judgemental frown. "Well, it was a heavy moment, Dorcas. Emotional. They deserved their privacy. Surely you don't think you were entitled to—"

"No, I don't, but *they* do," Dorcas cuts in, shaking her head as she glances back to the screen. "The gamemakers. The viewers. The sponsors. The higher powers, whatever you want to call them. They had to have been salivating over that moment between James and Regulus, so *why would they cut it?"*

"You think they...did it on purpose?" Marlene says, sounding confused.

Dorcas frowns. "He mentioned Gideon. You heard that, right? Regulus mentioned him."

"Yeah."

"Why would he do that when he was talking about death?"

Marlene blinks. "Um, I...don't know? Maybe Gideon gave him advice? You said Gideon was close with Regulus, while Fabian was close with James."

"I haven't seen them in two days," Dorcas says, gaze fixed on the black screen as her mind ticks over like a timer *almost* about to go off. "The first day is one thing. Everyone watches the first day of the games on their own, that's normal, but they should have been at the party today. I thought maybe they had just taken the first day hard because they were so worried about James and Regulus, so maybe they got drunk and weren't feeling well afterwards, which is dangerously close to what *I* almost did, if I'm honest, so I wouldn't blame them. This is—it's a lot harder when it's—when you're—"

"In it?" Marlene asks softly.

Dorcas' gaze snaps over to her, and she can feel her face soften as Marlene gives her a slightly bitter smile. "Yeah, that."

Marlene's smile falls, and she doesn't say anything else. They stare at each other, their hands tangled loosely in Marlene's lap where they'd fallen after wiping away her tears. Slowly, a fire not unlike the one she pushed someone into starts to grow in Marlene's eyes, and her nails push into the skin of Dorcas' palm. Dorcas can almost *taste* her resentment.

"Do you hate me, then?" Dorcas challenges.

"I hate the Hallow. I hate Riddle. I hate—" Marlene stops, and she gives a rueful chuckle. "I *want* to hate you, but I'm finding that rather difficult to do. You may not be like the rest of the Hallows, but you're still a Hallow, Dorcas. I *should* hate you."

"Is that so?" Dorcas says, arching an eyebrow.

Marlene scoffs and digs her nails in harder. "Don't pretend that you don't watch the games from a position of safety. Don't pretend you never *enjoyed* them."

"When I was a child, I did enjoy them," Dorcas admits. "It was the biggest event of the year. They threw parties and parades. People praised their favorite tributes, and cried when they died, then picked a favorite out of those that were left. The other students at school would gossip about their favorites, and new trends would start that the tributes created, and yes, I enjoyed them, but then I grew the fuck up."

"You—" Marlene blinks, her nails going slack, likely from surprise. "What?"

"I grew up," Dorcas repeats. "What were you expecting? Some tragic backstory where I found my whole worldview changing because something significant happened to change my mind? No. I literally just *grew up.* I got old enough to have the critical thinking skills to look past all the propaganda to wonder to myself, *what if that was me?* It's called basic fucking *decency,* Marlene. Not many Hallows are decent people, but I'm one of the few, and I'm not going to act like I'm not when you want a punching bag. You want a Hallow to lash out at, is that it?"

"Dorcas," Marlene says, an edge to her voice.

"I *know* I'm a Hallow," Dorcas continues sharply. "That doesn't mean I don't care, or that I'm not capable of caring without seeing how the other side lives, as it were. Why do you think I got into fashion? You don't think I'm not angry that *no one* cares, Marlene? It's fucking exhausting, I know, but I have to do *something.* You have no *idea* what I've—" She halts, then exhales and shakes her head. "My point is, being angry at the Hallows, that's *fair.* I'm angry, too, and I *am* a damn Hallow. But don't be angry at a Hallow that wants to help. We're rare enough as it is. So, if you want a Hallow to lash out at, maybe take the time to let me know I'm your target, yeah?"

"What, so you can stand still?" Marlene asks sarcastically.

"Maybe," Dorcas replies, keeping her voice low. She holds Marlene's gaze. "How do you know I wouldn't gladly hold still for you if you don't even ask?"

Marlene's eyes drop to her mouth, then dart right back up, her jaw clenching like she's frustrated by the slip. "With how angry I am, I don't really think I'll be all that gentle."

"Maybe I like it rough," Dorcas shoots back, letting her eyes droop as a slow smile spreads across her face. Marlene is coiled tight with all the grace of a predator about to pounce, and Dorcas is practically taunting her to leap.

"There's not that much space between rough and wrong, you know," Marlene says, taking a deep breath as she leans back, pulling her hands away. "You're right. You've been so kind, and I can't place the blame of all Hallows on you. Your work is incredible, did you know that? It's seen as radical and borderline traitorous, but it's—it's *important,* so don't think for a second that I'm ignorant to what you do and have been doing since before you became an official stylist. And you care. You *genuinely* care, and that's important, too. Dorcas, I'm sorry."

Dorcas quirks a small smile, her chest warm. "I get the anger. Sometimes I look in the mirror and feel it when I see my reflection, and not just because I'm a Hallow, but because I'm furious with myself for not figuring out how to sneak my way into Riddle's safe little castle and put a bullet in his brain while he's asleep. Yet. But *one day…"*

"Oh, so we have the same anger issues about the same things. Nice to know," Marlene teases, and the tension starts to fade into something calm.

"I'm not against working through some of those anger issues with you," Dorcas says lightly, because she would very much like to get the sexual tension *back,* thank you.

It works. Marlene inhales sharply, then once again studies Dorcas' mouth like she's figuring out the perfect spot to *bite.* When she exhales, she mutters a warning, "I haven't been with anyone since my games, Dorcas. I still—I don't know how to be gentle sometimes."

"Well, if you want to be with me," Dorcas says, slow and syrupy as she leans back on her elbows, eyelids drooping in the most blatant *fuck me* look she can make, "it's like I said. Maybe I like it rough."

"Can you throw a punch?" Marlene asks.

Dorcas is admittedly a little startled by this, so much so that she briefly pauses her whole seduction technique. "What?"

"Can you?"

"Um. Yes?"

Marlene crooks an eyebrow. "You don't sound so sure."

"I can...theoretically throw a punch," Dorcas says sheepishly. Her fists are admittedly not her usual choice of weapon.

"Right." Marlene's mouth twitches, and then she shifts to the side to plant her feet on the floor, spreading her legs a little and propping one leg higher than the other. She proceeds to tap it and watch Dorcas with a tiny smirk tugging at the corners of her lips. "Well? Come on."

"Oh," Dorcas murmurs the moment she realizes, and then she hikes up the sides of her dress and knee-walks over to Marlene before easing into her lap, straddling her elevated thigh.

"If I get too mean, or I panic and have some sort of flashback to the arena, think you're trying to kill me or something, then you're going to fling yourself off my lap, pick that bottle up off the table, and smash it over my head," Marlene says.

"I am absolutely not going to do that," Dorcas replies.

Marlene sighs. "For your own *safety,* Dorcas. I told you, I haven't done this since before the arena, so I—I just want to be sure. That's all."

"We don't have to do this, you know," Dorcas says softly, reaching out to gently push Marlene's hair back from her shoulder, revealing the faded scar on the side of her throat.

"I know, and if you've decided you don't want to, then that's fine," Marlene responds calmly. She's really quite relaxed, actually, not seeming bothered by Dorcas in her lap and eyeing her scar at all. "But I do want to, if you still want to. I'm a person, and I should be able to do

these things just like anyone else. I just—I don't know how it will go, because you'll be the first. I don't *think* it will go wrong, but I can't be sure until…"

"Right, well, you let me be the judge of what I can and cannot handle, alright?" Dorcas declares firmly.

"Oh, I'm sure you're more capable than anyone knows," Marlene murmurs, gaze dropping down to where her hand cups Dorcas' bent knee before slowly sliding up her leg. Her grip is firm, not light and teasing.

Dorcas chuckles breathlessly. "You have *no* idea."

With that, she rocks forward to duck in and kiss Marlene with enough force and intensity that her head tips back. It's their first kiss, and it is not gentle, or tentative, or sweet. It's *hot* and sharp, a little rough, but not enough to hurt. Marlene does bite her lip, and Dorcas' head spins as soon as she does it. The kiss has no concept of zero to one hundred when there was no zero to start with; it's immediate one hundred from the moment their lips meet, open-mouthed and desperate.

Marlene's hand clamps down on her thigh, digging in hard, and then she's shoving her hand up further, with more urgency, pushing at Dorcas' dress to grab onto her side and fully just haul her closer. Dorcas kisses her harder as a reward, and then she's the one that gets a prize, because Marlene releases this lovely little moan that drags out into a full-blown *whimper,* and Dorcas has never gotten so hot *everywhere* so quickly in her life. In the next second, she's frantically tugging at her dress, carelessly trying to snatch it off.

"Off?" Marlene mumbles as she pulls away from the kiss, her hand twisting the fabric of Dorcas' dress like she's about to rip the fucking thing to shreds.

Dorcas swats at the side of her hand, and Marlene instantly lets go, blinking up at her almost like a kicked puppy. Dorcas sways back to reach around to unzip her dress. "I make nearly everything I wear, so there will be *no* ripping of my clothes when we're together, yeah? I won't have my time and energy wasted just because you're trying to fuck me faster."

"Say fuck me again," Marlene breathes out.

"Fuck me," Dorcas repeats, slower this time.

Marlene groans and folds forward to latch onto the side of Dorcas' neck, sucking harshly and nipping a line down to her shoulder. She pulls back quickly when she realizes Dorcas is shimmying out of her dress, though. Her hands slip up the side of Dorcas' body like she's pretending to help, but all she's really doing is feeling all the new skin that's revealed.

"Dorcas, you are *flawless,"* Marlene whispers reverently, her eyes practically all pupil as Dorcas lazily lets her dress pool to the ground behind her. "Did you plan this? Your knickers match your—wait, is that a *set?* You did plan this."

Dorcas snorts, because she can't help it. "Actually, no. Some of us just like to wear sets. This is one of my favorites."

"I can see why," Marlene says, gaze firmly latched onto Dorcas' chest like you couldn't pry it away with a crowbar.

"Eyes up here, sweetheart," Dorcas teases, reaching up to slowly drag her fingers through Marlene's hair.

Marlene's eyes do come up to meet hers, eventually, *slowly.* She shakes her head. "You're like a fucking siren. This is—you are—fuck, I would *absolutely* drown myself trying to swim out to you."

"Anyone else would be alarmed by such a compliment, but I would like you to know that I am *very* flattered," Dorcas informs her as she dips in to press kisses along Marlene's jaw, heading right back to her mouth, drawn there again and again.

Marlene is grinning when Dorcas' mouth finds hers, and they're right back to it, but this time with less clothes in the way. Marlene takes advantage, her hands running all over Dorcas,

mapping her body out but never lingering for long, like she's too overwhelmed by what else there is to stop in one place. Dorcas grinds down against Marlene's thigh, which was the whole point to this position to begin with—this isn't her first thigh-riding experience, so she's already in the know.

She does it once, twice, resituates herself, then does it again and *moans.* Yes, there. Right there. Marlene breaks away with a low hum, her mouth trailing down Dorcas' throat as her hands grasp her hips. Her grip is tight, and she starts to tug and pull at a ruthless pace, making Dorcas' head fall back as her mouth falls slack and her eyes fall shut.

"Don't pull my hair," Marlene whispers into her clavicle, then nips at her skin before mouthing her way down to the dip and curve of her chest.

Dorcas goes to great efforts to unclench her fingers from Marlene's hair and grab onto her shoulders instead, fully aware that she can't trust herself *not* to yank on Marlene's hair at the moment. Her body is writhing of its own accord, her chest heaving. She feels like she's burning inside and out.

A shrill ring pierces the air, and Dorcas freezes. Marlene mumbles something like *ignore it* into her chest, where she's apparently trying to smother herself, and Dorcas would love nothing more...except she knows that ringtone.

"Fuck. I have to take this," Dorcas pants out, and Marlene groans but dutifully falls back, equally breathless. Dorcas leans in and presses a quick kiss to her mouth. "Give me one second, and then we'll be right back to it, I promise."

Marlene nods and leans her head back with a hum, watching Dorcas through half-lidded eyes, face flushed and mouth swollen. She looks so good that Dorcas finds it a genuine struggle to rip herself away, but she forces herself to. She moves over to answer the call, only standing across the room. Even with her back towards Marlene, Dorcas can feel her gaze roaming all over her body.

There's a beat of silence, then, "Patronus?"

"Starfish," Dorcas replies quietly, so quiet that she won't be overheard.

"Fabian and Gideon are dead. They got them," is the reply, and then the line clicks.

Dorcas stands there for a long moment, just breathing as she stares at the wall. Something inside her cracks open, and she squeezes her eyes shut so tight that spots dance behind her eyelids. Her fist curls in front of her, nails biting into her palm until she's sure that she's not going to make a noise.

Slowly, she exhales and opens her eyes. She swallows the lump in her throat. *Oh, Fabian, Gideon, not you,* she thinks, that space in her chest cracking open wider. Not them. They were being so careful. How did it go wrong? Why—

Dorcas blinks hard and rolls her jaw, peeling her hand out straight and forcing her body to relax. She keeps her voice level as she says, "Yeah, thanks for letting me know."

With that, she drops her hand, sits her cell down, and takes one more second. She taps her finger to the table beside her phone, then turns around.

"Everything alright?" Marlene asks.

"Yeah. That was just Fabian. He and Gideon got too attached to Regulus and James, and they couldn't handle all of this, so they decided to leave and try a different career path. Can't say I blame them, really. It's—hard, as you know," Dorcas murmurs as she pads back over.

Marlene frowns. "It is, but running away from it doesn't change anything."

"They're good men," Dorcas whispers. "Wherever they are, I hope they find peace."

"Is it…?" Marlene's face softens. "You were close with them. I'm sure you're going to miss them."

"Very much," Dorcas confirms and forces herself to smile.

"If you're not—if you don't want to continue, we don't have to, Dorcas," Marlene tells her gently. "I'll still stay. We can just—"

"No. No, it's fine. Where were we?" Dorcas says softly, sliding right back into Marlene's lap, because she has a hole in her chest and she knows exactly how to fill it.

"Right here, I think," Marlene replies, then leans in to help Dorcas do just that by kissing her.

Chapter End Notes

POV UNLOCKED!!!! *in a baseball player's voice* DORCAS IS SAAAAFE. please imagine that i just did the thing where i swing my arms through the air to indicate that dorcas is safe, like the baseball players do. (ive never played or watched baseball lmaooo)

anyway, yes, dorcas is safe!!! she will NOT be dying!!! some people thought she was gonna be cinna-ed, but she will not, in fact, be cinna-ed.

we got a looooot of information in this chapter, so ill ramble about jegulus first.

imagining james beat-boxing while strolling through the forest in a death arena is SO FUNNY to me. he's so cute, i love him. regulus is over here trying to feed them and make sure they survive, and james is just like: but they're a FAMILY, regulus 🥺🥺🥺 you can't kill it cause it's a BABY. in his defense, if that was me, i would literally do the same thing. bambi scarred me as a child, so i get it.

i wouldn't be surprised if a lot of people were surprised that regulus just flatout admitted that he and james would have ended up together if sirius never went into the arena, but i would like to remind everyone that this fic isn't heavy on the miscommunication. like, everything regulus says to james, he genuinely feels that way—or at least believes that he does. so, when he says that he hates james, when he thinks about how he got over james, that's all real to him.

him being blunt about what they could have been is just him being honest again and saying what he feels/believes/knows. and he's right. in this world, if sirius hadn't gone into the arena, they would have 100% ended up together, gotten married, and lived a

long, semi-happy life (as happy as anyone can be in this setting, at least). but that's not what happened, which is where the angst hits. that shit is so sad to me, im not even gonna lie. like, i wrote it, and im like: damn, that's fucked up :/

but lmaoooo, regulus faceplanting when james asked if they would have gotten married 😭😭😭 GOODBYE. he was literally taken out by that question. someone help this poor man. he's just trying to live his life and survive this death arena, and then there's james being all sweet and constantly flirting with him. poor james just wants to cling to as much happiness as he can, and he's fully expecting to die at some point, so you can't really blame the guy.

then of course the Sad Time when regulus breaks down over avery. him thinking he's a bad person because he's glad to be alive, even if it meant killing someone else. im SAD.

but the gideon mention... 👀

so, back to dorcas!!! she's safeeeee, and she's...apparently more involved in Things than anyone realized. and so were gideon and fabian!!! no i will not elaborate, you will see in due time, it'll all come out eventually, but i TOLD YALL that i didn't just kill them for no reason. im excited to hear your theories, though!!!

also, dorlene my beloveds <3 we see more of them, i promise. we see some more dorcas POVs in the future as well, if that excites anyone!

also², the evan mention probably appeased many of you, as well as the vanity mention. yes, peter and vanity are just chilling with irene and mathias in a secluded cave right now. i feel like it's important to remember that james established allies with these people BEFORE the arena, so like, it's not completely out of left field for all them to be working together.

also³, yes the A that mulciber was posting on the ground was for avery.

anyways, let me shut up now. feel free to drop comments of your theories/thoughts. i adore them all, and i adore all of you the same! thank you so much <3

tributes remaining in the arena as of this chapter: 16 (still)
tributes who have died as of this chapter: dylan, avery, and six unamed/unknown others.

Man Down

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death (because of the whole arena thing)
-explicit depictions of murder (yes, another person dies, and not just in the background, so i will be putting a more in-depth warning for what happens in the end notes for those of you who need/want to be more prepared)
-explicit depictions of violence (VERY explicit, and i will also be putting a more in-depth warning for what happens in the end notes for those of you who need/want to be more prepared)
-descriptions of blood
-depictions of injuries
-angst

please be warned, this is a very heavy and fast-paced chapter, and it will likely put some of you on edge/make you anxious, so take care of yourselves FIRST, always. highly recommend reading where you're settled in and can clutch a pillow or something.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What about fish?" James asks, then tosses his last berry into his mouth and raises his eyebrows at Regulus.

"How is that any less immoral?" Regulus replies, visibly unimpressed as he walks next to him.

James shrugs. "Well, you know… Er, do fish even have brains?"

"Obviously fish have brains. All living beings have brains," Regulus tells him. "Well, except for you."

"Ha!" James bursts out laughing, then immediately clamps his hand over his mouth to muffle the sound. Regulus gets upset with him when he's too loud (which is often), and considering the very real danger they're in at all times, James can't blame him. It's just not exactly in James' nature to *be* quiet.

Regulus looks exasperated. "Why are you the way you are? I've just insulted you. *Why* do you find that funny?"

"Not sure," James admits, once he's calmer. "Suppose I have a few wires crossed." He pauses, then knocks his shoulder into Regulus' and sing-songs, "Or *maybe* I have a little crush, and I'm just delighted by anything you say. Sound familiar?"

"Every time you open your mouth to speak, the urge to kill you grows stronger," Regulus informs him flatly.

"You used to be so *sweet,"* James coos, and Regulus instantly scowls, which is, quite frankly, so fucking adorable that James can't stop himself from grinning. "Okay, no, do you remember when you were twelve—"

"Do *not,"* Regulus hisses, head snapping around as he glares at him, his face turning red immediately.

"No, I am. This is too brilliant. This story deserves to be heard by all," James declares. "People watching at home, settle in and prepare for the cutest fucking—"

Regulus is abruptly right in front of him, the flat part of his dagger pressed against James' mouth. His gaze is sharper than the blade. "You can live without your tongue, James, did you know that? Why don't I show you?"

"You know," James mumbles carefully, *very* carefully, "I think I really do have a knife kink of some sort. I am *so* attracted to you right now."

"I hate you," Regulus mutters, then smacks the flat part of his dagger to James' mouth before pulling it away. "Tell that story and I'll cut your fucking tongue out."

"Still attracted to you," James announces, breaking out into a grin as Regulus huffs and turns to keep walking. "And what story? How do you know it's the same story?"

"I *know* what story it is."

"Would it be the same story—"

"James," Regulus warns.

"—where you found a new route to take after school and just *had* to go collect all the pretty rocks, taking two jars, and then you gave *me* the prettiest one with a sweet little smile while you gave Sirius the other one, which was only half full, and you told him not to eat them?" James continues anyway, his voice cheerful. "That story, by chance?"

"First, I couldn't be sure that Sirius *wouldn't* eat them. He's an idiot, so that was an extremely valid thing to say to him. Second," Regulus says, swiveling his dagger between his fingers, "you really don't value your tongue, do you?"

James hums, raising his eyebrows. "Not as much as you would, if only I had the chance to prove it."

"But you don't, and you never will," Regulus reminds him, because he's so, so mean.

"Well, I don't know," James muses as he continues walking next to Regulus, "I didn't exactly expect to have a chance with...other things. Your gifts at twelve were *a lot* different than they are at twenty-five, I'll just say that."

"Yes, James, that's called maturing. I realize that it's a concept of which you have no basic understanding, but—"

"Why are *you* the way you are, hm? Let's talk about that. You're always insulting me. Feels very...pointed, and frankly, you can't expect me not to like it, because it makes me feel very singled out. Special, if you will."

"You're just desperate," Regulus says.

"Well, yes, *but* I'm no fool. You're meaner to me than anyone else." James chuckles. "Unresolved feelings, maybe?"

Regulus huffs a laugh, like he finds James' theory incredibly amusing, as if it's so absurd that it can only be funny—which is a bit of a blow, if James is honest. "Your optimism has somehow managed to circle into delusion."

"Can you blame me? I mean, your *parting gift* alone…" James looks over and catches his gaze, pleased that Regulus holds it without pretending he has no idea what James is referencing. He can't believe that Regulus is actually willing to talk to him about this. "You can't blame a bloke for the effect a gift like that can have on his greater sense."

"The goal was not to give you hope, James."

"Right, well, you mucked that up quite nicely."

"It didn't mean anything," Regulus says. "You know that."

James purses his lips, wishing he had more berries to chew on so he could bide his time to figure out the best way to respond. He settles for tossing his hatchet from hand-to-hand. "I don't know that, actually. It was indulgence, yeah?"

"Obviously."

"But just for me?"

"Did it look like I got anything out of it?" Regulus asks, but now he's looking away, and there's a certain set to his jaw…

"Oh, fuck," James breathes out, his eyes widening. "Shit, Reg, you *did* get something out of it. You—"

"James."

"You *enjoyed* it."

Regulus cuts him a sharp look, but he's already blushing, so his protests are futile. "Will you *please* just stop talking?"

"No. This is the best day of my life," James declares brightly.

"Right, and a good day for it, no doubt. A nice stroll in the woods with someone who will *never* indulge you again inside an arena where death is imminent," Regulus says sarcastically. He waves his empty hand. "Yes, what a *lovely* day."

The last word has barely left Regulus' mouth before, with an abruptness that James doesn't see coming, everything proceeds to go wrong all at once.

~•~

Something drops down from the tree above them with no warning whatsoever and slams into Regulus' back hard enough to shove him to the ground. He lands on his front and gets a mouthful of leaves and dirt for his troubles, and the weight on his back shifts desperately, leaning, *reaching*... Regulus scrambles to crawl forward and reach his dagger first, because it had slipped from his hand when he went down. A pale hand stretches past him, broad and not familiar. Regulus knows for *sure* that it's not Evan, because he has no scar on the side of his thumb the way the owner of this hand does.

The hand closes around his dagger, and the only thing Regulus can think is, *no one ever thinks to look up.*

Fuck.

Frantically, Regulus tries to buck the person on him *off,* but he only succeeds in half-turning over, the person on top rocking with the motion and using the momentum to slam Regulus to the ground flat on his back. Vaguely, Regulus recognizes the man as one that didn't really speak to anyone, and now here he is, raising Regulus' dagger up and clearly getting ready to bring it back down. Regulus scrambles to reach for his third dagger, and then a hatchet is sticking out of the man's head.

It's just *there,* suddenly. Regulus barely even saw it swing in, like he blinked and missed the moment it was buried into the man's skull. There's a hand still gripping the handle, and Regulus knows that hand. He has that hand memorized.

James.

The cannon goes off, and Regulus' dagger drops down rather anticlimactically against his chest, then slides off without even harming him. The man's face is slack, head split open around the hatchet, and there's a grotesque *crack* and a sickening squelch as the hatchet is yanked free. Blood immediately starts pouring, and the man's body slumps to the side.

Regulus scrambles up in just enough time to see James raise the hatchet again, which propels him forward to catch James' wrist before he can bring it down. James' head whips around towards him, and his eyes are wild. He's breathing hard.

"He's dead," Regulus says firmly. "James, he's dead."

"What?" James croaks, like he's confused, and Regulus realizes with a pang that he *is*. "He's —but you—are you—"

"I'm fine," Regulus murmurs, gently tugging James' hand down and slowly easing the bloodied hatchet out of his grip. He nods. "I'm perfectly fine. Not a scratch on me, see?"

James fumbles to grab Regulus' arm, patting his way up, over his shoulder, into the curve of his neck. A punched-out breath escapes him. "You're okay?"

"I'm okay," Regulus confirms.

"I thought—" James cuts himself off, choking on the rest.

Regulus nods. "I know."

James just stares at him for a long moment, his eyes wide and startlingly innocent for someone who just buried a hatchet in the side of a man's head so deep that it cracked the skull on the way back out. Regulus is uncomfortably aware of what force James must have swung with to actually manage to get the hatchet in so firmly at all. He hit that man like he was planning to take his fucking head off.

There's blood on James' hands, and Regulus steps forward to tug on the bottom of his shirt on the side where he cleaned his hands when they were the ones covered in blood. Far more gently than he did for himself, he carefully and meticulously wipes away the blood as much as he can without water and without looking, still holding James' gaze to keep him looking at him instead of his hands or the dead body on the ground.

James' fingers aren't shaking.

His voice is, though, when he says, "I thought he was going to kill you."

"He was," Regulus replies.

"Why?" James whispers.

Regulus frowns, tempted to glance at the dead man like he can glean information from him, but he refrains because James isn't looking away as long as he's holding his gaze. "I'm not sure. There could be a variety of reasons. Maybe he wanted a weapon, or he thought we had food, or he just thought he could kill us both quickly and better his odds."

"Why would he do that, though?" James insists, and his voice cracks, rising in distress. "We weren't hurting anyone. I would have helped him if he—but he just—he *attacked* you, and I —"

"James," Regulus says softly.

"I couldn't let him," James croaks. "He—he was going to kill you, and I couldn't—I can't—I had to—"

"I know," Regulus tells him yet again, because he does know, even though James can't get his words out properly. "I need you to do something else for me."

James blinks, then rasps, "Anything."

"Close your eyes," Regulus murmurs, and James does. He's shaking now, rattling from head-to-toe. "Now take five careful steps back and turn around."

Without a word, James listens to him. Regulus immediately swivels to crouch down by the man, picking up his dagger to slip in his thigh holster, then grimacing as he cleans the hatchet

on the man's shirt. The sight of him is just—bad. Blood and gore. Brutal, like Regulus knew it would be.

Regulus is quick about making it back to James, pausing in front of him and just looking at him in pure sorrow. James still has his eyes closed, and his breathing is a little wobbly. Less than five minutes ago, he was flirting with Regulus with a grin bright enough to make the sun jealous. That's how fast it all happened; that's how quick everything can change.

And now, the James who never killed anyone is gone. He can never be that person again, and he let that person go without hesitating because he was protecting *Regulus*.

Regulus is so tired of seeing people destroy themselves just so he'll be safe.

"James," Regulus says, keeping his voice low and melodic, but he only speaks to give a warning before he reaches out with his free hand to slip his fingers into James'. Their fingers curl together with familiarity, slotting into place like they were made for this, like they've done this a thousand times instead of three. Regulus tugs on him. "Come with me."

James comes with him, and Regulus leads him away.

~•~

Ten people are dead. It's day three. Six by the first night. Eight by the second night, and a ninth in the middle of the night after the banners had already played in the sky. Here's the tenth. James didn't even know his name.

It's such a strange thing to be fixated on, but James feels like there's a distinct lack of honor in killing someone without even knowing their name, at least so flippantly. He didn't even hesitate, that's the thing. It happened so quickly, the man fumbling for the knife and raising it up, and it only took a measly few *seconds*. James—who fully expected to falter in such a situation—had swung the hatchet as hard as he could without even a *moment* of hesitation.

Just like that. Just that quick. Just that simple.

The baffling thing is, it's not like James made the conscious decision to do it. Yes, he was in complete control of himself, but he never had the thought, *oh, I'm going to kill this man now.* There wasn't really time for that, or any thoughts at all. It came down to one moment, faster than a breath, and it was about what James was capable of. If he wasn't capable of killing, then that would have been the moment he learned that. It wasn't, though, because James apparently *is* capable of killing, and he proved it. Effortlessly. Immediately. *Instinctively.*

He saw Regulus on the ground, seconds from death, and James killed the man. Not knowing his name, if he has a family, or friends, James just fucking *killed him.*

It's crushing to James to realize that he's capable of such a thing. He thought… Maybe it was naive of him, but he really believed that he was on the outside of it, like he and violence were parallel lines that could never cross. Oil and water. It just didn't *go together,* and James never really expected that he could do it. Sure, he told himself that he *would,* if it came down to it, but deep down in some hidden chamber within him where he's always clung to his innocence, he was convinced that it was all bravado, because him? Killing? No, never.

Never is now, forever is out of reach, and James has just killed a man. It was not self-defense. The man didn't attack him; maybe he would have, after killing Regulus, but James didn't wait long enough to find out. James killed the man in defense of Regulus, and he wonders if that should sicken him.

It doesn't.

Regulus didn't ask him to, and James makes his own choices. This choice was one he made from the beginning. He knew what it entailed. He spent *hours* thinking about it, going over every possibility in his mind to see just how far he would go to make sure Regulus makes it home. No matter what scenario crossed his mind, James' choice was always the same.

It's quiet out, excluding the random creaks of the trees and the muffled sound of running water in the distance. Regulus is leading him towards it, still holding his hand. They've been walking for a long time now, neither of them saying a word.

When James looks down at where Regulus is holding his hand, he can see blood stained on their tangled fingers.

It feels like James checks out for a bit. Like he's on autopilot. His mind feels like it's limping, like killing someone wounded his ability to function, to think, to make sense of anything. He has the disjointed thought that his parents must have seen that, as well as Sirius. The last people in the world who would judge him for it, and he still wonders what they're thinking.

What does Regulus think? He's very quiet, and he's being startlingly gentle with James right now, more gentle than he's been in years. James feels—untethered, and Regulus keeps holding onto him, like he knows and he's determined not to let him slip away. There's something secure about him at this moment, and James just wants to sink into him and close his eyes to shut the rest of the world out.

James goes in and out like static, his brain buzzing like it's full of bees, and then they're at the stream. A new one they've never seen before. Regulus takes him to the edge of it, crouching down and encouraging James to do the same by tugging on his hand. James does, and Regulus dips their hands in the water together, keeping them touching even as he cleans the blood off. In the water, it looks pink.

"Did you know his name?" James croaks.

"No," Regulus murmurs as he pulls their hands from the water, letting them drip without doing anything else. The hatchet lying across his thigh is clean, and James isn't sure how that's even possible. It looks untouched. "Did you?"

"No," James chokes out, squeezing his eyes shut and ducking his head. He's right next to Regulus, so he ends up pressing his face into his shoulder, sucking in deep, gasping breaths.

"Shh, breathe, James," Regulus whispers tenderly, so tender, and one of his hands breaks away to cup the back of James' head. His fingers push into James' unruly hair, which makes James feel so much better and so much worse all at once.

James breathes. He's not crying. It feels like he should be; all the usual symptoms are there—the tightness in his throat, the pain in his chest, the struggle to breathe. And yet, no tears come. His eyes remain dry. Everything just hurts.

Regulus sways back a little, and James reaches up to grab his arm with both hands. "Don't leave. Regulus, please don't—"

"I'm not leaving," Regulus says softly, carding his fingers through James' hair again. "I just need to refill our water, that's all. I'm not—I'm still right here, alright? But we can't stay long. I'm sorry, James, but we have to keep going."

"Just—just give me a minute," James begs, and Regulus makes a quiet, soothing noise that sounds like agreement. Oddly, James thinks Regulus would give him anything right now.

All James wants is him.

Regulus stays true to his word. He doesn't leave or shake James off. He lets James hold onto him as he shifts around, getting his bag and drawing out the water canister. James briefly pulls away to drink some when Regulus nudges him in the head with it, insistent even when James ignores it. He drinks it and feels a little better, which makes him feel guilty for some reason, and then Regulus finishes off the rest before refilling it. He does it with James' face pressed into his shoulder and James' arms threaded around one of his, limiting his mobility quite a bit, but he never complains.

Afterwards, Regulus gives him a little more time. James turns his head and stares at the water. It's moving rapidly, a long gorge through the earth and rocks, taking everything downstream. Fresh water replaces the spot they're at every second, and James wonders where the water that contains the blood of the man he killed is at now. Gone, like the man.

"Well, isn't this sweet?"

In seconds, Regulus has the hatchet in hand as he shoots to his feet, snatching James up with him. They whip around at the same time to watch Mulciber stroll through the break in the trees, his approach unheard over the rush of the water.

Mulciber has a sword in his hands, and he's not the only one walking out of the trees. It's all the death eaters, excluding Avery, and they all have weapons. Willa and Axus are back, and Axus has a hook with a rope like they used in the training room. Even little Hodge has a weapon—just a knife, but still.

"You two," Mulciber says, pointing the tip of his sword at them, "have been hard to find. It's almost like you just wanted some time alone together. Sorry, did I break up an intimate moment?"

Regulus' nails dig into James' arm where he's gripping it. James flicks his gaze between everyone. Bernice has a sword, too. Quinn has a spear. Willa has a bow with a quiver of arrows on her back. Her hand is slowly pulling an arrow free.

"Run," Regulus whispers, a mere breath, and then his nails go slack. Immediately, he and James whip around and crash directly into the stream, running as hard as they can while the others automatically give chase.

~•~

Run.

Run.

Run.

That's it. That's all there is. Just *running.* The world is a blur around Regulus as he pushes his legs as hard as they'll go, winding around trees and never going in a straight line. James is right next to him, his legs long enough to keep up with Regulus' speed. They're both sprinting like their lives depend on it. They do.

An arrow whips past them, landing in the trunk of a tree with a loud *thunk.* Regulus snaps it in half as he goes past, cursing under his breath when another one shoots right by him, so close that it would have hit if he hadn't stumbled a bit.

Regulus can hear the others chasing them, their feet pounding on the ground, their loud shouts and whoops of laughter. Taunting them. They have them in their sights now, and Regulus knows they're not going to stop until he and James are dead. The problem is, Regulus and James—even with weapons—can't fight them. They're outnumbered.

Crashing through the forest, Regulus can hear his heavy breathing, as well as James', and everything is going too fast for him to come up with a proper plan. Getting away is ideal, but not really feasible when the death eaters are closing in. And they are. Regulus can *hear* them getting closer.

So, just run.

Run.

Run.

Fucking *run.*

For how long? To where? Regulus doesn't know. He doesn't know what to do; he can't fucking *think.* Another arrow sails past him, nearly hitting James, who—by some miracle—evades getting it right in the back by splitting around a tree, going right as Regulus goes left. Run, run, run. What else?

Come on, *think.* What do you do when you're being hunted? When you're outnumbered and overpowered? What do you do? *Sirius, what do I do?* Regulus thinks as he gasps for air, his whole body screaming from how hard he's pushing it. No answer comes to him. Sirius isn't here.

Maybe there is no answer.

Maybe...this is it.

They can't get away. They can't climb, or hide, or run fast or far enough to evade the people who are after them. Regulus has a hatchet in his hand and two daggers strapped to his thighs. If he could take out Willa first—but no, she'd have an arrow in him the moment he stood still. If he could—

A hook buries itself in his shoulder, yanking him so hard that he's lifted clear off his feet and *slammed* to the ground with such impact that he nearly bites through his tongue. Blood fills his mouth, and he's been here before. For the second time, he swallows his own blood just to breathe, and if that isn't a perfect metaphor for survival, Regulus doesn't know what is.

Regulus, despite the suddenness of everything, is quick to react. He was just *rocked,* hard, but he still fumbles to snatch the hook out of his shoulder. It isn't very deep, but it hurts like a bitch anyway, and lovely, now there's a hole through his coat and shirt. Not the primary issue at the moment, honestly, but Regulus is enough of a miserable little shit to be angry about more than one thing at a time. See? He has talents, too.

Tossing the hook aside, Regulus scrambles to his feet to see James a few steps in front of him, his chest heaving as he turns around to look at him. Every line of his face is set, and Regulus knows he's coming back for him before James even takes one step. *I'm not leaving you,* he'd said. *You'll have to kill me.*

Even under pressure, James stays true to his word.

The issue is, the others have gained on them now. It takes twenty seconds, at most, for the group to converge on them, circling around them so they can't go anywhere. And this… Well, Regulus *knows* there's no way out of this.

But if he's going down, he's taking at least two of these bastards with him, because he's genuinely just *that* pissed off. Murderous rage floods through him, and he can recognize the

feeling for what it is. After all, he is a murderer now, isn't he? This predicament has infuriated him so much that he grips the hatchet with no shame about how he's going to use it.

Regulus has all plans to fight.

And then Mulciber grabs James and pulls him in front of him, holding the sword to his throat as he grins right at Regulus.

~•~

James can safely say he doesn't have a knife kink. Blade kink. Sword kink. *Any* of that—he doesn't have it. No, it's just Regulus he likes, and anything to do with him. When Mulciber has a sword to his throat, it's not sexy at all.

Holding very still, James stares at Regulus, who looks—well, frankly, he looks rather terrifying, but in a sexy way. Now really isn't the time, and maybe James is just biased, as well as a bit hysterical from the rising panic that's taking root, because *oh, fuck, he's about to die, he's about to fucking die.*

Regulus is bleeding from his shoulder, but he's standing like he's perfectly unharmed and completely willing to fuck shit up. His gaze is latched right onto Mulciber, no one else, and his eyes are *cold.* It's admittedly a bit disturbing, because James knows his eyes, and he hasn't ever seen anything like this in them before. Yes, when James discovered him, he looked ready to kill. This is different.

Regulus has fucking *murder* in his eyes. It's cold and calculating, a window into the no doubt chilling thoughts that are rolling through his mind right now. It's bad enough that James almost feels...concern for Mulciber.

"No, no, leave him," Mulciber says, and Bernice steps back from where she was about to grab Regulus. "He's not going to do anything. I've got his boyfriend, don't I?"

"He looks *angry,"* Willa sing-songs, an arrow docked in her bow and ready to set loose as soon as she lifts it. She sounds so young. James thinks she's Vanity's age. "Kill him, Mulciber. What are you waiting for?"

"Not yet," Mulciber snaps. "Go on, Black. I want to know how you did it. How you killed Avery. When we made it to him, they were already lifting his body out."

"I can show you better than I can tell you," Regulus declares sharply, an edge to his voice that makes James' heart skip a beat for a moment.

Mulciber snarls in James' ear. "I've known Avery my whole fucking *life,* you worthless cunt. You're going to tell me what you did to him, or I'm going to cut your boyfriend's pretty face up one little slice at a time."

"If you so much as make him *flinch,* they'll be lifting you out in pieces," Regulus warns, and James swallows, because that's his *I'm not fucking around* voice. He. Oh, he actually means that.

"Is that so, Black?" Mulciber laughs, and then the sword raises up to press against James' cheek. He drags it slowly, pressing in *hard,* and James hisses as he flinches back, but Mulciber just snatches him by the hair and holds him in place.

"Ow, *fuck,"* James grits out, wanting so badly to *fight,* but one wrong move could cost him his eye, or more importantly, it could cost Regulus his life.

James struggles to no avail, and the slice goes up the side of his face until Mulciber puts the sword back to his throat. It stings and aches, a line of heat that blood slips free from, pooling down to his jaw and in the crevice of his neck. His face is twisted into a grimace, but he can still see how stiff Regulus is, his jaw clenched and his nostrils flared wide.

"Do you want to talk now, or should I do that again?" Mulciber asks. "No? Here, let me just __"

"Don't," Regulus snaps, taking a step forward.

"Ah, ah, ah," Mulciber sing-songs. "Come any closer and he'll be *swallowing* the sword, yeah?" Regulus stops. "There we go. Got you on a leash now, don't I? Didn't your brother tell you not to reveal your weakness, Black, or is he as useless as you?"

Regulus gets *visibly* more pissed off at the insult to his brother, and James can relate. James also remembers when Regulus was thirteen, and one of his classmates called Sirius an idiot to his face. It wasn't at school, but rather in the middle of the market, and James was with Sirius. Regulus had wandered off, no doubt going to browse for a new journal, and when they went to find him, a boy was essentially bullying him.

James and Sirius had started over at the same time, both ready to do the same thing, but they never got the chance. Regulus was generally quiet around other people, a bit shy, and he honestly didn't *like* most people who weren't—well, James, basically. Sirius is his brother, so that's a little different.

Anyway, they got close enough to see Regulus being a snarky little shit, because for all that he was shy, he wasn't afraid to verbally rip someone to shreds if they were annoying him, even then. The boy said, "You won't do anything, especially when your idiot brother isn't around," and he'd barely finished talking before Regulus punched him in the face so hard that he crashed into the table of—predictably—journals. Regulus kept right on hitting him, too, at least until Sirius and James pulled him off and dragged him away before the Aurors got involved.

After all that verbal abuse the boy threw at him, it was one offhand comment about Sirius that set Regulus off.

In short, if Regulus gets his hands on Mulciber, he's *fucked.*

For some reason, this makes James laugh. This isn't really the situation where laughter is appropriate, but it bubbles up anyway. He can't help it. He's under a lot of stress, his face hurts, and he's terrified that they're about to die—and he still laughs, because oh, Mulciber is going to regret that.

"Something funny, Potter?" Mulciber asks sharply, yanking him by his hair to get him to shut up again.

James grinds his teeth, but nevertheless says, "You're an idiot. Mercy on your soul, Mulciber, because you just made a very big mistake. You think Regulus cares about *me?* No. No, *Sirius* is his weakness, and you fucking fool, he's *not here."*

"James," Regulus says sharply, and that's all he says, but that's all he *has* to say. The unspoken command rings loud and clear.

With a grunt, James recklessly presses into the sword, getting a sharp—but thin—slice for his troubles, all so he can toss his head back into Mulciber's face. Mulciber curses sharply and rocks back, his hand lifting slightly, which James turns his head to clamp down on hard enough that he tastes blood.

The sword hits the ground, and James lunges for it as Mulciber stumbles back with a shout. He gets it in his hand and sucks in a sharp breath as something glints out of the corner of his eye. Bernice is there, sword sailing right for him. He lifts the sword he just grabbed to block it, falling backwards and trying frantically to make it back to his feet.

Chaos immediately unleashes all at once. An arrow goes flying, but Regulus manages to dodge it in the midst of launching himself right at Mulciber. Bernice is downright *ruthless* with her sword, swinging at James again and again so quickly that he can only block over and over to keep his head from being sliced cleanly from his body.

Axus swings their hook in the air like a lasso, and James *sees* it go right for Regulus, and—it doesn't miss. It hooks into the same spot as before, but Regulus doesn't even slow down. He just grabs the rope part and *yanks* so hard that Axus stumbles to the ground, cursing under their breath as the rope slips through their hands rapidly enough that it likely burns. Regulus rips the hook right out and throws it carelessly to the side, making it disappear through the trees. Axus curses vibrantly and darts off to go get it.

Quinn rushes after Regulus with her spear, and James manages to knock back Bernice's sword with enough force to get the time to make it to his feet. Hodge is there, so small with his knife raised. He doesn't move, so James doesn't either. The three of them—James, Bernice, and Hodge—proceed to have a silent stand-off, their weapons at the ready.

James' heart thumps loudly in his ears, and his mind is racing. He's distracted worrying about Regulus, even though Mulciber has no weapon. Quinn is over there, though, and she has her spear. Regulus has a hatchet, at least, but Mulciber still has his fists. Also, James is *not* some god with a sword. He barely knows how to hold the fucking thing, and it's a lot heavier than he was expecting it to be. Bernice holds hers like she knows how to use it, which is concerning.

A sudden blood-curdling scream makes them all freeze before snapping their heads over instinctively to follow the sound. Mulciber is on the ground, and Regulus is ripping the hatchet out of his arm, then bringing it right back down.

"Pieces! I fucking *told you* you'd be in pieces!" Regulus roars, and he swings back down, stomping on Mulciber's hand until he breaks all the way through. The sound of it is sickening, and the blood—there's so much blood. Regulus snatches the hatchet up yet again, then *kicks* Mulciber's hand away from where it was separated from his body.

"Oh, fuck," Bernice chokes out, sounding like she might vomit, and honestly? James knows the feeling.

Mulciber screams and writhes on the ground, frantically clawing at his own arm, and Regulus just looks down at him like he's a twitching bug that can't get up off its back. He raises the hatchet again, looking to be going for the head this time, and he's so focused that he doesn't see Quinn behind him. She draws back her spear.

"Regulus!" James shouts, and the name rips out of him in nothing short of pure fucking terror.

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The spear catches Regulus along his side, just a bit above his hip, and it glances off as he stumbles away from it with a loud curse. Two inches to the left, and the spearhead would have been *in* him. Maybe his luck is turning up after all.

Maybe not, though, because Quinn just starts to lunge for him again, and he's not steady enough to fully block this time. It's going to land right in the center of his stomach, and again, James yells. Regulus sucks in a sharp breath, his ears ringing, and then a vine shaped into a noose drops down over Quinn's head and snaps tight around her throat.

Quinn proceeds to get lifted clear off her feet, raising in the air and dropping her spear as she scrambles at her throat and chokes, kicking in the air. As she goes up, Evan comes down, the end of the vine in his hands. It's like a pully system over the branch he falls from, him sinking down artfully as she thrashes her way higher. He wastes no time in rushing to the tree to tie the vine around the trunk, securing it there so Quinn won't fall back down.

On the ground, Mulciber is weeping.

"Fuck! Fuck, Hodge, we need to cut her down!" Bernice bellows. "Willa? Willa, where the fuck *are* you?!"

"Run!" Evan shouts at Regulus.

"James!" Regulus shouts back, like an answer, and then they're both running right for James, who is currently trying to throw Willa off his back. She has no more arrows, so now she's resorted to attempting to strangle him with her arms.

Mulciber is still flailing on the ground, Quinn is still flailing in the air, and Bernice and Hodge have abandoned James in favor of getting her down. Axus is still trying to find their hook, probably, and now Regulus is grateful that he threw it.

James does manage to throw Willa off of him, fully just shaking her off because she's so small compared to him. He stumbles back, sword still in hand, and he could kill her. He could, easily, but he doesn't. He sees Regulus and Evan racing right for him, and he starts backing up to meet them at a full sprint as they start crashing through the woods.

Run.

Run.

Run.

And so, they're running again.

This time, no one is chasing them, and now they have a third person with them, someone that Regulus—at this point—is sure he trusts. No one is following, and they still run like their lives are at stake. They can't be convinced that they aren't.

No cannon sounds, not even when they've been running for so long that Quinn would definitely be dead by now, which means that they managed to cut her down. Mulciber—well, he can survive without a hand, so long as he doesn't bleed out. Regulus isn't too happy about it, honestly. He didn't chop off Mulciber's hand out of *mercy.* He was going to kill him.

Regulus *still* wants to kill him. The murderous rage is still pumping through him, not letting up. Later, maybe he'll be sickened by how he just lost it, but for *now,* he remains fucking *furious.*

"Regulus. *Regulus,* stop," James wheezes, and he starts slowing, which makes Evan and Regulus do the same.

Slowly, they all come to a stop, breathing hard. As soon as Regulus gets still, his injuries make themselves known, and he groans as he cups his side and bends over slightly, eyes squeezing shut as he tries to catch his breath. Nothing is fatal, he knows that, but it still fucking *hurts.* The threat of infection is a concern as well, so stopping to dress their wounds is a must. But not here, not out in the open.

"Shit," Regulus gasps out, forcing himself to straighten up. He blinks at Evan in a daze, and Evan gives him a weak grin, also catching his breath. "Evan, what the fuck?"

"No one ever thinks to look up, eh, lover boy?" Evan says with a breathy chuckle.

Regulus stares at him, then busts out laughing. He isn't sure where it comes from, but he just —laughs. A full-bellied laugh that actually hurts him a bit, so it doesn't last long. Shit, his body hurts. He can feel the rush of adrenaline seeping out of him, letting in the exhaustion that makes him tremble.

"You're hurt," James mumbles, stumbling over towards him with wide eyes. His face is still bleeding.

"Yeah, no shit, James," Regulus replies with a grimace as he peels up his jacket and shirt to look at his side.

James hisses between his teeth. "Oh, that's—"

"It's not fatal," Regulus cuts in. "I'll live."

"Not if we don't clean it," James retorts. "Reg, we need to get you cleaned up as soon as possible. Infection might—"

Regulus eases his shirt and coat down. "Yeah, alright, but not here. We can't stay out in the open like this."

"Do you really think the death eaters are going to chase us down after all of *that?"* Evan asks incredulously.

"Of course they are. As soon as they get Mulciber's arm wrapped, they'll be on their way," Regulus mutters as he reaches out and grabs James' chin, turning his head so he can narrow his eyes at the cut on his cheek. There's a smaller one on his throat, too, but it's already stopped bleeding. The one on his face is slowing down, at least. "They have supplies with them, so it won't take long to recover. Mulciber will be on a warpath, no doubt. James, stop moving."

"I'm *fine,"* James insists, trying to lean his head back.

"Let me *look* at it, you idiot."

"I said I'm fine. *You're* worse off. Let me see your shoulder—"

Evan clears his throat. "If you two are done, there's a stream not too far from here with a little cave close by. Feel free to stop flirting at any time."

"Piss off," Regulus grumbles, but he dutifully drops his hand and turns towards Evan. "I saw Axus got their hook. Do you still have your knife?"

"Willa and Axus chased me for a long time," Evan says wearily, heaving a sigh. "Willa stole my knife; she's a crafty girl, I hate to admit. I managed to shake Axus by assuming they'd chase the hook if I tossed it, and I was right. I still have my supplies, obviously." He reaches up to pat the strap of his bag. "I just don't have any weapons. Didn't let that stop me, though."

"Here," Regulus says, holding out the hatchet to James, who stares at it without moving. His eyes crawl up to meet Regulus' gaze, and he swallows thickly. Regulus nods at him, which makes him take the hatchet slowly and carefully. It's covered in Mulciber's blood. Regulus takes the sword; James doesn't protest, just letting him have it. He holds it out to Evan, who blinks at it. "Here."

Evan only waits one moment before he reaches out to take it, then he mumbles, "Thanks."

"Lead the way," Regulus replies, sweeping out his hand.

"The death eaters know the stream, but not the cave," Evan explains as he turns and starts walking. "I've seen them go to the stream from the trees, but I don't think they've realized there's a cave near it. Should be safe for a few moments."

"Unless they've already recovered enough to start searching for us again," James points out.

"Yes, so maybe pick up the pace, yeah?" Evan suggests, and they all start up a light jog, which is about all they can manage with how sore and exhausted they all are.

Regulus presses his hand to his side with a wince, but he keeps going past the pain. "Did your supplies come with anything even vaguely medical?"

"No, but I have a cloth that should help clean you two up, and a bowl we can carry water in," Evan replies.

"Lovely," Regulus mutters with a sigh. "Not that I'm not grateful, Evan, but what were you doing in that tree?"

"I heard Mulciber scream," Evan says, and Regulus keeps staring straight ahead as James and Evan both glance at him from either side. "I wasn't too far, actually, and I was...curious, so I got close and climbed up to see what was going on. A right fright you were while chopping away, lover boy."

"Yes, well, you missed the part where I warned him that would happen," Regulus says. "Not my fault he didn't listen."

Evan whistles low, then clicks his tongue. "Can't imagine what he did to make you give a warning like that. I can guess, though. Threaten your boyfriend?"

"Mocked his brother, actually," James corrects.

Both, Regulus thinks, then grimaces as soon as he's had the thought, because James *isn't* his boyfriend. Regulus is just—look, he's injured and tired and dealing with a lot, okay? Give him a break. He can't be blamed for the thoughts he has under these circumstances, especially when he's essentially being guided into them because he knows that Evan means James when he says *your boyfriend.* Fuck, Regulus needs a nap.

They're all quiet until they locate the stream Evan is taking them to. He points out the cave, but they stop by the water first. It's clear and clean, less of a stream and more of a pond. The water is startlingly still outside of a few ripples that come from the wind and nothing else. Regulus can see all the way through to the bottom, and there's not one fish or anything else inside it.

Evan goes further down away from them to gather water in his canister and bowl, while James and Regulus crouch down to clean the blood off their hands for the second time today. It's getting a little bit later, but not late enough that the death eaters will retreat for the night. There's still time.

Regulus can feel James looking at him. He's not brave enough to look back, because now his anger is down to a simmer, just quietly festering under the surface. He has the space for shame and discomfort for his own actions, at this point. He doesn't know *how* James will be looking at him.

Vaguely, Regulus wonders what Sirius must have thought, seeing him chop off Mulciber's hand. That's a bit stupid, isn't it? Sirius did things in his games, too. Horrible things. He vividly remembers being fifteen and watching Sirius bite someone's finger off before spitting it out, using the advantage of their agony to finish them off. He was *ruthless,* unafraid to do anything and everything—even grotesque things—to stay alive. The worst part is, he never would have done those things at all if no one had tried to kill him in the first place.

If Mulciber hadn't cut James' cheek and made him flinch, then maybe he would still have his hand.

Regulus thinks Sirius wouldn't blame him, or see him any differently. Strangely, Regulus doesn't *feel* any different, but he's rational enough to work out why. Mulciber isn't dead. Yes, he's missing his hand, but Regulus didn't *kill* him.

He still wants to, though. Just because his anger has settled down doesn't mean it went away. It's still there, mostly just resting at the moment.

It's going to weigh on him. He knows it will. Already, he can see the blur of blood without even closing his eyes and hear Mulciber's shrieks of pain ringing in his ears even after they've stopped. Regulus will deal with it in his nightmares.

"Regulus," James says.

"I'm fine," Regulus replies reflexively.

"Regulus, look at me," James orders firmly, and there's something authoritative about his tone that Regulus responds to immediately. He looks, and James meets his gaze steadily, his expression calm. "You're not fine."

"I can't afford to let that matter," Regulus admits, because no, he's not fine. James is not fine. *No one* in this damn arena is *fine.* It's not possible, and they all have to carry on anyway. It's not a choice. "Just leave it, James."

"I don't—blame you," James murmurs.

"No?" Regulus raises his eyebrows. "I just mutilated someone. Tell me, how exactly are you going to excuse that?"

James shakes his head. "I'm not excusing it. I'm looking at it logically, and don't make a snarky fucking comment about me not having any logic, Regulus. I'm not in the mood, and this isn't a joke. We are in an arena where we have no *choice* but to fight and kill to survive. I buried my hatchet in a man's skull less than three hours ago."

"That was different."

"How?"

"I didn't have to chop off Mulciber's hand to survive, James. I did that because I—" Regulus cuts himself off and looks away.

"Because you were angry, and scared, and *fighting* under intense circumstances where dying was so much of a risk that everything—all of it—was survival instincts," James insists, swaying forward to catch Regulus' gaze again. "I know it came from a place of anger, but murder isn't delicate, Regulus. It's not clean. Sometimes it's brutal, like *that,* like the things Sirius had to do when it was him. You don't think I haven't had this same conversation with him before, hm?"

Regulus swallows, then reaches out to gently take the hatchet from James, dipping that in the water. It's his mess, after all; he should clean it up. "I know that, here in the arena, the perimeters for what must be done to survive are different than out there, but James...I don't want to get lost in that."

"Regulus," James whispers, and his hand comes down to cover his wrist, his eyes soft and sad.

"Can't you feel it?" Regulus whispers back, searching his eyes, desperate to find understanding. "It's like this—this *pit.* Like we're being pushed and pushed until we're frayed. Ragged and hungry like animals. But we feel—we *feel,* James, and not the way animals do. Deeper. Stronger. With higher intelligence, usually. So, our rage, our pain, our fear—it can become a weapon. And this arena, it's just this pit we fall further into until everything else, all the rules and—and what's *right,* just gets farther and farther out of reach. This place sucks the humanity right out of us. Can't you feel it?"

James takes a deep breath, then slowly exhales and nods. He looks pained. "That's why I didn't want to kill the animals. I actually—I wasn't as against it at the start, but then I saw them, and I thought… I don't know. The feeling of—of *having* to kill them was like this...vice around my throat. I didn't want to have to, just like I didn't want to have to kill that man, but I did. I can feel it, Regulus. You're not alone."

"I don't want to lose myself," Regulus rasps, "and I'm—I'm scared that I already have."

"You're so like Sirius sometimes," James murmurs tenderly, with a smile that's tinged with a mixture of fondness and pain. "I'm scared, too, but we're still here and we're still trying."

Regulus huffs a weak laugh. "That has to count for something, doesn't it? Is that what you're saying?"

"Almost. I think it counts for a lot of things," James replies, his smile growing warmer. His hand slips down into the water so he can squeeze Regulus' fingers between his own. "We're okay. We'll be okay, love."

"For now," Regulus says softly.

He looks away and pulls his hand free from James' grip, because his touch, even under the water, puts that stupid flutter in Regulus' chest. It's senseless. This is the worst possible place to go about having fucking *heart flutters* because James Potter has touched him, like he's suddenly fourteen again. For fuck's sake, he needs to get a grip. He's *literally* in a life or death situation at all times.

Regulus finishes cleaning off James' hatchet, then gives it back to him. Their hands are clean, but there's still blood on them from their wounds, and also on their clothes. That will just have to dry into it, because it's not as if they can wash their clothes at the moment. It's getting too late, and none of it will be dry by the time the temperature drops. So, for tonight, they'll be sleeping in clothes stiff with blood.

Evan approaches with the bowl and cloth, holding them up with a smug little smile. The prick is unharmed, of course, so he's completely free of what's surely about to be an irritating process. It's likely going to hurt, but it's necessary.

"Alright, let's get into the cave in case our friends head in this direction," Evan declares, nodding for James to walk ahead of him while Regulus grabs his bag.

"They won't be able to find us if they do, right?" James checks, turning around to walk backwards and face them both.

"The cave is behind loads of shrubbery and vines, so it's barely even visible to the eye. I actually only found it because I was avoiding Axus and Willa. Practically fell in," Evan assures him with a chuckle. "So long as we're quiet, they'll come through and never even know we were here."

There's a distinct click of a mechanism releasing, and then James is howling at the top of his lungs and crumbling to the ground. His scream of pain echoes off the trees, so loud that birds take flight, and Regulus can't even blame him.

James just got himself caught in a bear trap.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you coming to the end notes for the more in-depth warnings:

the explicit depictions of murder:

IF YOU WISH TO SKIP, THEN STOP READING WHEN IT SWITCHES TO REGULUS' POV AND PICK BACK UP WHEN IT SWAPS TO JAMES' SECOND POV.

if you just want the in-depth warning: regulus is attacked without warning by—as of now—an unnamed man, pinned to the ground and nearly stabbed. james swings his hatchet into the man's head, killing him. it's described in a bit of detail, but only briefly. there's descriptions of blood.

As for the explicit depictions of violence:

IF YOU WISH TO SKIP IT, STOP READING AFTER REGULUS' SECOND POV WHEN MULCIBER GRABS JAMES AND PUTS A SWORD TO HIS THROAT AND PICK BACK UP WHEN IT'S REGULUS' THIRD POV AND THEY'RE RUNNING AGAIN

if you just want the in-depth warning: regulus and james get into a fight with the death eaters. mulciber slices james' face with his sword. regulus cuts mulciber's hand off with the hatchet—and this is described in a bit of detail, mentions of blood and regulus stomping on his hand. regulus is sliced on the side by quinn with her spear. evan also shows up, and he does so by dropping a noose made out of vine around quinn's throat, falling from the tree as she gets raised in the air. both mulciber and quinn survive these things.

for those of you who have finished the chapter...

whew, what a doozy, huh?

let's get into it, i guess.

once again, i led you all in with a false sense of security. i do have a terrible habit of doing that. i would apologize, but i fear i will do it again. whoops 🤭

it started out so nice, right? like, james was chilling, flirting with regulus—ya know, as one does—talking about cute little memories and stuff. the rock story 😭😭😭 pls, im such a whore for the idea of regulus being a sweet, shy kid (to people he likes, at least) who ends up growing into this mean prick of an adult. also, regulus and james talking about the Parting Gift. it was bound to happen eventually, but they couldn't have picked a worse time.

then BOOM. 💫 murder 💫 james' first kill. that was so sad. he looked hot while doing it, though, so... 🤷‍♂️

NO LET ME STOP 😭 that was a joke. i have to deflect with humor, or ill genuinely get very sad, because james is sad about it, and i LOVE HIM. yes, i know i wrote it. i still have the right to want to hug him anyway. that's okay, because i made regulus coddle him afterwards, AS HE SHOULD. james literally just killed for him, you're damn right regulus coddled him.

unfortunately, things just Got Worse. james didn't even get to properly deal with anything before his life (and Regulus') was in danger AGAIN. that whole running scene was such a rush to write, i hope you all know that. i had run boy run by woodkid playing and it was genuinely so thrilling. that makes me sound like a bad person, maybe, but i mean from a writer's standpoint, mostly, because i was In The Zone while writing it. you haven't LIVED until you're writing something and you look up to realize you haven't moved in 3 hours.

anyway, regulus being a menace seems to be a running theme in my fics. like, i always give him at least one Unhinged Moment where we're all like: oh, he is Very Unwell. he actually has more than one in this fic, but that's besides the point. this first one was chopping mulciber's hand off and then feeling exactly zero remorse for it. in his defense, he LITERALLY told mulciber what would happen if he made james flinch. like, you cant say he didn't warn him. he's just a man who keeps his promises, if you think about it. and also, mulciber insulted sirius, too. i will defend regulus with my life, okay?

then EVAN!!! OUR BOY IS BACK!!! evan, my beloved <3 he really just swooped in and saved the day. king behavior. i am swooning.

(side note: regulus thinking of james as his boyfriend by accident, then immediately dismissing it. my brother in christ, you are fooling NO ONE)

finally, The Bear Trap. heh, who put that there anyway? those damn gamemakers, just a bunch of assholes, am i right? 😅 poor james... you're not gonna believe me, but i really do love him so much.

yeah, listen, you can yell at me, that's fine, i have accepted the consequences of my choices. that was mean to leave on a cliffhanger, wasn't it? 😬 again, i would apologize, but...well. it will unfortunately happen again, and anyway, it's not that long of a wait!

alright, let's do numbers:

remaining tributes as of this chapter: 14
tributes that have died, as of this chapter: dylan, avery, and eight unnamed/unknown others.

Loss

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-graphic depictions of violence
-graphic depictions of injuries
-descriptions of blood
-murder/death
-depictions of grief
-angst

(i will, as always, be putting a little spoiler-y in-depth warning in the end notes for those of you who want/need it, which is valid!)

this is another heavy one, unfortunately. it has its light moments, but overall, it's sad as shit. so, i recommend reading with something to cuddle close by! also, maybe read where you can cry without anyone seeing you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's the sound of Evan's bowl hitting the ground, and then the first thing James feels outside of the searing, white-hot agony centered on his leg is hands on his face.

Regulus has thrown himself down on the ground next to him, his face alarmingly pale. He's cradling James' cheeks, but only for a second, and then he's ripping himself away to go to the trap on James' leg. James stares down at it as he gasps out choked noises of pain, whimpering and biting his lip so hard that he nearly bites clean through. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

It hurts so fucking bad. James has never—he hasn't felt pain like this before. He's never even broken a bone, so seeing the trap clamped down on his leg is just—so much. It is *so much,* and James' head reels from how much *pain* there is. And to think, there are worse things to experience, and greater pains to feel. James can't even fathom it, any of it. He thinks the entire concept of pain is just stupid. It shouldn't exist.

"We—we have to pry it open," Regulus says, his voice sounding strained. James can see his hands shaking. "Evan—"

"I know. I just." Evan exhales and grimaces. *"Fuck.* Okay, James, this is going to hurt, like, *really* bad. As soon as we get it open, you need to move your leg free. Regulus, you get one side, and I'll pull the other. Firm grip now. *Regulus."*

At the sharp call of his name, Regulus gives a violent blink and jolts into motion. He nods at Evan, and they both reach out to carefully grip the sides of the trap. Neither of them pull.

"Just—fuck, just do it," James grits out. He can *feel* the teeth of the trap buried in his leg, deep enough to scrape bone.

"Together," Regulus rasps. "One, two, th—"

"Wait," Evan blurts out. "On three, or after three?"

"Evan!" Regulus shouts, glaring at him and looking frazzled.

Evan huffs. "It's a valid question!"

"Three!" Regulus bellows, and they immediately start pulling at the same time, which is when James starts screaming bloody murder again.

It almost hurts *more* being pried open than when it clamped shut, honestly. James' leg immediately starts throbbing harder, wave after wave of pain radiating from his leg all through his body. As soon as he has room, James lifts his leg free and scoots himself back, his shouts tapering off into whimpers as his foot drags along the ground.

When Evan and Regulus let go of the trap, it snaps shut with a clang, blood staining the teeth where it meets. In seconds, Regulus is back at James' side, hands cradling his cheeks once

more. James looks at him, blinking tears out of his eyes.

"You're fine," Regulus says breathlessly, his eyes wide, and he's still so pale. "It's fine. You're fine, James. It's not even that bad, yeah? Don't be a baby about it."

"It fucking *hurts,"* James confesses, nearly whining.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. You're fine, baby. It's fine," Regulus rambles, his fingers trembling as they pat down the sides of his neck, more unsteady now than he was in the aftermath of cutting Mulciber's hand off.

"Regulus, you need to get him up, *now,"* Evan hisses. "There's no way the death eaters didn't hear that. I wouldn't be fucking surprised if *everyone* heard that. Get him to the cave. *Go."*

"I—I don't think I'll be able to walk," James chokes out, his panic rising until he almost can't breathe around it. Not being able to walk out here, in *these* conditions, that's a fucking death sentence. He immediately starts spiraling.

"I'll help you. It's fine, I'll help. Shh, you're okay, I'm going to help," Regulus chants, and then he's shifting forward to get an arm around James, helping haul him up.

It's not a graceful process. The difference in the position changes the feeling of pain, somehow, which doesn't even *make sense.* Maybe it's the gravity that tugs at his leg once he's upright, or maybe it's the bolts of searing pain that shoot up his leg when he nearly stumbles and puts even a *hint* of weight on his foot, or maybe it's the drag of cloth against his wounds as it shifts on his skin. Whatever it is, it has him clamping down on Regulus and clenching his teeth so he won't yell.

Sweat drips down James' forehead, and Regulus tucks himself into his side, an arm around him. He supports most of James' weight and begins helping him limp towards the direction of the cave. It's slow-going, honestly, but they make some progress before Evan catches up with them, having refilled the bowl of water and gathered his things again.

As soon as Evan reaches them, he ducks under James' other arm without a word and helps support him along the way, as much as he can while holding so many things at once.

Getting to the cave is difficult; getting *inside* is a fucking trial and a half. It's a little bit elevated, and it's behind a wall of vines and shrubbery, like Evan said. Evan has to dart inside to put everything down, then come back and peel open a gap big enough for them to fit through. It doesn't work really well, so James and Regulus stumble inside, which makes James step down with his bad leg, and *that* rips a whimper from his lips.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *fuck,* I'm so sorry," Regulus apologizes, and he sounds absolutely fretful, so much despair in his voice that it actually breaks James' heart a little bit.

"It's—it's okay," James wheezes, doing his best to pretend he's not in as much pain as he's actually in. Putting on a brave face. Trying to soothe Regulus more than himself, at this point.

Regulus helps him over to the cave wall next to where Evan sat his things, slowly easing him down with care. James holds his breath until he's settled, his legs stretched out in front of him, and then he exhales explosively and tips his head back, eyes drifting shut for a moment. Just from that small walk to the cave, he feels like he's about to pass out.

"We need to look at it," Evan mumbles, and James opens his eyes to see him kneeling by his leg. He looks up and makes a face at James. "This…is also going to hurt. Sorry."

"Just give him a fucking minute to *breathe,"* Regulus snaps.

"Listen, I get that you're fretting right now, lover boy, but we don't have *time* to do this gently," Evan replies. "We need to see how bad it is, and so does your *mentor,* because James may need medicine we don't have."

"All I've got is a tiny bottle of antiseptic and a few bandages," Regulus admits, pulling his bag off to dig for it.

"Wait, what about you?" James asks. "You're hurt. You—"

"Shut up, James," Regulus cuts in distractedly, not even paying him any mind as he pulls out the compact kit. He pops it open to reveal a depressingly small bottle and three bandages that are also very tiny. He holds it up towards Evan almost desperately.

"Let's just see how bad it is first," Evan mutters, eyeing the kit with a grimace, like it's pathetic. "Alright, James, ready?"

James blows out a deep breath. "No. Do it anyway."

Evan does it anyway. In his defense, he does try to be gentle when he slowly, carefully starts rolling up the clothes over James' leg. It's just that every shift and tug causes fire to lick up and down his nerve-endings in the worst way possible. He tenses up and grits his teeth, squeezing Regulus' hand so hard that he's going to feel bad about it later.

But Regulus is right there, leaning in to murmur nonsense in his ear, just a steady stream of, "You're fine. It's fine. I know it hurts, I'm sorry. Just breathe, James. It's fine. Shh."

"You—you called me 'baby' before, you know," James gasps out, his chest heaving as he rolls his head to the side to gaze at Regulus, more than willing to do everything in his power to avoid what's going on down at his leg.

"No, I didn't," Regulus denies instantly. "I told you not to *be* a baby about this, and you're failing miserably."

James flinches when cloth drags over where the teeth of the trap bit into his leg, and Regulus immediately backtracks.

"Sorry, no, you're doing great," Regulus blurts out, his voice pitched higher with distress, and now he's squeezing James' hand back almost as hard.

"Right, but—ah, *fuck."* James grimaces and struggles not to shift, not to try to squirm away from the pain. He gives his head a literal shake, like he can just…shake it off. It doesn't work, but he focuses on Regulus anyway. "But yeah, you said that, and *then* you called me 'baby'. Like, you know, tenderly."

"Tenderly?" Regulus repeats, bewildered.

"A pet name. Term of endearment. Whatever you wish to call it," James explains. "You said it."

"You did," Evan confirms.

"You stay out of this," Regulus says warningly, then glances back at James. "I did not call you *baby* as a term of endearment or a pet name, though it would be very fitting, because you're absolutely being a baby about this right now."

"But you did, though," James insists. "Do it again."

"James."

"I could *die.* You don't know."

"You're not going to die," Regulus snaps. "Shut up."

Evan snorts, drawing their attention. "No, James, sadly you don't get to use the *dying* card, I'm afraid. Not yet, at least. It's…bad, yes, and you *definitely* need medicine, but it would take days to kill you."

"How bad? Let me see." Regulus pulls away to go examine James' leg, and all the color that had returned to his face proceeds to drain right back out.

"Not good?" James asks weakly, but he doesn't need to ask. He can see it from here. The wounds are deep, *very* deep, and they're still sluggishly pouring blood. The skin is angry red and swollen, inflamed already.

Regulus swallows, then clears his throat. "This is—fine. Evan, give me some water. James, hold still."

Evan passes him the bowl and cloth, and Regulus dips the cloth before giving James a warning look, waiting to receive a nod before he squeezes out the cloth over James' leg. The water cascades down, washing away blood and dirt, and it's terribly cold. James raises his arm and bites down into the side of his coat, pounding his free hand against the floor.

Gently, Regulus cleans his leg as much as he can, eventually using the cloth to carefully wipe around the entry wounds. He goes for the antiseptic next, using every drop and ignoring James when he tries to protest. Evan chuckles when James complains, but he doesn't intervene, just letting Regulus do whatever he likes. James, of course, fusses.

"At least keep *one* bandage for yourself," James demands, utterly aghast when Regulus starts peeling them open. "You have that gash on your side. Regulus, *please* just—"

"Shut up, James," Regulus says dismissively, yet again, then carefully covers James' wounds in every single bandage, somehow managing to make them all fit.

"You're not going to be able to walk," Evan informs him. "Not for a few days, at least. Not unless you get medicine sent in by your mentor."

"Which is going to happen," Regulus says, then tips his head back to glare directly at the ceiling of the cave. "Sirius, you're going send something to *fix him,* or so help me, when I get out of here, I'm going to rip all of your hair out right from the scalp until you're fucking *bald."*

There's a long beat of silence, and James blinks at Regulus, startled. Regulus is very… agitated. Fussy. Frantic, almost. He's clearly on edge, like maybe he doesn't like to see James in pain, and James thinks he *doesn't.* It puts a soft glow of warmth in James' chest to realize that Regulus is *concerned* about him.

James thinks that realization alone could cure him, because despite the pain all over, he breaks out into a grin and feels like he could hop up and run around. He doesn't test the theory, but he feels it nonetheless.

"His *hair,* Reg? That's a bit much, isn't it?" James teases.

"It's just enough for him to know I am *not* joking," Regulus grumbles, then huffs and dips the cloth in the bowl, wringing it out. He shifts to come back to James' side, freezing when he looks at James' face. "What are you grinning about?"

"You're upset because I'm *hurt,"* James whispers, beaming at him. Regulus presses his lips into a thin line, but doesn't deny it or confirm it. "Also, you called me 'baby'."

Regulus rolls his eyes. "Fuck off, I did *not."*

"Did too," James says. "Evan heard it."

"Evan did hear it," Evan agrees. "You said it, lover boy. Might as well own it."

"I like you," James declares cheerfully, and Evan winks at him.

"Shut up, both of you," Regulus says, shaking his head as he settles on his knees next to James and lifts the cloth to start cleaning the blood off his cheek. He's very gentle about it.

James holds still and flicks his gaze over Regulus' face. He has a bruise at the high point of his cheek, but the cut there is scabbed over and healing now. The split lip isn't swollen anymore, and it's also visibly better than it was the day prior. Something about *seeing* him get better soothes James, like a reassurance that everything that happens here is something that will one day fade. James knows better than that, through Sirius and even his mum, but he still finds it within him to have that hope anyway. One day, Regulus will heal.

The thing about healing that no one talks about is, it's painful. Getting better *hurts.* It's not something that's just easily done and over with. Bruises have to ache before they fade, and cuts have to bleed before they scab, and breaks have to set before they mend. Sometimes, healing is harder than being hurt.

Regulus carefully drags the cloth around James' slice on his cheek, eyebrows furrowed as he looks at it. He seems displeased about it, even more than James is. He knows it's not fatal, so he's not too worried about it, honestly. Sure, it hurts, but not very bad and it's *nothing* compared to his leg.

"It's fine," James murmurs.

"It might scar," Regulus shoots back, sounding unhappy.

James raises his eyebrows. "Have a problem with scars, do you?"

"No," Regulus says. "Scars themselves aren't a problem, but he had no right—he only did that because I—" He stops and shakes his head, looking and sounding very frustrated. Even still, he remains gentle when cleaning James' neck. "I should have put the hatchet between his eyes for this."

"You know, I've noticed that you get really offended about things involving my appearance," James muses. "You were upset about my glasses, the idea of my hair getting cut, and now this. What's that all about, Reg?"

Regulus frowns, and he doesn't speak for a long time, not until he pulls the cloth back. James can feel his damp skin prickling in the soft breeze that flows into the cave. He watches

Regulus exhale deeply and reach up with his free hand to carefully brush the tips of his fingers under the cut on James' cheek, his touch so light that it doesn't even hurt.

Regulus swallows. "I don't want them to change you."

James feels the impact of those words in his chest, because he instantly understands what Regulus means. He's somehow found the words for it, so succinct to explain something with such depths, and James is pretty sure his heart fucking *breaks*.

The thing is, it's more than just *change,* especially surface-level changes. Regulus—like Sirius—doesn't handle change well. When they're settled into something, comfortable with how the world is when it makes sense to them, any difference that comes in to shake that up will upset them. James thinks it's a result of their childhood, the constant abuse from their parents, never having a sense of stability because every day was a different battle they couldn't prepare themselves for. So, the things that *give* them a sense of stability—they cling to them, and if that changes, it's more upsetting than anything.

It's not about how James *looks,* not really. It's more of a representation for the stability he offers just as himself, because through everything, he's remained a constant. Sirius and Regulus were changed when Sirius volunteered. Forever altered with barely any resemblance to who they were before it happened. James changed, too, but in little ways. Quieter ways. Hidden ways, safely tucked behind closed doors where Sirius and Regulus could not see. He didn't lose too much of himself for it to become obvious the way they did, and he's just now realizing that—like Sirius—Regulus takes comfort from that. He's *protective* of that. Defensive of it, just the same as Sirius.

I don't want them to change you, Regulus said. It's more than just taking his glasses and giving him scars. It's a plea for James to get through this unscathed. Because he was always the one with a bridge to who they all used to be. He's closest to it, like a connection they can reach out and touch, a reminder of what they lost when they're in danger of forgetting that there used to be anything at all.

James thinks that Sirius and Regulus have many different fears, and one that they share is how easily the Hallow and the games can alter everything. The fact that they want to protect James from that, both of them, is…heartbreaking. Because they can't. Because there's absolutely nothing they can do to save him from it, and he would know, because he tried everything in his power to save *them*.

He failed. He failed them both.

Taking a deep breath, James reaches up and gently sweeps Regulus' hair back over his temple, tucking some of it behind his ear, staring right into his eyes as he whispers, "They already have, love."

It's spoken in a tone that is weighted with remorse and regret, because he's not happy about it either, but he won't lie. The moment he killed that man, that was it. There's more, too. The fear, the desperation, the repeated surge of the *need* to survive; it all molds him every second, his shape ever-changing.

James doesn't have the heart to tell him that it's been like this for years. Even before he killed a man. Even before he entered the arena. Even before his name was called. Ten years ago, he was changed, too, just from the sound of Regulus' name and Sirius walking to the stage in his place.

"No," Regulus denies quietly, his voice a mere breath, and he looks like he's just been slapped. He shakes his head minutely, his eyes wide and a little wet, almost like he's betrayed by this.

He sounds so *innocent.* So young. Twenty-five and James can hear the fifteen year old in him, on the verge of breaking, like this is the most devastating thing to happen to him since he watched his brother take his place in the arena. It's like he's trembling on the inside, like that scared boy is trembling within him. Still trembling. Always trembling.

"Yes," James tells him gently, but he knows something that they don't, something that they struggle with when he doesn't, and never has. "It's okay, though. Do you want to know why? They can mold me, shape me, but what I'm made of, what I *am;* that doesn't change. Who we are—that's ours, Regulus. No one can take that from us. If nothing else, we always have that."

"I don't want them to *touch* you," Regulus snaps, and now he sounds almost—petulant. Frustrated. Indignant. He shakes his head and then, without warning, folds forward to press his face into James' shoulder, leaning into him.

This is. Well. This is a bit different, in that Regulus now sounds quite bitchy, and also wildly possessive, which is. Yeah. Yeah, that's something. Confusing, mostly, but *something.*

Regulus, in his greatest moments of emotion, has always done one of two things. He either shuts down and shuts it out until he can figure out how to properly ignore it, or he rides it out until he can wrangle it under control, usually while hiding. In the arena, James has noticed that Regulus doesn't let himself shut down, almost like he's afraid of it. Feeling is a connection to one's humanity, and when you're in an environment that's trying to wring that out of you, *not* letting yourself feel will only help it in the long-run. So, even in just riding his feelings out, Regulus is being a rebellious little shit, basically.

James is admittedly confused about the nature of Regulus' feelings at the moment, about *him,* but he's aware that they're important. He can make some of them out, and he knows what they mean. Possessive, protective, concerned, gentle—all of it curls up in James' chest like a purring cat, because he *knows* it means something. It has to.

James wants to ask. *Do you still hate me? You said you always would, but are you sure that's true?* He can't bring himself to say the words, because he's in enough pain as it is, and right now, he's not willing to risk more.

So, instead, he lifts his hand and cups the back of Regulus' head, carding his fingers through his hair and never feeling as powerful as he does when tension seeps out of Regulus' body with each swipe. James smiles fondly at the top of his head.

"Sorry to break this up," Evan says, and all of the tension slams back into Regulus' body immediately as he pulls away with a sharp inhale. James shoots a glare at Evan, who is standing by the entrance to the cave. James wasn't even aware that he wandered away to give them some privacy, but he's suddenly ending that kindness as he swivels to come rushing back over to them, eyes wide. "We have a problem."

Regulus heaves a sigh. "Don't we always?"

~•~

The *problem,* as it turns out, is the distant sound of the death eaters getting closer. Regulus stands at the entrance of the cave, his heart racing as he *hears* them approaching. They're going to make it here soon.

"You said they don't know the cave?" Regulus asks, keeping his voice low so James can't hear. They're both being very quiet, not wanting to alert James to the current issue.

"They don't," Evan confirms warily, "but that doesn't mean they can't find it if they're determined enough. We need to move, Regulus. *Now."*

"We can't," Regulus grits out. He glances over his shoulder at James, then looks away. *"He* can't."

Evan grimaces. "If they discover him, he won't be able to run on that leg, or even…fight, really."

"Maybe they'll keep going," Regulus murmurs.

"Regulus…" Evan looks at him with a strain around his eyes. He slowly shakes his head. "This is where the screams came from, and it's a source of water. They're going to check around *thoroughly* before they continue on."

Regulus clenches his jaw, flexing his fingers down by his side as his mind races. The thing is, he *knows* Evan is right. It's what he would do if he was hunting people down to kill them. A part of him is unnerved by how easy it is to put himself in their shoes. The mind of a murderer—he has it. Sirius does, too. Regulus has known that since he was fifteen.

James doesn't. Hopefully, he never will.

"Alright," Regulus says softly, taking a deep breath. "Well, if not letting them get here is the goal, I suppose the only option is to lead them away."

"Oh, you're *mental,* lover boy," Evan breathes out, eyes wide.

Regulus ignores him and whips around to move over to James, dropping down next to him. James looks startled as Regulus pushes the hatchet into his hands, forcefully wrapping his fingers around the handle.

"Regulus?" James mumbles.

"I need to step out for a bit," Regulus says calmly, and James' eyebrows pinch together. "I'm just going to get firewood, is all. Evan is going to stay here with you."

James frowns, then opens his mouth like he's about to reply, then slams it shut when the distant sound of taunting drifts into the cave. It's the death eaters, getting closer, and James looks at Regulus in confusion only for one more moment before his eyes light up with realization. Instantly, he sucks in a sharp breath and starts shaking his head.

"No. No, absolutely not," James declares.

"James, if they find you, they will *kill* you," Regulus states firmly. "You won't be able to run. You won't even be able to stand up to fight, not six fucking people."

"So, what, you want to give them a willing target to focus on instead?" James spits out, sounding more furious than Regulus has ever heard him in his life. "Since when did you start caring so much for my fucking life that you'd put yours on the line? What happened to not hesitating? What happened to *that?"*

Regulus reaches out to grab him by his jaw, forcefully holding his head still as he leans in to lower his voice to a low hiss while staring directly into his eyes. "Make no fucking mistake,

James, I still hate the very breath in your lungs. Don't think for a *second* that I care about you more than I care about *me.* I don't care about you *at all.* I have no use for you."

James glares at him. "Then why the *fuck* would you go out there?"

To that, Regulus has no answer. He tightens his grip around James' face and struggles very, very hard not to kiss him. The impulse reaches up and digs its claws in until he almost can't shake himself free. They're both furious, and James looks unfairly good while angry, and Regulus' greater sense flees him when he's angry and also when James looks good. Kissing is obviously not the solution to their disagreement, but the temptation to do it anyway persists.

Regulus hates, hates, *hates* James Potter so much that he could just—he could fucking *kiss him.* Kiss him, and kiss him, and kiss him until they forget how to breathe.

Making a derisive noise, disgusted with himself for the urge, Regulus drops his hand away from James' face and starts to turn away. Immediately, James surges forward to grab onto his arm, holding on so tight that it hurts.

"Wait," James says desperately. "Wait, please don't. Please don't go, alright? Just—"

"What?" Regulus hisses. "Stay here? Let them find us and kill us? Leave you here alone and let them kill you? There is no fucking *solution,* James. I can lead them away, and I actually have a chance of *getting* away, but *you* don't. So, shut up and wait for your fucking medicine."

"Regulus, *please,"* James begs, staring at him with big, sad eyes and genuine panic in his face. "Don't do this. If they find you, they'll kill you, and I—I can't—"

"I'm not dying for you," Regulus cuts in sharply.

James swallows. "I know, but you can still die." Regulus can't argue against that, so he says nothing. James makes a small sound and digs his fingers into Regulus' arm harder. "Just come

back. If you have to go, then make sure you'll make it back. Promise me you'll do anything it takes to get back."

Regulus looks at him for a long moment, and there it is again. That stupid, senseless heart flutter. It gets stronger each time it happens, more obvious to the point that he can't ignore it anymore. It's growing in frequency, and it's turning him into the idiot he thought he left behind ten years ago.

Shaking his head ruefully, Regulus rocks forward on the perch of his feet, bringing one hand up to cup the side of James' head. He ducks in and presses a kiss to James' forehead, a result of the heart flutter and the earlier impulse to kiss. He's sort of resigned to how weak it makes him, at least at this moment when he's about to go running directly into danger in a move so uncharacteristic to who he is as a person that it sincerely makes him feel a little ill.

The kiss lingers, and James leans into it, his hand coming up to cup the back of Regulus' where it rests against his cheek and hair. Regulus can't keep his eyes from drifting shut, and he holds there for one beat, then two, and then three before slowly pulling back. James immediately tilts his face up as he draws back, his eyes wide and confused.

Okay, that's fair. Regulus *did* just tell him he hated him and didn't care about him at all less than twenty seconds ago. This is a big leap from *that,* and Regulus knows it. He should probably feel bad about the mixed signals he's sending at the moment, but he honestly doesn't have the time or the luxury.

"What was that?" James whispers, sounding breathless.

"A parting gift," Regulus whispers back, and then he stands up and snatches himself away when James tries to hold onto him.

Regulus wastes no time in pushing himself out of the cave, drawing out both daggers from their holsters. He's left his supplies with James, and given James his hatchet in case of an emergency, and that will just have to be enough. Does Regulus plan to die? No, he doesn't. Is he aware that there's a good chance he might? Also no, because he's ignoring that.

There's a few seconds where Regulus stands in place, his mind already trying to work through a plan for the best way to do this. It's not too long until it starts to get dark, and cold. The death eaters will retreat back to the cave once they can cross the crimson river, but not if they're on Regulus' heels, so he's going to have to find some way to lose them—only *after* he's gotten them far enough away from James.

In other words, Regulus is going to have to keep the death eaters chasing him for the next two hours, then disappear well enough that they'll give up in favor of getting warm and just try again tomorrow. It's not impossible, but the chances…

What was it that Sirius said one day, sounding so bitter that it was like the words were coated in poison? *The odds are never in your favor.* Yeah, well, Regulus is going to beat them anyway.

"Psst."

Regulus jumps, head snapping up from where he's waiting by the bank, eyes on the woods where the death eaters are steadily getting closer. Evan moves next to him, lips pursed and sword in hand.

"Evan?"

"Do I look like your boyfriend's babysitter to you? That's *your* job, lover boy, not mine," Evan mutters. "I'm not staying here to watch him fret about you."

"Oh?" Regulus arches an eyebrow at him. "So, what, you'd like to trade places, is that it? I'll stay here while you go running around with all of them chasing after you?"

Evan hums and gives him an appraising look. "I'm sure you'd love nothing more than to stay with him, but no, I have a different idea. What do you say we…better the odds?"

"The odds of…?" Regulus narrows his eyes.

"Your survival, and his, and mine," Evan explains. "There's six of them, and they all have weapons. We want to draw them away, yeah? Well, what if we split them up?"

Regulus raises his eyebrows. "Easier to get away from, and easier to fight if it comes to that, *and* they'll all have to give up more quickly to meet back up as one group."

"Brilliant, isn't it?" Evan grins at him. "So, you go one way, and I go the other. How does that plan sound?"

"Considering your first plan failed—"

"I beg your fucking *pardon?* That plan was flawless, and it *worked.* Well, at least until that bit at the end, but let's not talk about that. Trust me, this is a good plan."

Trust me. Those two words roll around in Regulus' mind, and he looks at Evan for a long moment in complete silence, coming to terms with the fact that he *does.* He trusts Evan. He was going to trust Evan alone with an injured James, and now he's going to trust him about this.

"Alright," Regulus says, finally. "You go your way, and I'll go mine. And Evan?"

"Yes?" Evan asks.

"Be careful," Regulus mumbles.

Evan grins at him. "Oh, I'm always careful."

"Is that so?" Regulus asks.

"Don't you know, lover boy?" Evan waggles his eyebrows playfully. "I can climb, and no one ever thinks to look up."

Regulus shakes his head, lips twitching. "Come on. If we're doing this, we need to go now and get their attention before they even start to look around."

Evan nods and starts moving, but Regulus hesitates just for a moment to look back at the entrance to the cave, where James remains alone. Injured. Unprotected. Anything could happen to him. *Anything.* But something *will* happen to him if they don't lead the others away, and the risk of that is much greater. Regulus swallows, then turns and forces himself to go.

Quickly, Regulus moves with Evan to stand in place on the other side of the pond. The layout unfurls in Regulus' mind. James is towards the east, and the death eaters approach from the west, which is some kind of fucked up irony. A cruel metaphor for how this could play out. After all, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. If James is the sun, then Regulus isn't about to let him set today. Fuck that.

It takes a few moments more for the death eaters to reach them. Mulciber is on a warpath, as Regulus predicted. They had the supplies to take care of where Regulus cut off his hand; it's wrapped up securely, and he's holding a sword in his other hand. Bernice's, by the looks of it, because she has Hodge's knife, leaving him with nothing but a stick he must have picked up along the way. Axus has found their hook, and Willa has retrieved one arrow, so she's not completely empty-handed. Quinn has her spear, and she's also sporting raw bruises around her throat.

"You," Mulciber snarls as soon as he sees Regulus.

Regulus smiles and playfully wiggles his fingers in a mocking wave. "Me." He tilts his head. "You seem upset, Mulciber."

"You cut off my fucking hand!" Mulciber snaps.

"I did do that," Regulus agrees.

Mulciber's face twists into a sneer. "I'm going to take your fucking head for that, Black."

"Well, that's a bit excessive," Evan says. He stacks his hands over each other in the air. "Really seems to be escalating things a bit. Have you considered anger management?"

Axus snorts, then disguises it into a cough when Mulciber shoots a glare in their direction. Evan grins at them and winks, as if they never even tried to kill him at one point. Axus looks flustered by this response, and Regulus cannot *believe* this is happening right now. Evan's attractive enough that he probably *could* flirt his way out of being killed. His cheekbones are weapons in their own right.

"Where's your boyfriend, Black?" Bernice calls. "He and I have a bit of unfinished business."

"Oh, just on his way to the cave," Regulus lies with a smooth laugh. "He's going to clean that place out as soon as the river ices over. Shame you'll be too busy with us to stop him."

"He's bluffing," Quinn says immediately.

Regulus gives a lazy shrug. "Am I? I don't see him around here anywhere. Do you?"

"Willa," Mulciber says slowly.

"Yeah?" Willa asks, hand on her last arrow, even though she hasn't pulled it out yet.

Mulciber narrows his eyes at Regulus, then grits out, "Go back to the cave. You need arrows anyway, and wasting that one on them would be pointless if you can't be sure that you'll manage to hit them. If you see Potter there, kill him."

"You think he's not prepared for that?" Regulus asks, arching an eyebrow as Willa instantly starts backing up to turn and go jogging deeper into the forest.

"I think Potter is too soft," Mulciber retorts. "When it comes to killing, he'll choke."

"Unfortunately for you, I don't have that problem," Regulus says, twirling a dagger between his fingers lazily. He tips his head to the side, lips curled up. "I certainly didn't have that problem when I killed Avery."

"You're dead," Mulciber hisses, raising his sword to point it at him, pure fury flashing in his eyes.

Regulus chuckles and starts backing up. "You'll have to catch me first."

"Get them!" Mulciber shouts, and with that, Regulus and Evan turn to run, splitting in different directions. Regulus goes north, and Evan goes south, and the others break up to follow.

James remains safely to the east.

~•~

A parting gift.

The words ring in James' ears. Regulus has only said them once before, following the declaration that James might die. A parting gift for that purpose—because of possible death.

This time, James isn't the one at the highest risk of dying.

James muffles a small sound in the crook of his elbow and squeezes his eyes shut. They sting, and his heart thumps to a steady beat that feels like *Regulus, Regulus, Regulus.*

It's not right. It's not *fair.* James is supposed to protect him, to do everything he can to get Regulus home, and he's *stuck* here while Regulus is out there being chased by people who want to kill him. James has only ever felt so useless and so frustrated one other time in his life, and that was with Regulus, too.

Somehow, it's always Regulus who makes him feel powerless, like no matter what he tries, he's never doing enough. Like he can *never* do enough. It just makes James want to try harder, and every failure feels like a brand on his heart.

James was supposed to take care of Regulus at fifteen, too. It was Sirius' last request before he went into the arena, the last words he might have ever spoken directly to James, if he hadn't made it home. As hard as James tried, he never could get it right.

Regulus, like Sirius, is stubborn. He was going through something that no one should ever have to deal with. He wanted to be alone. Never wanted to talk. Always disappeared to places that James could never find him.

James used to sit outside on the street waiting for Regulus to come home where he disappeared off to after the games stopped showing in the courtyard. Every day, he tried to talk to him. He begged him to come over to his house. Asked him to dinner, because he was getting so thin. Suggested he stay over at least for a night to get proper rest, because he always looked so tired. Begged him not to go home, because his parents were furious with him every time he ran off, so much that he would have to face their wrath as soon as he went through the door.

Without fail, Regulus brushed him off. With each passing day, he got meaner and more distant, growing sharper when he told James to back off. It bubbled up into an explosion until Regulus was yelling at him. *You're not Sirius! You'll never be Sirius, so stop trying to be,* he'd shouted.

The thing is, James understood. Regulus wanted *Sirius.* He wanted his brother, and no one else was ever going to connect with him when his brother was gone, when Sirius was brushing up against death every day, never safe. James was just a living, breathing reminder of what was lost to them both.

But James was trying so, so hard. He was doing his best to keep it together and giving Sirius' last request his all. Regulus wasn't the only one fraying because Sirius was gone. James had lost his best friend, too. So, James had bubbled over along with him. *Yeah, well, you're not him either,* he'd replied, a tangle of spiking emotions and unwavering hurt.

If James had to guess the exact moment that Regulus *really* started hating him, it would be that one.

James regretted it, of course. He was fifteen, nearly sixteen, and he was dealing with a lot as well, but that didn't stop him from feeling remorse for hurting Regulus. Not only the boy he had feelings for, but someone he'd known for years, and the person Sirius begged him to take care of. So, he apologized. Not that it changed anything. It all stayed the same, and everything fell apart anyway.

At this age, learning all that he has, James knows it wasn't his fault. It wasn't Sirius' fault. It wasn't Regulus' fault. None of them are to blame for this, for where they are now, for all that they've suffered. James is aware that taking care of Regulus now isn't required to make up for how he failed to before.

But he really, *really* wishes that it would.

James made this choice for many reasons, past mistakes and keeping a promise to Sirius among them. Most of all, though, he decided this for himself. A selfish, selfish desire to save the man he's helplessly in love with. And he's failing again.

After all this time, you'd think he'd be used to that by now.

~•~

When Regulus was younger, he used to play hide and seek with Sirius, and eventually James when he came into the picture. Regulus was the best seeker, but that was probably because James and Sirius were *terrible* at being quiet when they hid. It was more than that, too. Regulus has always been observant, and he's got a sharp eye for finding the things he's after.

As for hiding, well, he was always good at that, too. All the hiding and seeking from his youth has prepared him in more ways than he could have expected.

It's certainly helping him now. Mulciber, Bernice, and Axus all chased after him, while Hodge and Quinn went after Evan. Regulus is faster than them, and he uses this to his advantage, staying ahead of them at all times. He runs, and runs, and runs, like maybe he could run forever.

He can't, and neither can those that follow him. Humans are creatures of endurance, so of course they can't just chase each other around for hours on end. Regulus begins a pattern, one that's going to help when it's time to retreat.

Over and over, Regulus gets ahead of them until he finds a good spot to hide in. Behind a tree, usually, or a bush. He waits for the others to catch up, then gets 'discovered' and takes off running again. He leads them further and further away from James in spurts, dangling himself like bait.

They fall for it every time.

Staying one step ahead is key, which is why it's so devastating when Regulus realizes that Mulciber is missing. Bernice and Axus are still hot on his trail at all times, but Mulciber stops showing up. This can either mean that he's gotten lost, fell back due to exhaustion, or found something else to chase after instead. Regulus has no idea where Evan is, but he's heard Quinn and Hodge in the distance a few times, so Mulciber could have gone to help them. Either that, or he's gone back to the crimson river to see if James is really there.

Whatever it is, Regulus doesn't *like* it. In hide and seek, knowing where the other players are is one of the most important parts to help you win. In this game, it's him, Mulciber, Axus, and Bernice. Losing one is concerning.

Unfortunately, it eventually gets late enough that worrying about Mulciber isn't an option. He needs to circle his way back to James, which means shaking Bernice and Axus off. This part won't be simple, but he's made it more simple by leading them into a pattern they're used to by now.

It's the same thing as before—find a place to hide—but, this time, the goal is to not get discovered. Bernice and Axus will keep looking while he sneaks off, waiting for that moment of discovery he's not going to give to them.

"Come on out, Black!" Bernice calls, sounding winded as she and Axus break through the trees. Regulus has stopped running, so they unconsciously know he's hiding.

"Fuck, I'm tired," Axus wheezes. "Bern, we can't keep doing this. We have to head back soon; the temperature is starting to drop. Mulciber said—"

"I know what Mulciber said," Bernice mutters. "Just spread out and look for him, alright?"

"What if we don't find him?" Axus asks.

"Then we'll go meet up with Willa. Maybe Quinn and Hodge will have better luck with Rosier," Bernice says. "But we'll find him. You hear that, Black? We know you're here!"

Regulus rolls his eyes. Yeah, yeah, he hears that, and them knowing he's here is the whole *point.* Idiots.

They're only two people, so they can't really cover much ground, which he uses to his advantage. The thing is, he was always better at hiding than Sirius and James because he *was* good at being quiet. He uses that, too.

People have this thing where their minds fill in information that isn't necessarily true. For example, Regulus can't be crouched near a large rock because they didn't see him in front of it, and when they move past it, he's not behind it either. They don't come over to check, because 'discovering' him has been easy so far; he's made himself obvious and loud on purpose, for this exact reason. It makes them sloppy.

So, with an ease that's almost pathetic, Regulus slips around the rock as they move past it, and the further they go, the farther he gets in the opposite direction. Slowly and silently, he backs away, hiding in places they've already checked and won't think to check again. And then, when he's far enough back that he loses sight and sound of them, he leaves.

Just like that.

It's a lot easier to get away from two people than it is six, especially when he has a head start and he's alone.

Regulus starts making his way back to James, quiet and careful and watchful. He stays alert, even as he puts as much distance between himself and the others as he can. He doesn't know Mulciber's location, so he isn't being reckless.

More time passes, and the temperature continues to drop, the sun dipping low enough that it's growing dark. If the death eaters are smart, they'll be heading back to the original cave now to stay warm for the night, where there's food and supplies waiting for them as well. From what Bernice said, that's the next course of action.

As for Regulus, he's getting closer to the pond, and it's making him eager. He wants to get back and set his eyes on James to make sure he's alright, which is…

Oh, *fuck off.* No. Absolutely not. Regulus isn't doing this. The heart flutters can shrivel up and *die,* is what they can do. It's happened before; it will again. This is the hunger games, and he is *not* about to—

A small twig hits Regulus on the side of his head from up high.

Regulus very nearly crawls out of his skin. He crouches down behind a rock instinctively, raising his dagger, his heart racing in his chest. He follows the direction the twig came from, his head tipping back where he spots Evan in the tree above him. He's grinning down at him as he swings his legs like the lunatic he is. Regulus exhales, relaxing slowly.

Evan makes a vague gesture in the direction of the pond, and Regulus nods. He holds up two fingers, and Evan shrugs. For some reason, they both know what all of that means. Yes, Regulus is heading back to James, and so should Evan. No, Evan doesn't know where Quinn and Hodge are, but he's in a tree, so he's assuming they lost him.

Evan makes a face at him, and Regulus flips him off, fighting a small smile. Evan laughs, seeming unable to help it, and the sound carries.

No one ever thinks to look up—until there's a sound.

It takes only seconds. One moment, Evan is grinning at Regulus, and the next, a spear is flying up to hit him right in the stomach. Evan's smile falls before his body does.

"No," rips free from Regulus' mouth, breathless, and then he stands up and spots Quinn a few steps away from the tree, Hodge standing right next to her.

Regulus' dagger is flying through the air before he's even had the thought. It buries itself directly in Quinn's throat, making her choke as she stumbles back and hits the ground at the same time that Evan does. Hodge makes a weak noise, spooked, and turns to run away.

Regulus doesn't chase him. He goes to Evan.

Evan has landed badly. He fell from up high, and his leg is sticking out at an awkward angle. The spear is still impaled in his stomach, and he's dragging himself back with low noises of pain like he can get away from it. He pushes himself up to lean against the trunk of the tree, hand braced on the handle of the spear as he groans through clenched teeth.

"No, no, don't take it…" Regulus trails off as he hits his knees next to Evan, who has just snatched the spear out with a deep gasp. He shakily drops it, and blood instantly starts flowing. Regulus swallows thickly. "Out. Don't take it out."

"Ow," Evan rasps, his trembling hand coming up to cover his wound. Blood seeps over his fingers.

Regulus leans forward and presses his hands to the wound, too, fingers immediately slick with blood. "Okay, this is—it's fine. If we can get the blood to stop, then we—"

"Regulus," Evan says.

"No," Regulus replies.

Evan huffs out a weak laugh. "I think I broke my leg."

"I'll carry you," Regulus tells him firmly. "I don't doubt that Sirius has sent medicine for James by now, Evan. Just don't bleed out, and you'll be fine when we get there."

"Just don't bleed out, he says," Evan mutters. He shakes his head and looks down at his stomach. "Yeah, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but that's a bit out of my control."

"You're *fine,"* Regulus insists.

"I'm really not," Evan counters, and then he proceeds to cough, and when he does, blood bubbles up past his lips. He grimaces and groans through it, fumbling one hand up to swipe the blood away. "Oh, that's a bad sign."

"Shut up," Regulus croaks, his eyes starting to burn.

"I'm about to, I think. For good," Evan mumbles, his gaze rolling a little unsteadily before finding its way to Regulus. He smiles, just a bit. "Did you get her? Quinn?"

"I got her," Regulus confirms.

"No cannon."

"Yet."

"You're a scary bastard sometimes, you know that?" Evan says, then jolts when the cannon does sound, then winces through the pain of movement. A quiet gasp escapes him.

Regulus glances down and struggles to breathe at the sight of blood slipping through his fingers. Evan's life, slipping through his fingers. He looks back up.

"I'm sorry I left you on the other side of the river," Evan whispers, looking right at him.

"I told you to. You had to," Regulus murmurs.

"I know," Evan agrees, "but it still felt wrong."

Regulus swallows. "You're a good person, Evan Rosier."

"That's the thing, though. I'm really not." Evan blinks at him slowly. "I just—like you. Isn't that mental?"

"Certifiably insane," Regulus says, his chest feeling tight.

Evan waves his free hand lazily. "I don't mean the way your boyfriend likes you. Just… person to person, I suppose. It's a shame, really. I think—well, I think you're my friend."

"I—" Regulus chokes off, struggling to speak, finding it impossible to say anything of importance. He forces it out, nearly gagging on it, because he knows he wouldn't say it if Evan wasn't dying. He wouldn't have to, because Evan would be alive to just—know. "Yeah, I'm your friend, Evan."

"Have many of those, do you?" Evan asks.

Regulus snorts weakly. "Not really. I'm not exactly…the easiest person to get on with."

"What? No. You're a fucking delight, what are you on about?" Evan mocks through a shit-eating grin.

"No one's ever—" Regulus exhales shakily. "I have a friend at home, just one, but that's… different. I think you two would have gotten on well. But he's—" Regulus stops, because he's not sure how to even begin explaining Barty, who is his friend, yes, but not the way Evan has been. "Well, I'm not the type to have a best friend, but if I were, it would have been you."

"Pity we never met before this, eh?" Evan swallows harshly and looks down at his stomach, then closes his eyes and leans his head back. "Best friends tell each other things that they don't tell anyone else. I'm dying, so you have to indulge me. Didn't expect I'd be using the dying card so soon, but desperate times and all that."

"Yeah, alright," Regulus mumbles, pretty willing to give Evan whatever he wants at the moment, and he has the niggling feeling that there's something Evan wants to say.

"I've never had a friend before you," Evan croaks. "So, you know, thanks for that, I suppose. It—it was nice while it lasted."

"You—" Regulus fumbles for Evan's hand, and their fingers clasp around each other, slipping from the blood. "I'm—Evan—"

Evan hums, and he's slurring when he says, "Your turn, lover boy."

"I miss my brother," Regulus confesses in a whisper, his vision blurring as he feels Evan's grip get looser. The words wrench at him, but they're true. He doesn't say that he's missed his brother for the last ten years, but that's true, too.

"Won't have to miss him for long," Evan breathes out, his hand falling slack. "You're going to win. You…"

Evan doesn't speak after that.

Regulus sits with him, holding his hand, and it's not long before the cannon sounds again. He flinches when it does, then feels such a strong surge of emotion take over him that he quite literally just bursts into tears.

It's instant. He starts weeping so hard that it *hurts,* and he folds forward to press his face to Evan's shoulder. He's still warm, and it's not fair. It's not fair. *It's not fair.*

"Please," Regulus chokes out. "Sirius, *please."*

He doesn't know what he's begging for, really. For Sirius to find some way to fix this. For Sirius to hold him in his grief now when he didn't before. For Sirius to just—be here, because Regulus has just lost the best friend he never even got to have, and because Regulus misses his brother so, so fucking much.

Nothing changes. Sirius doesn't show up, Evan is still dead, and Regulus is left alone with a corpse.

~•~

The gut-wrenching, heart-rending sound of harrowing sobs that falls out of his little brother makes Sirius want to set the world on fire. It makes him want to get his hands on anyone who had anything to do with it and rip them apart.

Regulus never had very many friends growing up. When he was *really* young, he was too shy, and Sirius was always the one who wasn't afraid to talk to people. Sirius had friends in school, even before he met James, but Regulus never did. He's always been quiet, and even that young, he didn't really like people. Even *James* wasn't really his…friend, now that Sirius is thinking about it. It didn't matter how well they got on or how much Regulus actually, genuinely seemed to like him, James was always *Sirius'* friend. His best friend.

Regulus never had one of those. A best friend. There's Barty, and Sirius knows they *are* friends, but it's not… Well, there's something else mixed up in all that they are for them to be best friends. Uncomplicated, simple best friends—the way James and Sirius are. Regulus has never had that.

Until now.

Or something like it. Something that *could have been.* Maybe in another life, they would have been just as close as Sirius and James are. Maybe not. Either way, sometimes there are people that just—recognize each other. Like whatever you're made of, you might be lucky enough to find someone holding a little bit of you in them, and without even knowing it, you've been carrying around a little bit of them before you ever even met.

So, when you do meet, it's like something inside of you starts wriggling around that says *hey, that's me, that's ours, that's us.* Recognition. Connection. Something really, truly special.

Regulus has just watched that die.

Sirius stares at the screen, unable to do *anything* as Regulus releases a muffled shout into Evan's shoulder. It's utterly chilling, a raw scream of pure grief.

The worst part is, Sirius knew it was going to happen. He saw the death eater girl there with her spear. He saw her take aim, then let it fly, and there was nothing he could do. He could only sit here and watch, and cling to Remus' hand, and fall apart just because Regulus is.

Regulus, who said *I miss my brother.* Sirius has been crying ever since. Regulus hasn't said that, or anything even *close* to that, in ten years. Something he doesn't tell anyone else—that's what Evan asked of him, and that's what Regulus went with.

I miss you, too, Sirius had thought, and maybe he whispered it, maybe Remus heard him, or maybe not. He's been crying too incoherently to know. But it's true. He's been missing Regulus for the last ten years.

"I'm sorry, Reggie," Sirius rasps, even though Regulus can't hear him, even though that doesn't change anything. He is so, so fucking sorry. He wishes he could fix this.

He can't, and Regulus continues to weep.

There's often these moments in the arena, when those inside have been pushed and pushed and *pushed,* when they've been nonstop suffering every variety of torment—and then they break. They always break. Everyone has a breaking point. The saddest part is, there's generally *multiple* breaking points.

Some people don't get back up after they reach that point. Most do, but they don't get back up the same person. A few can, and they figure out how to recover as much as they ever will. It usually depends on how badly they've broken down.

Despite the brutality of Regulus' breakdown, he nonetheless gets back up. It's a bit of a process, one that shows just how stubborn he is down to his core; maybe that's a Black family trait, even to their detriment, because Sirius has that same streak within him. In this case, it serves Regulus well.

He cleans his face. He stands up, marches over to rip his dagger from the dead girl's throat, then moves back over to crouch down beside Evan. He starts carving into the trunk of the tree, his shoulders blocking the view of what he's doing.

"Evan's name?" Remus murmurs. He's been rubbing soothing circles into Sirius' hand since they started watching together. Sirius has been a wreck from the moment he came in through the door, rushing to see what had happened when he left the party after getting medicine sent to James.

Not very much had been happening, at the time. Regulus was still playing hide and seek, which Sirius recognized instantly. He's a smart little bugger, there's no denying that.

"I don't know," Sirius mumbles, waiting to see what Regulus will reveal when he moves out of the way.

It takes a while, and then Regulus stands up and walks away. Sirius sucks in a sharp breath the moment he sees what's there, and Remus curses softly in shock.

Hallow is Hollow

On the screen, the tree goes up in flames.

Sirius swallows harshly and can't bring himself to be upset about how much damage control he's going to have to do tomorrow. Regulus is grieving. Sirius would be no better in his situation, frankly. Hell, he might have been *worse.* The world doesn't know what will hit it if James dies.

Besides, Regulus has made himself *very* popular. The people love him right now, because not only is he entertaining them with all that he's dealing with, he's also dealing with things *very* well. He's smart and capable and fucking ruthless at times. There were literal cheers and chants of his name while he was chopping off Mulciber's hand, though Mulciber's mentor—Lucius—had been *visibly* displeased.

James, too, remains beloved by many. When he killed the man he did, people cheered for him as well. And, well, they're *all* living for Regulus and James' little…romance, or whatever it is. Sirius can't think about it too hard, because he knows them, so he knows that they're not just—playing it up. No, that's them. Every touch, every little comment, every shared look; that's all real, as real as Sirius has ever seen them.

Still, Sirius isn't above using it, if he has to. He sure did, without shame, going to sponsors with their little love story to get every donation he could to send James the medicine he needed to heal his leg. And Sirius will do it again, if he has to.

"Sirius," Remus blurts out, sounding strained, and he's suddenly strangling Sirius' hand.

"What? What is it?" Sirius replies, immediately panicking.

"I found out what Mulciber is doing," Remus says warily, and then he points to the screen, where Mulciber has returned to the pond and is kneeling down next to the closed bear trap, squinting at the blood.

Sirius can practically see the light bulb go off over Mulciber's head. With dread in his veins, Sirius watches as Mulciber stands up and begins his search.

The search for James.

Eyes sinking shut, Sirius whispers, "Fuck."

Chapter End Notes

i want to tell you all how to skip the hard parts, but like, this entire chapter is hard, so??? ill do my best!

for the injuries: it picks up right out the gate from where james got his leg stuck in a bear trap. there is a lot of mentions of pain, as well as blood, and the injury is described

briefly in detail. regulus and evan do help him get out of it, and the injury is eventually cleaned and bandaged as much as it can be until the proper medicine can get sent to him.

for the death/murder:

IF YOU WANT TO SKIP THIS PART, SCROLL PAST WHEN REGULUS GETS HIT IN THE HEAD BY A SMALL TWIG AND CROUCHES DOWN BY A ROCK, AND PICK BACK UP WHEN IT'S SIRIUS' POV (but beware that sirius will reference the death that just took place)

if you just want the warning: evan dies, sadly. he is up in a tree and thinks he's managed to evade quinn and hodge. regulus makes him laugh, which catches quinn's attention from where she's close by, and she throws her spear up to hit evan in the stomach. regulus immediately stands up and launches his dagger at her, hitting her in the throat. evan falls out of the tree, breaks his leg, and bleeds out while regulus sits with him.

to everyone else, who has finished the chapter... im not even gonna ask how you're all feeling, because i can take a pretty good guess.

on a high note, regulus called james baby! the progression of regulus going from calling james a big baby in a mocking way, to calling him baby in tender way makes me go feral. also, the fact that he didn't even notice??? genuinely, he has no idea that he actually did it—and, in his defense, he was too busy losing his collective shit because james was hurt. which, hey, get a clue, reggie. again, in his defense, he's mostly oblivious purely by circumstances, because every time he starts to acknowledge the change of his feelings, some shit goes down that takes all of his focus.

the way that regulus—and sirius—want to protect james and keep him safe and make sure he doesn't get changed the way they've been changed. STOP THAT'S SO FUCKING SAD. what's worse is that james is ALREADY changed, and has been, and there's nothing they can do about it. sirius and regulus are just like me! i, too, want to wrap james up and keep him safe—which none of you probably believe, because i have been putting him THROUGH it.

regulus was a bit of a mess of mixed emotions during their little spat. all tangled up about it. he was quite literally that thing that's like: "you should be addicted to shutting up // you want to fuck me so bad that it makes you look stupid" 😭😭😭 literally, he was like: god i hate you, i wanna make out with you SO BAD. yeah, he's unwell, too.

but then the forehead kiss. why did he have to make it sad by calling it a parting gift???? leave him alone, he was dealing with a lot at the time. he was doing his best, okay? and james deserves forehead kisses.

and then...evan...

oof, that hurts. because, well, he's been a delight in this fic. not saying he was a good person—he actually had all plans to kill everyone from the trees and make it home. like, that was his goal from the start, but then he met regulus, and that plan got derailed. he made a friend, and it got him killed. but, if it comforts anyone to know, he didn't regret it

—being regulus' friend for that short time. all of his plans failed, but he didn't really mind, because he had a friend. that's so fucking sad, let me stop.

you know, when i wrote evan's death, i was pretty fucking emotional, because i got super attached to fanon evan through writing just lovers and intermission, so writing him dying was just. really hard. but then, out of nowhere, Another One Bites The Dust started playing on my playlist, and i was literally just sitting there, laughing and a little teary-eyed because evan would have thought that was the funniest fucking thing. he would have been DELIGHTED to know that song played while he died. rip evan my beloved <3 you will be missed.

also, briefly touching on sirius. he is STILL going through it, yes, but that whole part where regulus said he missed him and was calling his name as he pleaded for him to do something??? gut-wrenching. the fact that they both miss each other and have been for the last 10 years??? devastating. we do see more of sirius and his feelings on everything next chapter. we see a lot of wolfstar over the next few chapters!

number update:

tributes remaining: 12
tributes who have died so far:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan (😔)
eight unnamed/unknown others

Shutting Down

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter:

-graphic depictions of violence
-murder/death
-mentions of blood
-dissociative amnesia from an outsider's perspective
-vague hints to torture (you might not notice, it's very blink-and-you-miss-it, but still, just to be safe)

as always, i will be putting in depth warnings in the end notes for those of you who need/want it to be spoiled for you, which is always valid!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James hears the scuff of a shoe outside the entrance of the cave, and his heart leaps as he whips his head towards it. There have been two cannons, one right after the other, and he's barely been breathing ever since.

Maybe it's stupid, but James refuses to even consider the possibility that it's Regulus, despite *knowing* that the chances are… Well. He simply doesn't accept that, not without proof, and there's still some part of him that's sure he would *know,* somehow. It's not just a silly, romantic notion; he genuinely thinks that, on a fundamental level, everything would *shift* if Regulus wasn't in the world anymore.

His optimism wilts when the vines are sliced through carelessly, making a large gap for Mulciber to step into. James is moving before he even makes the decision to, bracing one hand on the wall and putting all his weight on his good leg as he hobbles to full height. He keeps his hatchet gripped in one hand and keeps the other against the cave to remain steady.

Mulciber stands still in the entrance with a sword in hand, his other wrist wrapped neatly where Regulus removed his hand. He looks at James up and down, then snorts.

"Well," he says, gesturing towards James' leg with his wrapped wrist, "it looks like both of us are at a disadvantage, hm?"

"A bit," James admits.

"Suppose that evens things out between us," Mulciber muses.

James purses his lips. "Well, I don't know, it's definitely different, isn't it? I mean, you could actually just turn around and walk away, but I don't have that option."

"True," Mulciber concedes, nodding, "but *you* can use two hands to fight, and I can't."

"Right, but you still have both elbows," James points out.

Mulciber hums. "That I do, and you still have both knees. Might hurt to move that leg, but you still can. I really do think this is evenly matched, honestly."

"I'm not sure if that's how it works," James mutters.

"Maybe not." Mulciber shrugs. "But, well, I actually wouldn't care if it was an even match either way."

James sighs. "Should've seen that coming."

"You really should have," Mulciber agrees with a chuckle. He swings the sword lazily in his hand in a move that James doesn't want to admit is cool. "Your boyfriend is very clever, Potter, do you know that?"

"I do know this about him, yes," James says.

"It's just, his confidence in his own cleverness makes him forget that he's not the only clever person in the world. I just so happen to be rather clever myself," Mulciber tells him, lazily leaning up against the cave wall. "He got us to send Willa away, said you were heading to the starting point to steal all our supplies, and he's a good liar, I'll give him that."

"Sounds to me like you're not as clever as you claim to be."

"Oh, I wouldn't call that a moment of stupidity. I'd say it was more…caution, just in case. I won't lie, I did fall for his little plan to start with. Chased after him for quite a bit, but I can't be blamed for that. I *really* wanted to kill him."

"Failed with that, did you?" James asks lightly, flexing his fingers around the handle of his hatchet, his heart thumping hard in his chest. He just. He *needs* to know that Regulus is alright, and if he can get Mulciber to slip up…

Mulciber just grins at him, looking far too pleased with himself, which makes James' heart sink. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Potter. See, I had a thought. I mean, it was *your* screams that drew us in this direction, you know. I started thinking, and I wondered…if you were fine and heading to the starting point, why were you screaming so much? I gave it a bit more thought, and I asked myself…why was Black just waiting for us? Seemed almost *eager* to be chased, didn't he? And of course he'd never get too far away from his precious boyfriend, would he? So, where were you?"

"Well, you found me. Want a sticker?" James says sarcastically.

"You're a funny man, Potter," Mulciber replies with a laugh, and it's a *mean* laugh, sharp and triumphant. "I couldn't be sure, of course, so I decided to check back here to make sense of it all. Imagine my surprise when I find a closed bear trap with blood on it. That told me all I needed to know."

James stares at him blankly. "Yes, yes, very clever. Are you done gloating now?"

"You know, it's a shame you didn't join us when we offered," Mulciber says, shaking his head. "I think we would have worked well together."

"You're delusional, then," James announces.

Mulciber clicks his tongue. "Oh, come off it, Potter. You're *strong,* there's no denying it, and if you weren't so fucking soft, that would actually mean something. We could have made you into something, you know that? And Black? Well, we would have let you look away as we killed him, slowly."

James goes still, his face dropping as his gaze sharpens on Mulciber, whose lips curl up into a malicious little smile. It's like the temperature in the cave drops, and James' skin crawls as his ears start to ring. The insinuation makes bile rise in James' throat, but more than that, there's pure fucking *fury.*

There's barely a breath between Mulciber's last word and James launching the hatchet right at him with all his might, not even hesitating as the instinctive need to *protect* rises up in him, and there's also the need to remove this fucking scum of a human being from the world. Mulciber raises his arm to block it with a look of surprise flitting across his face, and then he's roaring in pain as the hatchet buries itself in his arm that's already missing a hand. He drops his sword to fumble for the handle, ripping it out with a scream.

James doesn't give one fuck about his hurt leg at the moment. In his anger and adrenaline, he barely even feels it as he launches himself forward, tackling Mulciber to the ground. They go sailing back through the cave, rolling down the incline until they hit even ground.

Mulciber lands on top, and he still has the hatchet, which he promptly raises up with a snarl and immediately brings down. James yelps and dodges to the left, staring wide-eyed at where the hatchet is buried into the ground right where his head just was. Mulciber starts to tug it out, but James punches him in the face, throwing his weight to the side.

They roll away from the hatchet, and James slams him down, then proceeds to punch him in the face again, then again, then *again,* and then once more. His hand aches. Mulciber has blood on his face, but he just bears his bloodied teeth into a grin and kicks James right in his injured leg.

"Fuck!" James shouts as pain explodes through him, his leg giving out, making it easy for Mulciber to shove him off.

Mulciber tries to hold James down with his arm, but the wound where the hatchet landed makes him cry out and fall forward. He's bleeding profusely, and it gets on James' throat, on his face, in his mouth. Mulciber self-corrects and lifts himself up, holding his injured arm close to his chest as he balls his other hand into a fist and hits James *hard.*

James grabs a handful of dirt and leaves, tossing it in Mulciber's face—his eyes, primarily—to make him flinch. He hisses and rocks back, which James uses to his advantage to flip him. They scramble over each other with grunts and low snarls of anger and pain, like two animals in a fight to the death—and that's what they are, isn't it?

That's what they've been turned into.

"I'm going to *kill you,* Potter," Mulciber spits out, reaching up to dig his fingers into James' cheek where he was sliced earlier, causing it to bleed and sting.

Again and again, they roll and hit each other over and over, making each other bleed. It's all going so fast, and James is stripped down to the relentless need to survive, fighting as hard as he can. There's no space for anger, because everything narrows down until all he knows is the heart beating in his chest and the determination to not let it stop.

They end up next to the hatchet again, and James stumbles to his feet, yelping at the pain when he puts weight on his bad leg. He limps and stumbles, but manages to snatch the hatchet out of the ground. As soon as he's standing over Mulciber, breathing hard, seconds from burying it in his chest until he *stops fucking moving,* Mulciber kicks out with *force* and slams his boot directly into James' leg.

James crumbles helplessly, the hatchet falling from his grip and skidding away across the ground. Instantly, he and Mulciber start crawling for it, and James is closer. He's just snatched it up when Mulciber grabs him by the back of his hair, snapping his head back before shoving him face-first into the ground. It hurts, a throbbing pain immediately starting

up, but James doesn't think anything breaks. There's blood in his mouth, and he doesn't know if it's his.

On the next yank, James sends his elbow back as hard as he can, which makes Mulciber gasp and loosen his grip. James immediately throws himself to the side and desperately flings himself on top of Mulciber with the hatchet in hand. He raises it up and brings it down, but Mulciber catches it by the handle with his hand, his fingers overlapping with James' as his arm shakes from the exertion of trying to not let James push it down into his chest. James pushes harder.

"What—what are you even fighting for?" Mulciber grits out through clenched teeth. "Your boyfriend is already *dead."*

James falters.

He can't help it. Those words take him out at his knees, hurting worse than anything that's happened to him so far. Mulciber laughs and elbows him in the face, ripping the hatchet from his hand and pushing to get on top.

"That's right," Mulciber declares triumphantly, his words coming out in sharp bursts as his chest heaves. "You heard those two cannons, yeah? One was your boyfriend."

"No," James chokes out, hands flinging up to stop the hatchet when Mulciber swings it down. The blade of it slices into one palm, but Mulciber keeps pushing.

"Yes," Mulciber counters gleefully.

"You're *lying!"* James bursts out, because he refuses—he just *won't* believe that. He can't believe that.

"I made sure it hurt, Potter. He was crying and begging for his brother," Mulciber grits out, throwing his weight forward to push the hatchet down further.

The words get to him. It's—well, survival is about will, even more than capabilities, and there's some sort of inner strength it takes to *keep fighting.* The idea of what Mulciber is saying saps that strength right out of him, which translates rather literally. His arms give out a little bit, and the blade of the hatchet presses into his chest, almost pushing in.

James remembers when Pandora said that the hunger games are more than just physical; they're mind games, too. He's never felt that more starkly than he does at this moment.

Mulciber presses forward, and James gasps as the hatchet pushes into his chest, a low whine escaping him from the pain that just radiates *everywhere.* It's nothing, *nothing,* compared to the pain at the thought that Regulus might be dead. The thing is, pain reminds you that you're alive, and if it's true—please, *please* don't let it be true—then there's still one last thing James has to do before he loses the will to survive altogether.

"His brother won't even fucking recognize him after I got through with him," Mulciber hisses. "I made him—ow, *fuck!"*

James shoves his knee up between Mulciber's legs a second time, and this time, he pushes with all the strength he has left. Mulciber goes sailing to the side, groaning as he lands on his back, and then James is on him.

Hitting him. Hitting him. Hitting him.

Mulciber doesn't even get a chance. James just keeps hitting him until the hatchet drops to the ground, Mulciber's wet, labored breathing ringing in his ears. James can't really see him in the low light, and he wouldn't be able to in broad daylight, because his vision is blurring with tears. It's anger, and pain, and so many other things, and somehow nothing at all. James chokes out a harsh breath and fumbles for the hatchet, and this time, Mulciber is too beaten to stop him.

The hatchet lands in the middle of his chest. Mulciber chokes, his whole body jerking from the impact. As soon as James pulls the hatchet free, Mulciber coughs up blood.

James brings it down again.

Again.

Again.

Again.

The cannon sounds.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Mulciber isn't moving anymore.

Again.

Again.

Again.

James chokes on a sob, staring down at the chest in front of him. It's practically ribbons. There's blood everywhere on everything. The hatchet, his hands, the ground, the body. Blood. So much blood.

The hatchet hits the ground, and James slumps to the side, landing on his back next to Mulciber's body, where he proceeds to weep so hard that it's hard to breathe. His mind is one long litany of *Regulus, Regulus, Regulus*.

Regulus.

Regulus.

Regulus.

~•~

The sound of a cannon shakes Regulus out of his daze. It rings in his ears as the world snaps back into focus. He feels simultaneously like no time has passed since Evan died and also as if it's been years. Everything has a fuzzy quality to it, and there's a steady pulse of pain in the center of his chest.

That pulse of pain shifts into panic immediately when the cannon sounds, and then he's running.

Regulus isn't too far from the pond, so it doesn't take long to break through the trees. He instantly starts towards the east because that's where James is supposed to be, only to come to a screeching halt when he sees the shape of two bodies lying towards the west. One of them is James.

"No," Regulus whispers, breathless, the very tips of his fingers tingling as he scrambles to throw himself in that direction. He sprints around the edge of the pond, rushing right for the bodies. "No, no, no. James?"

There's a soft sob, and it's James, and Regulus has never been so relieved to hear such sorrow in his *life*. He tosses himself on the ground next to James, who sucks in a deep gasping breath and shifts towards him. Regulus is already reaching for him, dragging his top half into his lap, arms wrapping around him as he curls up and presses his face into Regulus' stomach.

"James," Regulus says, and then he can't stop saying it. He chants the name like a prayer. "James, James, James."

James.

James.

James.

Regulus doesn't even care about Mulciber's body right next to them. That doesn't matter. Nothing matters but James right now, alive and breathing. Regulus folds forward and presses his face into James' hair, holding him close.

He doesn't know if they're both crying, or if they're not. He doesn't know how much time passes, or if it even does at all. Everything narrows down to this, and it could be seconds or hours before the world creeps in around the edges again.

They breathe. James is making little hitched noises in his throat, but he's no longer weeping. His whole body is shivering, and Regulus doesn't know if it's because of the cold or because of…what happened.

What did happen? Regulus raises his head to look at Mulciber. He's… It's bad. Brutal. There's a lot of blood, and Mulciber's chest is cracked open and caved in, a complete mess.

Regulus stares at it, feeling numb.

"Okay," Regulus says out loud, his voice shockingly steady. He exhales and focuses back on James. "Okay, let me look at you. Are you hurt? James?"

James unravels away from him, slowly easing himself up from Regulus' lap, moving like he's in a lot of pain. He exhales heavily, then sways harshly, his eyes fluttering. His face is swollen and bloody.

"Reg'lus," James slurs.

"Hey. *Hey,* look at me," Regulus says sharply, hands lifting to cup James' face. He immediately sags into his palms and goes limp, crumbling forward. Regulus curses under his breath and catches him, James' head rolling on his shoulder. Regulus pats his cheek, the one that's not bleeding again. "James?"

Nothing.

"Fuck," Regulus mumbles, blowing out a deep breath. James is still breathing, so he's just passed out.

Right, well, maybe that's for the best. Regulus can get him back into the cave easier that way, at least without causing him too much pain.

James is bigger than him, and taller, and Regulus is really fucking exhausted and sporting injuries of his own, but nothing short of immediate death could stop him from getting James to safety, where Regulus can check him over. And it's cold now, the sun officially gone and the temperature sinking at a rapid rate. They're going to need a fire tonight.

So, with a grunt, Regulus shifts to gather James up in his arms, then pushes to his feet. He falls right back down, not at all prepared for James' dead weight. *Not dead,* Regulus snaps in his own head in a reprimand. Somehow, the mere insinuation infuriates him enough that he manages to stand back up from his knees. He curses, then grits his teeth as he starts to walk.

He practically runs and stumbles to the cave, trying to make it there as quickly as possible, which is difficult to do in the dark like this. He's groaning by the time he makes it, but he does indeed make it. The entrance is conveniently cut open for him, at least, but then he nearly trips over a sword that he assumes Mulciber must have dropped.

Regulus puts James down as gently as he can, lying him out flat. The first thing he does is fumble for his supplies, finding his matches. He curses again and bolts to his feet to rush outside to get sticks and proper kindling, pausing long enough to grab the hatchet before rushing back.

His hands are shaking so bad that it takes him a few moments to start the fire, but the inside of the cave lights up when he does. Regulus immediately starts looking around for the medicine he wholeheartedly *knows* Sirius sent them, but he can't find it. Frowning, he pushes to his feet and leaves the cave, swinging his head around as he looks.

In a tree. The parachute hanging on a branch. Lovely.

Regulus scowls, his jaw clenching. The gamemakers send those in, and they can put them wherever they want, which means they purposefully kept it out of James' reach, *knowing* he wouldn't be able to climb to get it.

There's already so much anger at the gamemakers because of Evan, and now this. All of this. Regulus' fingers twitch with the urge to do something very, very fucking awful.

Shaking his head, Regulus rushes forward to go to the tree, a lump forming in his throat when he thinks about how easily Evan would have scaled up to get it. Regulus does it with a lot less finesse, and it's so *stupid* that he's still scared. After all that he's seen, that he's *done,* how is he scared of *this?*

But he is, and he does it anyway. He climbs up and cuts down the container, then scurries right back down, breathing easier as soon as he's on solid ground. Snatching up the container, he heads right back towards the cave.

Halfway, the sound of a Hallow heli-carrier approaches, the trees swaying and the wind whipping as it gets closer. Regulus can't stop himself from looking back to watch the coffin-like cage that opens into a claw sink down and scoop Mulciber's body up, lifting him out before flying away again.

Regulus watches it go, feeling nothing, and then he continues into the cave.

James is still passed out.

Exhaling deeply, Regulus moves over and sinks down to settle beside him. First he opens the container, and he could cry when he sees the two wrapped rolls of bread on top. A weak noise escapes him, because he hasn't eaten anything since the dried meat and berries that he and James had…yesterday.

Yesterday feels like a lifetime ago.

Hands trembling, Regulus lifts the rolls out like they're made of gold, and he tips his head back to breathe out, "Thank you," hoping that Sirius knows he's talking to him and no one else.

Regulus sits the rolls aside, then digs out the smaller canister. He unscrews it, tipping it towards the fire to see it better. It's paste, colorless and odorless, but Regulus doesn't doubt that it's the Hallows special brew. They have access to medicines that work miracles; it could save many lives in the district, but the Hallow doesn't let *them* have access to it.

Putting that down, Regulus reaches in to draw out the last thing that's in there. A small, white card—the message that Sirius can send with it. The messages are seen before they're sent in to keep any helpful information from being given, like it's cheating in some way, as if survival is a game. Sirius can't send in instructions or give up locations or any other tips that betray the other tributes. He can, however, send coded messages that Regulus and James would understand or work out because they know him so well.

On the card, it just reads: "Baby"

That's it.

Regulus stares at it, lips pressed into a thin line, mind working in circles. The quotations were put there on purpose, and it doesn't take Regulus long to realize that Sirius is quoting *him.* When he called James 'baby'. Because apparently he did. He doesn't remember doing it, and to be fair, he was a little busy freaking out about James' leg to care too much about what was falling out of his mouth. Why does that even *matter?*

It doesn't make sense, not at first. Sirius wouldn't waste a message just to tease him. Actually, no, he would probably be *very* tempted to, and he'd love it if he could manage to tease Regulus at the same time that he's helping him, but how exactly does this fucking help?

He glances from the card, to the rolls, to the medicine, to James, then back to the card—and that's when it clicks.

You've got to be fucking joking, Regulus thinks in a rising sense of disbelief, his face twisting into a scowl. So, the medicine and food was about James and Regulus' relationship? The people love them so much that this is like a *reward* to them? So, what, if Regulus doesn't play into it, they won't get anything else? Life-saving offers are dependent on how much they please the Hallows with their fucking *love story?*

Regulus wants to scream. He squeezes his eyes shut, then crumbles the card up in his fist, grinding his teeth. Slowly, he exhales through his nose and opens his eyes, tossing the card into the fire with a glare. He's just—he does *not* have the emotional stability to deal with that right now.

He focuses on James instead.

First, he handles James' leg. He has to go out and get fresh water in Evan's bowl, freezing the whole way there and then back. It's getting dangerously cold again. Once he's back, he wrings out the cloth and reveals James' leg, taking off the bandages with care.

It's worse than it was when he last saw it. Now there are dark bruises that put a lump in Regulus' throat. Guilt threatens to choke him as he cleans James' leg carefully, and James doesn't stir, not even when Regulus smooths the salve on his leg.

Next, Regulus goes to his cheek. There's blood all over his face and throat that Regulus diligently cleans away, repeatedly dipping the cloth and wringing it out over and over again. His hands are freezing, but he doesn't stop. Regulus puts the salve on his cheek, and that's when James wakes up.

"Reg?" James rasps, his eyes fluttering open.

"I'm here," Regulus murmurs, ducking his head and gently pushing James' head back to smear a line of salve along James' throat where Mulciber's sword nicked him earlier. It's just a thin line, but Regulus does it anyway. "Are you hurt anywhere else, James? Did Mulciber get you anywhere else?"

"He—my chest—the hatchet—" James sounds disoriented, still a little out of it, still half-asleep.

Regulus inhales sharply, his heart dropping. He slowly reaches out with numb fingers to open James' coat. His fingers bump into something, a cold pin that makes his breath hitch. It's in the shape of the sun, and he thinks about his own star pin, the one Gideon gave him. James told him that they killed Fabian in front of him, much the same way they did Gideon.

That infuriates him, too, but it also…scares him. All of this goes beyond just the arena and gamemakers. Behind it all is Riddle, and he's a very, very powerful man. The type of man who kills people in the form of a warning.

Regulus thinks about the message he carved into the tree by Evan's body, and he goes cold all over. He doesn't have a lot of people in his life who matter to him, but there's Barty. There's Sirius. He even thinks of Remus, Pandora, and Dorcas. Even his parents—horrible as they are—cross his mind.

And James. Oh. *James.*

Riddle could kill them all.

Swallowing harshly, Regulus feels his defiance flicker like a candle in the wind. He's so tired, and the fear makes him want to curl up and never move again. Never make a mistake again. He takes a deep breath and tucks the pin out of sight, in the fold of James' coat, then focuses on the wound on his chest.

There's so much blood that it takes Regulus a bit to find it. James' shirt has a tear through it, and when he pushes it open, he can make out where the hatchet was pushed into the flesh. It's not too deep, but the sight of it makes Regulus' stomach cramp. He carefully wipes away the blood and applies salve to that, too, then zips James' coat back up.

"Regulus?" James says, like he's discovering him all over again. He blinks harshly, as if he's not sure this is real.

"I'm here," Regulus tells him again, because he'll tell James that as many times as he needs to hear it. He can't say what he should, can't get the words out. *I'm sorry I left. I'm sorry I didn't make it back in time. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.*

"You're here," James repeats, and then he's surging forward with a surprising burst of strength to drag Regulus into his arms. He clings to Regulus, hugging him so tight that it hurts, and Regulus lets him. James snatches back quickly, hands flying up to frame Regulus' face. "Is this real? He said—he said he—I thought he—"

"Mulciber?" Regulus asks, and James' mouth snaps shut with a harsh click. His hands slip off Regulus' face as he sways back, and he looks—hurt. All twisted up inside. Something passes through his eyes, and then he lowers them, like he can't bear to meet Regulus' gaze. "Give me your hands."

Wordlessly, James complies. Regulus cradles James' hands in his lap and gently, carefully cleans the blood off of them. His knuckles are busted and swollen, so Regulus applies salve to those as well, which draws James' attention.

"What's that?" James asks.

"The medicine Sirius sent. I've already taken care of your leg, face, and chest," Regulus says quietly.

James shifts to sit up further, craning his head to locate the canister, and then he's tugging it towards him with one hand while Regulus smears salve on the slice in his other palm.

Regulus' head is ducked, so he starts a little in surprise when he feels James' thumb glide along the cut on his cheek that is already mostly healed by now, the one Avery gave him. James' touch is gentle, and Regulus looks up at him through his eyelashes and a curtain of curls.

James keeps stroking his cheek, even when there's no need to, and they don't say anything. Not a word passes between them as Regulus cradles his other hand and James cradles his face. Despite everything, Regulus still has his heart flutters.

This isn't really the time or place, though, and they've dealt with too much today for it to be anything other than weak within him. It's not even yearning. Regulus is too tired, too worn out, too *hurt* to yearn for anything at all.

"Let me see your shoulder," James murmurs, dropping his hand to gently tug at Regulus' coat.

Honestly, Regulus forgot about where Axus' hook caught him in the shoulder—twice—but the reminder makes him realize that there's a twinge there. James helps him pull his coat and the collar of his shirt to the side, down over his arm, revealing where the hook got him. From the angle, the hook thankfully didn't dig in too deep, but it's obvious where it caught his skin. There's a puncture wound—rather shallow—and a red scrape that runs up a bit.

James is gentle when cleaning away the dried blood, then just as tender when applying the salve. His fingers are warm, and Regulus' eyes flutter shut at the intimacy of this moment. It's just the front of his shoulder, but the feeling of James' fingers there feels both entirely too good and far too important.

"Side," James instructs next, pulling Regulus' shirt back into place before wringing out the cloth.

Regulus does as he's told, dutifully leaning back and easing up his coat and shirt as he cranes his head to peer down at the gash on his side with a grimace. He hadn't forgotten about this one, very aware of the pain, but he's been ignoring it.

It looks bad, which is confirmed a moment later when James hisses between his teeth like he's just been burned. Regulus presses his lips into a thin line, looking at the wound. It's red and swollen, completely inflamed. He wouldn't be surprised if infection already set in, but maybe it hasn't. Maybe, even if it has, the medicine will fix it anyway.

James is so, so very careful when cleaning away the dried blood. It still hurts enough for Regulus to squeeze his eyes shut tight, reaching one hand up to brace it against James' shoulder, holding on too tight and not even meaning to. James murmurs apologies, using his free hand to rub soothing circles into Regulus' arm where it's raised.

There's not much salve left. It's not like they sent very much, unwilling to give them *too* much help, so James honestly has only a bit to work with. He drags his finger along the inside of the canister, gathering every last drop to gently apply it to the puffy wound. Regulus bites his lip and tries his best to swallow a whimper, but the skin is so raw that even *breathing* on it would feel like poking him with a branding-iron.

"I'm sorry, love. I know, I know, I'm almost done," James whispers, and he's not lying. A few seconds later, he draws back and nods for Regulus to lower his shirt and coat.

"Thank you," Regulus says quietly, settling back down and reaching over to dig around for the water canister in his bag that's still full from earlier. He sits it down and picks up the bread, offering one roll to James, who blinks at it in pure shock. Regulus' lips twitch weakly. "Sirius says hi."

James looks like he could cry. He chokes out a soft laugh and reaches out to take the bread, legitimately bringing it up to his face to inhale deeply, eyes fluttering shut. He presses a kiss to it and looks up to mumble, "Sirius, I fucking love you."

The lack of a response is deafening.

"Drink some water," Regulus murmurs, pushing the canister towards him, then focusing on his own bread.

In silence, they drink water and slowly, oh so slowly, eat their bread in tiny pieces, cherishing it next to the crackling fire. Neither of them speak or look at each other. Regulus is really tired, as well as cold, and he doesn't know what to say. He doesn't want to say anything, because the idea of talking just exhausts him more. He doesn't even want to feel right now.

Due to the cold, he's numb pretty much all over, and he sort of prefers it. He wants to be numb on the inside, too, but he can't figure out how to—disconnect. Everything is just too much. *Trojan Horse,* he thinks almost desperately, inwardly pleading for it now more than ever. It's not working. All he can think about is Evan.

When the water and bread is gone, Regulus 'cleans up', just to give himself something to do. He puts the canister for the salve aside with the paper that was wrapped around the rolls inside it, then puts his empty water canister in his bag so he can fill it again tomorrow. He drags out the blanket, passing it to James, who takes it without a word, and then he adds a few more sticks to the fire. The silence drags on.

Eventually, James breaks it to whisper, "Regulus?"

"Yes?" Regulus replies quietly.

"Is…?" James trails off, and Regulus looks over to see him swallowing harshly. There's a sad quality to his big, brown eyes, and Regulus knows exactly what he's going to say even before he asks, "Where's Evan?"

Regulus stares at him, feeling that awful pulse in his chest, and then he looks away as he says, flatly, "Dead."

James is silent for a long moment, and then his voice is so soft and remorseful as he replies, "Regulus, I'm so sor—"

"Don't," Regulus cuts in sharply as soon as James' hand reaches out to settle on his arm. He pulls away from it, *snatches* away, and he feels his anger spike again.

He wants to yell at James, even though it's not his fault. He wants to rewind time and force Evan to stay behind with James, because then maybe all of the things that went wrong wouldn't have, but it's too late for that now. He wants to rant about how unfair it is, because all of it *is* unfair—the fact that the *one* person Regulus has ever chosen or dared to trust by *learning* to is lost to him; how all of James' fucking allies are perfectly fine in some cave somewhere while doing *nothing;* the way none of them should even be in this fucking arena in the *first place;* or even the injustice in having found a friend different from any other in just enough time to lose him.

"Regulus," James says, his voice strained.

"Stop. Just stop. Just leave me *alone,"* Regulus bursts out, fully turning away as his eyes start to sting, and just like that—just that easily—he disconnects. He shuts down immediately. There it is. Trojan Horse. Fucking *finally.*

James retreats and falls silent.

Regulus lets him.

~•~

Remus' heart aches as he watches the banners play out on the screen. It's clearly visible to James and Regulus inside the cave from the angle of the entrance, because they're both watching it. Peter and Irene have exited their cave to see who's gone, leaving Mathias to keep winding thin logs together, while Vanity's main job seems to be not freezing to death. Bernice, Axus, and Hodge all made it back to the original cave and made it across the iced

river where Willa was waiting for them, and they're all watching as well. The last girl on her own—Juniper—has once again burrowed into the ground, and she doesn't come out to see who's dead.

It goes in order.

First, there's the woman who died the previous night from dehydration and hypothermia after the banners had already played. After that is the man James killed that attacked Regulus.

James makes a small sound on the screen, staring up at the sky, his throat bobbing harshly. Regulus looks at him briefly, but he doesn't speak, and he looks away when James drops his gaze in obvious shame.

There's Quinn, who Regulus killed. Following that is Evan.

When his face appears in the sky, James once again makes an obvious attempt to comfort Regulus, who shakes him off and scoots further away from him. His face is blank. He doesn't cry; he doesn't look sad, or angry, or hurt; he's just—empty. James retreats again, looking back at the sky.

Lastly, there's Mulciber. As soon as James sees his face in the sky, he presses his lips into a thin line and looks away. He doesn't move until the banners stop playing.

Peter and Irene go back inside to update the others, and everyone seems relieved that James is still alive. The death eaters are upset. Axus starts ranting about their numbers dwindling, sounding genuinely terrified, and Hodge cries. Bernice remains stoic, only her eyes blazing with emotion. It's anger. Pure rage. A woman scorned.

The camera cuts back to James and Regulus. James is spreading out the blanket, mumbling, "Regulus, you need to get warm. Please just—"

"I'll come when I put the fire out for the night," is Regulus' cold response, and his tone allows for no further arguments.

James says nothing else, curling up under the blanket, and Regulus remains next to the fire, hunched over with his knees pressed to his chest. He's still looking at the sky. James turns his back to him and closes his eyes.

It's not long before the arena fades out, and Rita comes on screen, immediately chattering away excitedly. She starts off about how fiercely James fought Mulciber, and then the screen goes black as Sirius lifts the remote, then puts it down.

Silence drapes over them, heavy.

Remus can't tear his eyes away from the screen just yet. It's been five years since he watched the games, and he's only just now realizing how the distance from it has affected him. Despite the fact that he watched them his whole life, the brief pause in between has made him forget how fucking *cruel* they are. Well, no, he never forgot, but he's not as desensitized to it as he was. Or maybe it's just because he cares so much about James and Regulus, as well as *Sirius.*

Whatever it is, Remus struggles with his discomfort. How anyone could watch that—any of it—and be genuinely entertained is beyond him. It sickens him.

This is hard. Really, *really* fucking hard. Having to watch this is a different form of torment, and they *do* have to, because it's imperative that they know what Regulus and James are doing. Sirius, especially. Remus wishes he could just—shield Sirius from it, even if he had to watch alone and give Sirius a watered down summary of the events, but that's not possible. Sirius is trapped in this just as much as his brother and best friend, just from the other side. It's all fucked.

Sirius has had it rough today. Well, he's had it rough this entire time, but he's genuinely been a wreck tonight compared to the previous ones. Between James' first kill, he and Regulus being chased, then captured before getting away with Evan's help, *then* James stepping into a bear trap, followed by Regulus and Evan leading the death eaters away, which led to Evan dying, *and then* James' fight with Mulciber—well, Sirius has likely felt every emotion on the possible spectrum for humans to feel, and then some. He's been *so* fucking stressed.

Sirius has cried. He has shouted in fear. He has held his breath and held Remus' hand in a death grip, and he has let go. He has fallen silent, stood up to pace, sank down to the floor while rocking back and forth with his hands in his hair. He has crawled back into his seat and gone very, very still.

That's what he's doing now. When Remus looks over at him, Sirius is just—sitting there. With one look, Remus knows he's gone. He can't pinpoint when, exactly, it happened, but Sirius did become strangely quiet mere moments after Mulciber pressed the hatchet into James' chest. He got back into his seat without a word, and now he's here, but he isn't here.

Remus swallows. "Sirius."

Immediately, Sirius looks over at him and blinks, but it's not… It *is* him, but he's hidden away, like a curtain has come down within him. Remus can tell by his eyes. There's just something different about them when this happens to him, which Remus has only seen one other time.

"Alright," Remus says softly, "I'm going to get you a glass of water. Stay here for me, yeah?"

"Alright," Sirius replies quietly.

Sighing, Remus stands up to go into the kitchen, making Sirius a glass of water like he said he would. When he comes back, Sirius hasn't moved, and he takes the glass as soon as Remus offers it to him. He drinks it slowly, staring at the screen.

Remus doesn't say anything, just sitting next to Sirius and waiting. He doesn't really know what to do when this happens. The last time, Sirius had been in the middle of sobbing his eyes out, so Remus had held him instinctively. Now, Sirius is, for all intents and purposes, rather calm.

When Sirius drinks his water halfway down, he sits the glass on the table in front of them, then leans back. Glancing over at Remus, he murmurs, "Can I lean on you?"

"Yes," Remus answers immediately, because there is no version of Sirius, or any state Sirius could ever be in, where Remus would deny him this.

Sirius shifts over to lean into Remus' side, lying his head over on his shoulder. Remus wraps his arm around him, but he doesn't do anything else, and won't until Sirius gets back to himself. Sirius breathes, and Remus breathes with him.

It takes a while, but Remus knows as soon as the change occurs. Sirius stiffens, and his breathing immediately goes erratic. He surges up with wide eyes, all the color draining from his face as he whips towards Remus.

"James?" Sirius chokes out.

"He's alive," Remus says quickly, hands darting out to cup Sirius' trembling fingers between both palms. "Sirius, he's alive."

"I need to see," Sirius declares, diving away from Remus to fumble for the remote.

Remus falls silent, letting Sirius do what he needs to do. The screen comes back on to Rita talking about Juniper, who is surprising everyone by how long she's lived and how well she's doing on her own as a sixteen year old girl.

Sirius just rewinds, not stopping until it gets back to the fight between Mulciber and James. Remus looks away, but he can't do anything to stop himself from hearing it. He closes his eyes, trying to drown it out. Even still, he reaches over and gently bumps his hand into the side of Sirius' leg in offering.

Sirius takes it, threading their fingers together and holding on tight. Knowing that James lives seems to help him get through it, but that doesn't stop him from crying right along with his best friend after Mulciber is dead. Sirius does that rocking thing he does when he can't be still, especially in moments of distress. Remus thinks it soothes him.

He watches all the way through, making quiet noises and murmuring soft words under his breath that Remus knows aren't meant for him, so he respectfully doesn't try to listen to what they might be. Sirius is calmer by the end, and just as he did before, he turns the screen black the moment Rita comes on. There's another round of silence and breathing.

"Reggie isn't doing well," Sirius mumbles, eventually. He's frowning when Remus glances over at him. "He's—you can see it, can't you? He's shutting down. James is… This is hurting him. All of it. They're both so—" He shakes his head, his throat rising and falling on a harsh swallow. "I don't know how they're going to—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in gently, and Sirius looks over at him, still so pale. "Start small, remember?"

"Right." Sirius takes a deep breath and nods. They've done this once before the previous night when Sirius was stressed, and it seems to help him, so Remus is sticking with it. "Right, so first, they're alive."

"They're alive," Remus agrees, nodding, because that's the first priority. Everything else—that's something to deal with *after* acknowledging the relief that they're alive. That alone always calms Sirius. Helps ground him. It soothes Remus, too.

"They've gotten medicine that will have them healed by morning," Sirius lists off slowly. "They've had bread to eat, so they're not sleeping on empty stomachs. They have water and a way to stay warm. They're safe, for now."

Remus hums. "Yes, they are. You helped them today, Sirius. Don't ignore that. I know you worked hard with the sponsors."

"I wish I didn't need to help them at all," Sirius mumbles. "I got them medicine and food, but that doesn't mean they weren't hurt. That doesn't just go away. I can't—"

"You're right, it doesn't, and it's not fair that they're going through this," Remus agrees, *"but* even just getting what you sent meant something to them. That's important."

Sirius opens his mouth, then closes it, then nods. His eyebrows furrow. "I'm fairly sure that Regulus got my message that I sent with the medicine and bread."

"Can I ask?" Remus murmurs, and Sirius nods. "You just wrote *baby.* I'm not… I don't get it. Am I missing something?"

"I'm really glad that you don't understand, because that means you aren't thinking like *them."* Sirius spits the last word like it's poison, his lip curling. "The fucking Hallows are loving James and Regulus' little romantic moments, which I can't even *begin* to explain how fucked that is on so many levels. Regulus called James *baby,* which…" He pauses, then wrinkles his nose and clears his throat. "Well, I'm quite sure it just slipped out because he was panicking about James being hurt, because he would never be so soppy in front of the entire world on purpose like that. Maybe in private, but… Well, that's it, unless he's freaking out, apparently."

"Can't blame him there," Remus muses.

"No? Not one for pet names?" Sirius asks curiously.

Remus shrugs one shoulder. "Generally, no. I had one boyfriend call me *sunshine* and, unfortunately, *Re-Re ."*

"Re-Re," Sirius repeats flatly, one eyebrow arching up with so much judgement and sass packed into that one twitch of muscle that Remus laughs.

"Yes. Awful, isn't it?" Remus asks.

Sirius purses his lips like he's tasting something sour. "It's more than just awful, Remus. That's a crime against nature. *Re-Re?"* He scoffs, his face scrunching up. "And you still dated

him after that? Willingly?"

"He sucked cock *quite* well," Remus says dryly, "so yes, I was willing to take the bad with the good, as it were."

"Oh, *did* he?" Sirius sniffs primly. "Have some standards, why don't you?"

Remus bites back a smile. "It was a short relationship anyway. So, I'm gathering that you don't like pet names."

"No, I do," Sirius replies, relaxing now that they're no longer referencing Remus' past boyfriends. He breaks out into a soft smile. "I'm a lot like James that way, I suppose. Did you see how happy he was about it? Regulus calling him that, I mean. Even in all that pain, he was ecstatic. He's pathetic."

"A bit, yeah," Remus says softly, amused by how fond Sirius currently sounds. "He's really quite smitten, isn't he?"

Sirius sighs, his smile fading. "Yeah, he is."

Remus nods. "Right, so—sending that word."

"Oh! Yeah, that," Sirius says, back on track. "Basically I just told Regulus that they'll have more support if they play into the whole love story thing. He looked peeved about it, so I figured he worked out what I meant."

"Can't blame him for that either." Remus frowns and shakes his head. "I would hate it, too. Having to deal with the fact that your worth is measured in how entertaining you can be for others involving something that's personal—and your survival is dependent on that? Oh, I would be *furious."*

"Anyone would," Sirius mutters with a scowl, "but they never care when it's not them."

"It's never them," Remus murmurs, his jaw clenching.

Sirius closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, drawing his hands away from Remus' to scrub his palms up and down his face. He rubs at his eyes, then presses his fingers into his cheeks and moves them around like he's massaging them. He then proceeds to tap both cheeks and roll his jaw, like he's trying to reset himself and work the tension out of his face. Smacking his lips, he drops his hand and opens his eyes.

"Okay, next," Sirius says with a deep exhale. "Evan died."

"Yeah," Remus replies with a frown. His heart gives a pang just thinking about the way Regulus had sobbed when it happened, and he once again breaks out into goosebumps thinking about the short but poignant message Regulus carved into the tree.

"Regulus isn't handling it well," Sirius mumbles. "He's going to *continue* not to handle it well, and I can't fucking blame him. It's—grief. Normal. Human. He should be allowed that, at the very least, but there's no space for it in the arena. If he just shuts down… Remus, I'm worried it'll get him killed."

"Regulus has been doing very well," Remus says. "He's stubborn, like you. As unfair and awful as it is, I don't think he's going to let this stop him from surviving."

"He has to be hurting. He's going to be so—"

"Sirius."

Grimacing, Sirius nods. "Right. Focus on the now. Worry about the later when it's here. One day at a time."

"One day at a time," Remus repeats quietly, because that's really the only way Sirius can handle this, and even that's a struggle for him—which is fair and makes complete sense.

"James was hurt," Sirius continues, a strain in his voice.

"You said he'd be fine by morning."

"He will. They both will. I just—well, I hated seeing him in pain. Either of them. But yes, they will heal. The medicine was very expensive, but it'll work really well. I think they might have scars, but maybe not."

Remus clears his throat. "You…have scars."

"A lot," Sirius confirms without batting an eye.

"So do I," Remus murmurs.

Sirius blinks at him, then says, "I'll show you yours if you show me mine." He frowns. "Wait."

Remus busts out laughing, unable to help it, and Sirius breaks out into a sheepish grin as his cheeks start to glow. Oh, but Remus adores this man. He's silly, yet so smart. Bashful, yet so brash. Kind and kaleidoscopic. Magical and mercurial. Sirius is a mess, like a container that things of all colors and shapes and sizes were overturned into, impossible to sort through it all, and it's so, so lovely. He's just so lovely.

"Well, fumbled that quite nicely, didn't I?" Sirius says with a snort. He reaches out and swats Remus gently on the leg with the back of his hand. "Stop laughing, you prick. You *know* what I was trying to say."

"Something about showing me my scars?" Remus teases.

"Oh, *nevermind,* forget it." Sirius rolls his eyes, lips twitching as he shakes his head. "Anyway, moving on."

Remus sobers instantly. "Right. Next, then?"

"James killed Mulciber," Sirius says, no longer even *close* to smiling, and it's like shadows are passing through his eyes.

"He had no choice," Remus points out.

Sirius nods. "I know that. *He* knows that, but that never makes it any easier, Remus. It's just fucking awful. I know he won't let that stop him, because his motivations are a little different than Regulus'—or, well, actually they're not different at all, but my point is…it's still going to get to him. He's *James.* Worst case scenario, it gets to him so much that he falters next time something goes wrong."

"James is strong, and he's fought hard," Remus says. "When it comes down to it, he's not going to give up. Don't think about what *might* happen, not now. Just focus on what you already know, and what *you* need to do for them."

"Right, well, I have to…" Sirius grimaces. "Tomorrow, I'm going to have to smooth over Regulus' little note he left after Evan died. It's too—defiant. They're not going to like it, and they might hurt him for it."

Remus forces himself not to ball his hands into fists. "Alright, and how do you plan to help?"

"Play up his grief and say that he meant the Hallow was hollow like he was when losing Evan, like he wasn't alone in feeling that way, like they brought him comfort," Sirius replies immediately, because *of course* he has a plan already. He's so, so fucking smart and completely unafraid to use his brilliance to James and Regulus' advantage.

"Okay." Remus nods. "So, James and Regulus are safe. They were hurt, but they've had medicine and food, and they'll be warm through the night. You helped them today, and you're going to help them tomorrow. Everything else—all the worry for what hasn't happened yet—that will just have to wait."

Of course, Remus knows it's not as simple as that. Sirius is going to fret and worry about *everything* regardless, all that has happened and all that could. But breaking things down like this seems to be the only thing that helps, as much as he *can* be helped in this situation.

Sirius has been letting Remus take care of him through this, at least in part. He lets Remus calm him so he can be focused, and he lets Remus comfort him when he returns to watch the games with him, but that's it. After the screen goes off and they've talked, Sirius keeps his distance. He'll occasionally make flirty comments, but that's as far as he'll go when it comes to their…? Whatever this is.

They haven't embraced since the morning before the second day of the games—and frankly, Remus doesn't mind. He knows this is really hard on Sirius; there's too much going on for him to really care about *romance,* of all things.

Remus just worries he's not letting himself be comforted enough. Not letting himself have the things he wants in a form of punishment, or guilt, or both.

Remus doesn't push it. He never pushes it, and he never will. It's a privilege just being with Sirius at all. In a way, Remus is sort of…grateful for the distance they don't cross, because he's painfully aware of the life they'll never get to have together.

It would have been such a lovely life, too.

"Earlier," Sirius says abruptly, "you knew I was—having issues. Did I—what did we—"

"Nothing," Remus assures him. "We just sat together. I made you a glass of water, and you asked if you could lean on me, then did that when I said yes."

Sirius nods, immediately trusting him, and there's no doubt in his expression at all. "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me."

"You've done something kind and helpful. It's only polite to share my gratitude."

"Who taught you such manners?" Remus asks, raising his eyebrows at Sirius. "Not your parents, surely."

"Oh, yeah, definitely not." Sirius chuckles. "They cared about manners involving how we presented ourselves, not manners involving being a decent person. No, that honor goes to Effie and Monty. James' parents."

Remus smiles slightly at the admiration in Sirius' voice. He clearly holds James' parents in high regard. "They adopted you when you moved out, right?"

"Basically," Sirius admits. "But honestly? They looked after me and Reggie a lot when we were children. Hard not to when we were in and out of their house so much. Well, me more than Regulus, generally, but he was around before—" There's a pause, then Sirius sighs. "Anyway, yes, Effie and Monty took me in as soon as I showed up, no questions asked. Effie…"

"She was your mentor."

"Yeah, she was. If not for her, I wouldn't be alive right now, in more ways than one. She and Monty are brilliant parents; I've been wishing they were mine since I was eleven. I can't even imagine what they're going through right now…"

"They sound lovely," Remus murmurs.

Sirius blinks rapidly and clears his throat, glancing over at him with a tight smile. "They are. What about you?"

"What?" Remus asks.

"I just—I feel like we talk about me a lot, but I'm curious about you, too," Sirius mumbles. "Obviously you don't have to tell me, but if you wanted to…"

"My parents?"

"If you want to tell me about them, sure."

Remus takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Yeah, they were brilliant. My mum was a seamstress, which is not the convenience you might think it would be."

"No? Why not?"

"Hope Lupin didn't believe in throwing clothes out, and considering how hard it was to come by nice, new clothes, I can't really blame her. But she was a bit fanatical about it, if I'm honest. If I got holes or tears in anything, she just sewed them shut. You wouldn't *believe* the amount of patches I had on my clothes at all times. Lily used to say I dressed like a grandpa, but that was because my mum believed in handing clothes down as well, as long as they fit."

"I bet you looked sexy dressing like a grandpa," Sirius teases, and Remus huffs a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "Hope sounds like a practical woman."

"She was," Remus says softly.

Sirius hesitates, clearly debating the question that Remus just *knows* he wants to ask. He apparently decides not to, choosing instead to murmur, "And your dad? What's his name?"

"Lyall Lupin," Remus recites, dropping his gaze. "He was—"

"You don't have to tell me," Sirius offers, when Remus falters.

Remus shakes his head. "No, it's fine. He was, ah, an Auror for our district. Signed up when he was eighteen, just to feed his family. You know they have to be in service for twenty years without being married or having kids, so it's… I mean, he was in love with my mum, but he felt like he had to take care of his family, or they'd starve, so he—he became an Auror and told my mum to live her life without him, because he couldn't really give her much of one as an Auror."

Sirius says nothing. He just watches with keen eyes, visibly giving Remus all his focus.

"But my mother was a very stubborn woman," Remus continues, lips curling up sadly. "She waited for twenty years."

At this, Sirius' eyes go wide. Breathlessly, he asks, "She did?"

"Indeed she did," Remus says, nodding. "She used to tell me how she would flirt with him and try to get him to sneak off and have a secret affair, even though it would get them both killed if they were ever found out."

"And did they?" Sirius presses, a gleam in his eyes that betrays satisfaction and humor at the thought.

Remus sighs. "My dad held strong. Didn't so much as touch her for twenty years. He said he gave up trying to convince her to live a life with someone else about fourteen years in, but he still wouldn't give in. Showing any loyalty to anything other than the Hallow would have gotten them killed. It's funny, though. A week after the twenty years were up, my parents were married, and I came less than a year later."

"That's really sweet," Sirius says softly.

"Suppose it is. In the end, they didn't get as much time together as they spent apart," Remus murmurs. "She died when I was seventeen, only three years before—"

Remus bites off the rest of that sentence, swallowing it, even though it's too bitter. He remembers the day his mother died, sick in bed with Lyall right by her side as they talked about how the life they had together was worth the wait. He remembers three years after, when blood splattered a shirt his mother had sewn for him and he ran with Lily's hand in his, *knowing* he'd never get to go home again.

"Remus?" Sirius asks cautiously.

"Before I ended up here," Remus finishes, which wasn't what he was going to originally say, and by the expression on Sirius' face, he knows it. He doesn't push it, though. "My dad retired when he was fifty, only five years before my mum passed. That's when the new wave of Aurors came in, since most of the others had aged out, like my dad. I was twelve."

"It's always difficult going through that change," Sirius mutters with a grimace. "The new Aurors are usually nothing like the ones before them, and you're already *used* to how things were before they got there, and then suddenly it's on you to adjust to new rules and procedures to avoid getting into trouble? It's utter shit."

"Yeah, pretty bang on," Remus agrees wryly. "The new Aurors weren't… Well, they weren't as lax as the ones before them. They came straight from district two, where they're trained, and you know they're basically just—Hallows. Anyway, my dad was usually a calm, level-headed man. Just—well, imagine a load of new people coming into the job you did for thirty-two years and completely going about it wrong, particularly just to abuse their power. It was…" He runs his tongue over his teeth, then gives Sirius a tight smile. "Let's just say it didn't end well and leave it at that, yeah?"

Sirius is curious. Remus can *tell* that he's curious, and he can't even blame him, but to tell him… For some reason, Remus really doesn't want to. It's nothing good, and Sirius already sees so much of his worst as it is.

Despite his curiosity, Sirius doesn't push any further.

"I'm sorry about your mum," Sirius murmurs. "It's a shame I'll never get to meet her. I think we would have gotten on."

"Oh, yeah, she would have *loved* you," Remus admits with a fond chuckle, lips curling up. "It's a shame I'll never get to meet Monty and Effie."

"They'll know of you, though," Sirius assures him. "I'll be telling them all about you."

"Will you?" Remus asks.

Sirius gives him a lopsided smile, cute and boyish. "They worry about me, so it'll comfort them to know that I had you through all of this. I wish I could tell them now. Your mere existence would help them sleep better at night, I just know it." He chuckles. "Just like it does for me."

Remus melts like butter over an open flame. He's nearly overcome with the urge to reach out and touch Sirius, to hold him, to kiss him. He refrains with effort, turning his head away and taking a deep breath to calm himself.

For the first time in years, Remus' mind turns to his father. All their fights, all their disagreements, all the push and pull of where they couldn't meet halfway on how to act, especially after Hope died. Remus was too—radical, honestly. Defiant. Rebellious. Always in trouble and unafraid to cause more, while Lyall was hard on him for it. These days, Remus knows why, even though he couldn't understand it back then.

This. This is what Lyall was trying to warn him away from. Exactly what happened and exactly where Remus is now. Lyall could see the smoke-signal for what it was, and he knew how bad things could get. He tried to save Remus from this fate, but he hadn't managed to. Remus didn't let him.

They had a fight on that last day. A screaming match, in fact. Lyall ranting and lecturing while Remus shouted and tossed a glass at the wall the moment Lyall dared to bring what Hope would have wanted into it. Their worst fight—and that's the last memory Remus ever has with his dad.

Remus can just imagine what it was like for Lyall when he heard the news. When he found out that his son—his *son*—

Swallowing thickly, Remus pushes the thoughts away. There's a reason he doesn't think about it, mostly because it hurts to. He can't go to his dad now and tell him that, even if he *still* doesn't agree, he understands what Lyall was trying to do. And he's grateful. All Lyall ever wanted to do was protect his son, and Remus… Well, Remus had his own way of doing things. Look where that's gotten him.

There's something else Remus understands now that he never could before. Being chained to the Hallow and being so very aware that one mistake could end in death, or worse. The only difference is, Lyall had to deal with it for twenty years, and Remus is sentenced to life.

It's some kind of cruel irony that Remus would find himself in a situation like his parents, but unlike them, he and Sirius will never get their happy ending, even as brief as it was.

Remus glances over at Sirius and smiles slightly, because if there's one thing that Hope and Lyall taught him about love, it's that a happy middle is just as special.

Gently, Sirius smiles back.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you who want warnings and need to know where to skip:

IF YOU WISH TO SKIP THE GRAPHIC VIOLENCE/DEATH, THEN JUST SCROLL PAST WHERE JAMES THROWS THE HATCET AT MULCIBER UNTIL IT'S REGULUS' POV AGAIN (after it says "Regulus" three times)

if you just want the summary/warning: mulciber does find james in the cave. mulciber taunts james, and he makes a comment about killing regulus slowly, which spurs james to throw his hatchet at him. mulciber manages to block it, but james tackles him. they get into a rather brutal fight, in which it's described that mulciber kicks james in his injured leg multiple times, as well as shoves the hatchet down into james' chest, but only a bit—only to break the skin, really. they hit each other and fight, and mulciber lies to james to say that regulus is dead. james ends up managing to fight him off, hitting him until he swings the hatchet into his chest multiple times, even after mulciber is dead. it's really quite brutal and described in detail.

as for the dissociative amnesia: it's sirius again, but it's from remus' POV, so it's not really described in detail. it's fairly brief, sirius is rather calm this time, and remus takes care of sirius until he comes back to himself.

for everyone else, who has finished the chapter...

yeah, that was another rough one. i think, for me, this was the second most uncomfortable chapter for me to write—or at least the first portion of it. the one that was most uncomfortable for me to write hasn't been posted yet.

i will say that things do calm down for a bit. like, we do get a break and the chance to breathe from here, at least for a few chapters. things don't get really, really bad again until chapter 20, if that helps.

so, let's get into it, i guess.

i don't really have much to say about james and regulus right now. like, they're clearly going through it, both of them. it's just a really bad time for them, very heavy and very hard. they had that moment of comfort in all the hurt when they were using the medicine that sirius sent, at least (hurt/comfort my beloved <3).

oh, and i feel like i should mention—im kinda going on the HP Universe/Wizarding World rules for advancements in medicine as far as what the Hallows have access to, so like. yes, that salve will heal them and leave only minor scars, if that, because i said so. it was REALLY expensive, though, so just know sirius put in the work for that! put some respect on his name!!!

oh! i can say this about jegulus, at least. regulus is so transparent at this point that, if not for everything going on and all that he's dealing with otherwise, he would 100% realize that he—at the very least—cares about james. however, shit isn't simple or going well for him, so he literally does not have the space or time or emotional well-being to examine his feelings.

but anyway, the real main characters of this chapter were none other than remus and sirius. finally, they're BACK. oh, ive missed them. we see plenty of them over the next two chapters, i promise, and it's GOOD, too. im very excited.

im particularly excited for the next chapter, honestly, for multiple reasons, but we get there when we get there.

anyway, back to sirius and remus. they're so cute and sad, i wanna BITE THEM! and also hug them. like, sirius is obviously going THROUGH it, but remus makes it better.

i think the best part of this chapter was sirius "ill show you yours if you show me mine" black and remus "oh, is that so?" lupin just—having soft/light moments together. jealous sirius black strikes again. he was so offended by "Re-Re" 😭😭😭 PLS HE WAS SO UPSET LMAOOO i adore him. also, them opening up about their parents>>>

we got more hints of remus' history, which was exciting. the auror thing is basically what the peacekeepers were in the hunger games books/movies, but for those of you who havent read/watched or just don't remember, ill give a brief summary, short and sweet.

basically, they're people from the districts—usually district two, but can come from anywhere—that are trained like civilian soldiers to keep order in the districts and provide protection in the Hallow. they're completely under the Hallows orders, and they're the ones who capture criminals and keep the districts in line. depending on the district, they can be relaxed, or they can be strict. oh, and it was aurors that killed fabian and gideon on riddle's orders. we will get a bit more information on that later, i promise!

anyway, i think that about sums everything up, so let me wrap up.

numbers:

tributes remaining: 11
tributes who have died as of this chapter:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
eight unnamed/unknown others

The Break

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!! finally, an easier chapter! im so stupidly excited about this one, you all have no idea.

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death/murder (because of the whole arena thing AND the whole corrupt government thing)
-references to previous deaths/violence
-brief depiction of violence (VERY brief)
-brief description of animal death (to eat in the arena and not described in detail)

i will be putting a short in-depth warning in the end notes for the brief violence in this chapter. it's not as bad as we've seen so far, but it's there just in case anyone wants/needs it, which is, as always, valid!!!

okay, without further ado, ENJOY :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sybill likes to cut holes in her shirts and put paper clips through them because she thinks it gives her *flair,* which Lily isn't against, per se. It's not that she protests individuality and style—no, of course not—but she *does* take issue with Sybill doing things that's going to end with her crying later.

"How are you even hiding that from Dumbledore?" Lily asks as she tugs on the line of clips. She's reaching for a cigarette with her other hand, which Sybill looks at pointedly. "Oh, this isn't nearly as obvious. I have a place to hide these."

Sybill squints at her, and Lily reaches up to scoop her arm under her chest, fumbling for the pack of cigarettes before she tucks it underneath. When she lets go, the pack disappears beneath. Sybill looks down at her own chest, frowning, then looks back up with a thoughtful look on her face. "Will you—"

"No, I will not use my tits to hide things for you," Lily cuts in, tugging the pack out so she can scoop her lighter from it, cigarette trapped between her lips.

"Not all of us were blessed with—" Sybill drops her gaze and bites her lip. "Goodness, Lily."

"Blessed?" Lily mutters. "You think back pain, uncomfortable fitting clothes, and common heat rashes is *blessed?"*

"No, you're right, that's awful. Still, you have extra hiding spots, and also…it sure is a blessing to look at them," Sybill says with a dreamy sigh, then promptly folds over and rests her head on Lily's chest with a happy hum.

Lily quickly grabs her cigarette so it won't catch Sybill's hair on fire, her free hand cupping Sybill's head as she grumbles, "Oi, watch it. I'm smoking, Sybill."

"Yeah, yeah, I know your routine by now. Same way Wren, Miranda, and Ember know," Sybill tells her with a snort. She lifts her head and shifts across the grass, throwing her leg over Lily's lap and leaning up to pluck the cigarette from Lily's mouth, turning it to put it in her own. Inhaling, her cheeks hollow out, and she parts her lips to let the smoke escape slowly. "Let Lily Evans fuck you, then watch her chainsmoke like she's trying to set her lungs on fire."

"Well, if you know, then what makes you think I'm willing to share?" Lily reaches out to take her cigarette back, raising her eyebrows. "These aren't easy to come by, let me tell you."

"And yet, I've never seen you without them after we fuck. Wren, Ember, and Miranda all say the same."

"Stop talking to the other women I fuck. It's weird."

Sybill grins. "Stop fucking so many women."

"Can't do that. You'd all be so disappointed," Lily teases, then inhales and tips her head back to watch the smoke billow up from her lips. Her eyes flutter shut for a brief moment.

"That we would," Sybill agrees with a chuckle. "Besides, it's not like the Phoenix has enough room to keep us unaware of it. Fuck, Lily, we all eat meals together. Wren is literally my best friend. What did you expect to happen?"

Lily doesn't bother responding to that. If she's honest, she doesn't really give a shit. "You never answered me." Reaching out with her free hand, she tugs on the paper clips. "How are you getting those past Dumbledore?"

"I stole them from his office," Sybill says. "If he acknowledges them, then he has to acknowledge that someone managed to break into his office."

"You broke into his office?" Lily asks sharply, sitting up so quickly that Sybill nearly topples out of her lap.

"Yeah, I did," Sybill admits, looking smug. "Difficult to do, if I'm honest, but worth it for the paper clips. Of course, he'll probably just have someone confiscate them, and I'll end up sobbing again. But, you know, it's worth it."

"They look lovely," Lily feels compelled to point out, if only to make Sybill happier. Sybill brightens instantly. "How did you do it? Break into his office, I mean."

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Trelawney."

"Evans," Sybill teases, but Lily stares at her, staring her down, and Sybill's smile fades. She swallows. "I snuck out after curfew. Remember that alarm that went off in the Great Hall last night? That was me."

"Did you look at anything else?" Lily asks, and Sybill hesitates, biting her lip. Lily nods. "You did. Tell me."

Sybill frowns. "Lily—"

"Tell me," Lily repeats sternly.

"I—" Sybill grimaces, then huffs and scoots out of Lily's lap, drawing her legs up to her chest, where she wraps her arms around her knees. "It wasn't much, alright? I didn't want to risk too much, so I took a look at the most recent file."

"What is it?" Lily grits out.

"The Prewetts," Sybill murmurs. "Fabian and Gideon. They're dead. Killed on orders from Riddle."

Lily takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Dorcas?"

"Still alive," Sybill says.

"Well," Lily replies, and that's as far as she gets.

Neither of them speak for a long time. Lily keeps smoking, ignoring the faint tremble to her fingers as she looks up at the treetops above them. It's a nice meadow, because Lily likes a decent setting to fuck in, and the inside of the Phoenix leaves much to be desired. A whole lot of grey, mostly.

An underground bunker called the Phoenix should be a bit less drab, in her opinion, but this has been her reality for the last five years. Metal walls and too many rules. Not much more

than a prison, really, if you sit down and think about it—and Lily sits down and thinks about it *a lot.*

The Order—those living in the Phoenix—consists of a lot of good people, at least. Most of them have been living this way their whole lives, unaware of the world outside. When you haven't had a taste of fresh air, you don't feel like you're suffocating underground, Lily has learned. She remembers the look on Sybill's face the first time Lily coaxed her outside with honey-coated words and heated promises in her soft touches.

Lily, who has had a taste of fresh air, constantly feels like she's suffocating inside the Phoenix. She feels trapped more often than she doesn't. It makes her itchy.

"Evans," comes the call from Kingsley through the radio.

"Fuck's sake," Lily snaps, sucking down the last bit of her cigarette before stubbing it out and diving for the radio with a scowl. "King, I've had *one* smoke."

"Not my problem, Red," Kingsley responds in amusement. "I'm supposed to be retrieving you from your room."

"What? Why?"

"You have two minutes."

"Shit," Lily blurts out, launching hastily to her feet as Sybill looks up at her with wide eyes. Lily holds her hand out, wiggling her fingers. "Come on, Sybill, time to go."

Sybill looks fit for crying. "Lily, if—if they find out—"

"They won't find out," Lily insists. "Well, they won't if you get a move on."

Groaning, Sybill takes Lily's hand and lets her tug her to her feet, complaining under her breath as Lily snatches her into a run. She's grumbling breathlessly about how she lets pretty, mysterious girls get her into trouble, as if she's not fully capable of getting into trouble on her own. She broke into *Dumbledore's office.* Really, she's Lily's favorite of all the women she's been with for that alone.

Lily admittedly enjoys the thrill of running to get back into the Phoenix, especially pushing a time limit. The severe lack of excitement in her life in the last five years makes it impossible *not* to enjoy this, honestly. She's grinning by the time she comes tumbling out of the hatch through the air vent in her room, Sybill right behind her.

First, Lily slots the vent cover back into place, then she dives for her pillow to dig into the pillowcase and find the small, near-invisible tear that she pushes her pack of cigarettes into. She smooths her pillow out, then sits down and grabs Sybill's wrist to drag her close in between her legs. Sybill looks startled, but she melts the moment Lily pulls her into a kiss.

Right on time, there's a knock on the door, only a brief warning before it swings open. Lily and Sybill break apart to stare at Kinglsey, Poppy, and Bones.

"And what if we were naked?" Lily declares immediately, glaring out at them.

Kingsley looks amused, but he turns away at the same time that an exasperated Poppy Pomfrey and a scowling Edgar Bones do. Bones would be scowling, though. Lily used to have a *thing* with his sister, Amelia, which didn't end well, so seeing her with Sybill likely irritates him.

"Ms. Evans, your recreational time is set between nine and eleven am," Poppy says with a sigh.

"Ms. Pomfrey, two hours simply aren't enough for all the…recreational things I get up to," Lily replies, smiling at Sybill, who chokes on a laugh that she pretends is a cough.

Bones scoffs and mutters, "If you're done working your way through half the Phoenix—"

"I wasn't, actually," Lily cuts in, "but I've made *quite* the progress. Don't sound so bitter, Bones. I'd give you advice on how to satisfy a woman, if you need it, and I'm a reliable source. Just ask your sister."

"Alright," Kingsley says smoothly, catching Bones when he starts to whip around. He holds him straight and looks over at Lily like *can you please behave?* "Sybill, if you would return to your room, please."

"Sure thing, King," Sybill replies eagerly, beaming at him.

Kingsley's smile turns gentle and warm as Sybill passes him. She has her arms wrapped around herself, blocking the paper clips on her shirt, and she wastes no time in beating a hasty retreat. Kingsley watches her go for a moment, and Lily is quite sure that he did see the clips, but he says nothing as he turns to focus on her again.

"Follow us," Kingsley murmurs.

Lily heaves a sigh, as if she's not burning with curiosity at the moment. "Yeah, alright. Where are we going?"

No one answers her as they lead her away, and she crosses her arms as they head through the compound. Curiously, they're not leading her towards the infirmary, where she works the mid shift from three pm until one am, replacing Arthur Weasley, who works from four am to three pm. They're both on call from one am to four am, and so are those that work on the shifts with them—assistants, mostly, because Arthur and Lily are two of the few healers the Phoenix has. There's Poppy, the leader of the infirmary, but she's also a field medic and has other responsibilities as well.

Lily's agitation with not being told anything melts away into genuine trepidation when she realizes that they're leading her to Dumbledore's office. She drops her arms and stands up straighter, sharing a brief look with Kingsley, who holds her gaze until he reaches the door.

He knocks three times with the heavy gargoyle-shaped knocker, and they all wait for a calm response granting them entry before they go in.

Immediately, Lily's eyes find the screen that's on the side wall. She only gets to watch the games while in the infirmary, because there's a screen there for the patients, which would usually be playing old films, but the only thing broadcasting on any screen during the games *are* the games.

On the screen are James Potter and Regulus Black. They're getting ready to leave the cave they settled into the previous night, neither of them speaking or looking at each other.

"Ms. Evans," Dumbledore greets, dragging Lily's attention to him. "Thank you for joining me. Have a seat."

"We interrupted her with Sybill Trelawney," Bones announces, sounding as if he's relishing in doing so.

"Ah," Dumbledore says, then hums. "Yes, thank you, Mr. Bones. I'd ask that you, Mr. Shacklebolt, and Ms. Pomfrey leave Ms. Evans and I alone."

Lily struggles not to fidget as the others file out, shutting the door behind them as they go. She's never been alone with Dumbledore, not even when she first arrived five years ago. He did visit her in the infirmary while she was healing, but there were people in the beds, so they weren't technically *alone.*

Albus Dumbledore is an older man—much older—with a long white beard and long white hair, and he wears half-moon glasses perched on his crooked nose. He's a man admired by many—calm and steady when addressing his people, even kind when requiring order within the Order. As the leader, he's the one everyone looks to for anything, and he's the one everyone respects and believes in. He holds the promise of one day winning the war for freedom, or so it's said.

So far, Lily hasn't seen much of this so-called *'war'.* Whatever war is taking place, it's fairly damn quiet. Dumbledore has been in power a long time, from what Lily knows. Around fifty

years, at the very least, and he's pushing eighty at seventy-four.

It shows. Not because of his hair, or because of his wrinkled, withered hands, or the aged softness of his voice—no, it's the gleam of knowledge in his eyes. They're wise. This is a man who knows things, who knows more than anyone else, who knows what no one has even dared to begin thinking about yet. Knowledge like that—it's dangerous. It's deadly.

"What do you think?" Dumbledore murmurs, turning slightly to incline his head towards the screen.

Lily flicks her gaze to it. Regulus Black is crouched down beside the pond, refilling his water. James Potter is watching him from a few steps away, hatchet in hand. They're both still not speaking, and they've healed really well, all visible wounds just thin lines that likely won't even scar.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Lily admits, ripping her gaze away to focus on Dumbledore again.

Dumbledore is silent for a beat, then he says, "Do you have an opinion on who will win?"

Lily frowns, her eyebrows tugging together as she stares at him. One thing she's always appreciated about the Order is the way the games are treated; they're seen as barbaric and utterly immoral, something that needs to be stopped at all costs, and *not* a form of entertainment to be speculated about. No one's asked her for her opinion on the games in five years, which she actually *likes,* so the fact that he is now makes her…uncomfortable, honestly.

"Um," Lily mumbles, clearing her throat. He keeps waiting, so she actually thinks about it, and it doesn't take her very long to form her honest answer. "Regulus Black."

"Hm. Regulus Black," Dumbledore says softly, tapping his finger to the desk as he looks at the screen. "Why?"

"Why do I think he'll win?"

"Yes."

Lily glances at the screen again, still frowning. "Well, he's undeniably skilled and willing to do what it takes to survive. He's smart, and he has James Potter with him, who is also a strong fighter and incredibly smart."

"Why not James Potter?" Dumbledore asks, looking at her, and Lily blinks. "Why don't you think he will win?"

"I—" Lily opens and closes her mouth, because she doesn't know. She doesn't have the answer.

"Love," Dumbledore murmurs. "It's because of love. Even unconsciously, love has its influence, Ms. Evans."

"I'm—I don't understand," Lily admits, which frustrates her. She doesn't like feeling stupid, or out of the loop.

Dumbledore's beard twitches with his smile. "Some would say that sacrifice is the strongest form of love. Do you agree?"

Against her will, Lily's mind turns to Remus. It hurts to think about him, as always, and a lump forms in her throat when she remembers his sacrifice. Him for her. His capture for her freedom, and here she is, locked away in an underground bunker while doing *nothing* with what he sacrificed himself for. They caught him, and they killed him for his crimes. Her crimes, too, but she got away. He made sure she did, and she sometimes wonders for *what?* For this? He's dead, and she's just sitting here, wasting the life he granted her.

"Yes, I agree," Lily rasps.

"James Potter has made his feelings for Regulus Black very clear," Dumbledore announces calmly. "So, that begs the question—one most don't dare to ask themselves. If, at the end, it is just them, who will win? But you have your answer before you even ask, don't you? Regulus Black will win, because James Potter will ensure it. Why?"

"Love," Lily whispers. "Sacrifice."

"And you knew this before you even thought to work out *why* you knew it," Dumbledore says. "We all know it, because to be human is to know love. That is how strong love is. It causes a sense of faith. Hope." He holds her gaze. "Power."

Lily swallows. "So, Regulus Black will win because of love."

"Yes," Dumbledore confirms simply. "Do you want to know the most devastating thing in this world is? The most destructive thing? It's not fear. It's not war. It's not pain, or loss, or fury. It's not even death."

"Then what is it?"

"It's love."

"Love," Lily repeats quietly.

Dumbledore hums. "The most powerful thing in this world is *love."* He glances back at the screen. "People will kill for it. People will die for it. But, most importantly, people will *fight* for it. Love is a dangerous, dangerous weapon if one knows how to wield it."

"And you do, I'm guessing," Lily declares boldly.

"I do," Dumbledore agrees without shame, focusing back on her again, and something passes in his eyes like a shadow that sends a chill down her spine. "Love is how I will win a war."

Lily presses her lips into a thin line. "How do you plan to do that, exactly?"

"You let me worry about that," Dumbledore replies without batting an eye. He turns and gently threads his hands together on the desk, focusing on her. "Do you know why I called you here today, Ms. Evans?"

"No," Lily grits out.

"Because you don't love anything," Dumbledore says, and she briefly stops breathing. "Everything you loved was taken from you. Your mother, father, sister, and best friend were all killed. You drift between your lovers here, but none of them matter to you, not really. You have friends here, but you don't let yourself be close to them, not genuinely. Five years, and you've refrained from forming one meaningful connection here, which I must assume is a conscious choice you've made. You love nothing, because you've decided not to."

Lily feels his words like a tiny slice into her skin, each one cutting deeper and deeper. She remains stiff in her seat, her whole body cold and a gaping emptiness in her chest. The reminder of her family, what they suffered because she got away, will forever set her heart on fire. *Mum, Dad, Petunia.* They suffered for her crimes, and sometimes she wonders how she lives with that knowledge every day.

"Love gives us purpose," Dumbledore murmurs, never breaking her gaze. It feels like he's looking through her, right down to her fucking soul. "It gives us *all* purpose, but without love, what is your purpose?"

"I don't know," Lily croaks.

"In this war, love is a weapon that will be wielded by all sides. Do you know how important it is to have soldiers that are immune?" Dumbledore asks.

"To love?" Lily asks sharply.

"To the destructive nature of love. I can win a war with that, and I can just as easily lose it *because* of that, so those that are unaffected by it are invaluable to me." Dumbledore inclines his head towards her. "You have nothing. No one to care about, no one to love, and no one to lose."

Lily works her jaw, balling her fists in her lap as she blinks harshly to try escaping the way her eyes sting. Dumbledore doesn't apologize, and she doesn't expect him to. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing you're not willing to give," Dumbledore informs her, leaning back in his chair. "I want to start training you to be a field medic. It will be some time yet before you find yourself in the field, because we have some time yet before the war makes itself known. It's coming, Ms. Evans, and when it does, I want you to be fighting on the front lines. Does that entice you?"

"Yes," Lily says instantly, almost gasping the word out in pure relief, because finally, *finally,* she won't be wasting Remus' sacrifice or the loss of her family. "I'll do it. I want to do it."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkle. "Yes, I thought you might respond like this, if for no other reason than because you're tired of escaping through the vents to go outside."

Lily freezes, feeling a sense of dread crawl through her. He knows. He *knows* that she's been going to the surface, and *how* she's been getting out. She could be put in solitary for that.

"I believe that will be all for now, Ms. Evans. We'll begin with you soon," Dumbledore says. "You're excused."

Lily's never left a room so fast in her *life.*

~•~

The games are a delicate balance. Sirius has always known that from the moment he became a mentor, because having an insight to what goes on behind the scenes taught him that. Most people assume it's like a machine made of steel, completely indestructible with no broken parts.

In all actuality, it's a web carefully weaved, made of gossamer material that could so easily fall apart. But that's the thing; you don't want it to fall apart, because if it does, people die.

"Eleven left now," Frank says, watching Irene and Mathias check the traps outside of the cave they're at with a furrow in his brow. They're his tributes, so of course he's concerned about any and all moves they make.

"And it's only day four," Emmeline murmurs, shaking her head. Juniper is still sleeping in the ground—and okay, Sirius *has* to ask, at this point.

"Did you teach Juniper to dig holes and hide in them?" Sirius blurts out, because he's genuinely curious.

Emmeline glances over at him, arching an eyebrow. "Actually, she came up with it on her own. Evan—" She halts, her throat bobbing, and Sirius' heart gives a pang because he doesn't doubt Evan's death hit her hard, too. In fact, Evan's death seems to have hit *a lot* of people hard, including Hallows, shockingly enough. "Well, he used to say something about climbing. No one ever thinks to look up, he always said, and one day, Juniper made the comment that no one ever thinks to look *down* either. Suppose she was right, in the end."

"Em," Frank says gently.

"Yeah, I know," Emmeline murmurs, despite the fact that Frank hasn't said anything. He doesn't have to. They all say the same things every year when they lose their tributes. She looks at Sirius steadily. "I just—I want to say that what your brother did for him was—it was appreciated. Stupid, yes, but it meant a lot to me, and I know I'm not the only one."

Sirius just nods, because he can't really say anything else. She's not thanking him, really, but she knows as much as he does how important it is to say these things to each other. When things really matter, leaving them unsaid in the moment often means they'll go unspoken forever, because there's always something else that happens next.

"How are mine doing?" Marlene asks, walking over with a glass in hand, which Sirius side-eyes in vague concern.

"Vanity is up and working on the bridge with Peter," Frank informs her, "and Hodge has set out with the death eaters. They're out for blood, predictably."

"Your blood," Emmeline mutters, nudging Sirius with her elbow. She grimaces apologetically when he shoots her a glare.

"That was brutal last night," Marlene says quietly, briefly pressing her shoulder into Sirius'. "With Mulciber, I mean. Evan, too. Sorry, Em."

"Thank you," Emmeline replies, equally quiet.

Sirius takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Well, on the bright side, James and Regulus are all healed up, so that's…" He swallows, then clears his throat. "Anyway, Lucius is out of line-up now that Avery and Mulciber are dead."

"And it's yours that killed them," Frank points out. He shoots him a curious look. "Malfoy will take that personally."

"I don't much care, honestly," Sirius says. "Let him. I'll rip his fucking head off if he tries anything."

Marlene snorts. "So much for family loyalty, even extended as it is."

"He's no family of mine," Sirius declares. "I don't give a toss if my cousin married him; I have *no* relation to that prick. It's no less than he deserves, in any case. I don't doubt he encouraged Avery and Mulciber to hunt down Regulus and James."

Emmeline gives a mean little smile. "Didn't work out so well for him, did it?"

"He's still here, though," Frank grumbles, inclining his head across the room where Lucius is talking to Dolohov and Yaxley, both who still have death eaters alive.

Sirius eyes him across the room in disdain, a bitter taste in the back of his throat that makes swallowing difficult. Most mentors stop showing up to watch when their tributes die, as do many sponsors that were planning to support those tributes and those alone, no one else, completely unwilling to support any other after they're dead. At least a third of the sponsors have ceased to show, now that Mulciber is out. A lot of people expected him to win, and maybe if James and Regulus weren't his competitors, he would have.

It's a bit fucked up for Sirius to feel satisfaction about that, even a bit of *pride,* but it's there anyway. He knows that's sick, in a way, because no part of him wants Regulus and James to have to suffer as they have. It's just that Lucius is a cruel bastard who brings home Victors more often than anyone else. One of his tributes doesn't win *every* year, but it's still a high rate. Lucius has been a mentor since before Sirius was even a tribute himself, but only by a few years. He won his games seven years before Sirius won his.

Lucius is the type of man who relishes in the games, always a mentor of death eaters. He's also the man that Narcissa ran off to marry when she left the district with Bellatrix in tow. There is absolutely no warmth between him and Sirius.

"Sirius," Marlene says, nudging him and nodding at the screen, which gains him immediate focus.

James and Regulus are moving through the forest in complete silence. They're going a bit slow because James has a mild limp, which will no doubt clear up by tomorrow. They haven't spoken one word to each other or looked at each other since waking up. Regulus looks blank, and James looks so fucking *sad.* Sirius wants to hold them both, just wrap them up in his arms and promise them that they're going to be okay, even when that's not a promise he can really keep.

He can track their position on the full map layout in the corner of the screen, and whether they know it or not, they're heading in the direction of the cave where Peter, Vanity, Mathias, and Irene are. If they keep going, they might reach it by tomorrow, so long as there are no interruptions.

Thankfully, the death eaters have no idea what their location is, and they're going in the opposite direction. The arena is one big loop, however, so they'd all eventually run into each other at some point. Maybe not today, though.

The games are a delicate balance, as established, and that comes with the knowledge that the gamemakers have their thumbs on each and every pulse in that arena. Every choice reflects that, and they decide what tribute may or may not have a bad day. They also decide what tribute needs a break.

Sometimes, if they push too hard, they'll end up pushing too far. Survival instincts are far more fragile than most people realize, and under too much strain, they *will* snap. Being consistently tormented can completely ruin the goal that the gamemakers are always striving for—make an entertaining game. It's not fun when the players are too broken to play.

So, it seems that Regulus and James are getting the space to breathe, because not being *allowed* to breathe will eventually suffocate them, regardless of their skills and motivations.

Unfortunately, James and Regulus are not taking this time to do anything entertaining. There's no flirting. No teasing, or talking, or touching. No stolen glances or further planning. There's absolutely nothing, and Sirius can't blame them. They have to be fucking exhausted; not only are they dealing with everything they've been through and had to do so far, but they still have to constantly think about surviving in the present. They have grief and pain and anger to deal with, along with basic survival needs like water and food.

With everything they're dealing with, that doesn't leave much room for their little love story that everyone is so eager to see.

"Day four," Frank announces with a deep breath. "Let's see how it goes, yeah? Good luck."

"It's going to be a long fucking day," Emmeline says with a world-weary sigh, and then they all split off at once.

While James and Regulus get their much needed break, as brief as it may be, Sirius goes to work.

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Dorcas looks up from her cup when she hears the knock at her door. Frowning, she dips the teabag a few more times before gently lifting it out and sitting it on the small plate her teacup is resting on. She draws her robe around her and gives a quick glance towards the screen on her way to the door.

Regulus and James haven't had much happen to them so far, but it's only mid-day, so that's subject to change at a moment's notice. Regulus has flung out one of his daggers to catch a bunny as it darted past, which he and James did stop to eat, and James didn't even protest or make one comment. He just sat down against a tree with his head ducked while Regulus handled the whole process. They haven't been speaking.

Dorcas wonders how Sirius is doing today, after the previous night. She's tempted to go check on him, but the thought of leaving her place right now is—too much. After learning about Gideon and Fabian, she left her suite and came home instead, which isn't uncommon for those that aren't mentors to do. Most design teams and handlers go home to watch the games at their own leisure, or with their family.

Dorcas will go back. She plans to; she just needs a little more time. As much as she wants to be there for Sirius, and for Marlene, she has this horrible knowledge she's carrying that she can't tell anyone, and she's working out how to handle it.

Sighing, Dorcas checks the belt on her robe one more time, making sure it's tied tight, then opens her door. On the other side is a short, curvy woman with red hair and startlingly bright blue eyes. She's a Hallow, just from the way she's dressed, and her hair is cut into a wavy bob.

"Dorcas Meadowes?" the woman asks.

"Can I help you?" Dorcas replies, eyebrows furrowed.

The woman tilts her chin up. "My name is Molly Prewett. You know my brothers, Fabian and Gideon. They work with you."

Shit, Dorcas thinks.

"Yes," Dorcas says softly. "Right, Molly, they mentioned you. It's lovely to meet you. Would you like to come in? I'm having tea, if you'd like to join me."

"Please," Molly replies with a fierce gleam in her eye that makes her polite request seem more like an order.

Dorcas smiles as warmly as possible and steps back to let Molly in, then takes the lead towards the kitchen. Her back turned to Molly, she lets her face twist through various emotions, then wrangles them all as much as she can. When they reach the kitchen, Dorcas immediately starts making Molly her tea, pouring out the boiling water and slipping the teabag inside before carrying it over.

"Sugar's just here," Dorcas murmurs, gesturing to the artistic tin holding the sugar cubes with a small pair of tongs to use to put them in their tea.

"Thank you," Molly says, and yet again, she speaks in a would-be polite way, except her gaze is sharp on Dorcas' face as she adds some sugar to her tea.

Dorcas is admittedly uneasy at the moment. "Like I said, it's lovely to meet you, Molly. Fabian and Gideon only had nice things to say about you. I should tell you, your brothers were incredibly talented, and I enjoyed working with them."

"Yes, they've always been very good at what they do." Molly frowns slightly, swallowing harshly, and then she looks down at her tea as she stirs it. There's a furrow between her brows, and her fingers are shaking, making the spoon clink against the ceramic. "They've always admired you, Ms. Meadowes."

"Dorcas, please," Dorcas mumbles, trying to ignore the lump that forms in her throat.

Molly looks up, holding her gaze. "They've always admired you, Dorcas, and your work. When they found out that they'd be working with you, they were…" Her face softens for the very first time, and she smiles. "They were *ecstatic.* Wouldn't shut up about it, really. It was their dream, you know."

"I admired them just as much," Dorcas tells her, and it's true. It's so true. Such brave, brave men. "They taught me more than I could ever explain."

"You're close to them, then?"

"I did get close to them, yes. I was their friend."

"Have you heard from them at all?" Molly asks.

Dorcas stirs her own tea with a frown, feigning thoughtfulness while Molly watches her. "You know, I can't say that I have. It's a shame. I'm assuming they went home when the—"

"They didn't," Molly interrupts sharply, taking her spoon out and sitting it down with a clink. She doesn't drink her tea; no, she braces her hands on the counter and stares Dorcas right in her eyes. "For one thing, they *wouldn't.* They would see their job through until the end. Gid and Fab always did. But I did check, just to be sure, and they didn't go home."

"Oh," Dorcas says, nodding. "Well, maybe we just haven't crossed paths, that's all. I've been home recently, so—"

Molly cocks her head, her eyes cold. "But that doesn't make any sense, Dorcas. I know which tributes Fabian and Gideon worked with, because they talked about them to me, and you've surely seen how rough those tributes have it in the games. I know it's hard to watch. Fab and Gid would reach out to check on you, at least, especially if you're their *friend."*

"I've been really busy," Dorcas murmurs calmly, lifting her tea to take a careful sip, trying to calm her racing heart and the pain that twists in her chest.

"Gideon and Fabian have been missing for *four days,"* Molly announces harshly, her voice a low hiss. Her whole body is shaking, and there are tears forming in her eyes. "Four days, Dorcas, and I haven't heard a word from them. *No one* has heard from them. You are, as far as I know, the last person who interacted with them."

"That may be so, but I don't have the answers," Dorcas replies stiffly, inwardly *begging* her to just let it go.

"Gideon left me a voicemail," Molly informs her, reaching in her pocket to pull out her cell. She sits it on the counter and holds Dorcas' gaze as she plays it.

"Hi, Molly," Gideon's voice filters through, and just hearing it feels like a blow to Dorcas' chest. *"I know the games are about to start soon, so you've got your cell off, but I just…"* There's a long beat of silence, just the sound of his breathing, and then he clears his throat. *"I just wanted to ring you up to check in and tell you I love you. Fabian and I—we love you, Molly."*

Dorcas feels like her heart is lodged the wrong way in her chest, all mashed up. He knew. Gideon *knew;* or, he suspected, at least. She can't work out where it went wrong, or why Riddle ordered the hit, but Gideon somehow saw it coming. That only makes it more tragic.

Dorcas takes another sip of her tea for the excuse to clear her throat, working to keep her expression neutral. "That's lovely. I'm not sure what you're implying—"

"Don't *lie* to me!" Molly bursts out, slamming her hand down on the counter so hard that the teacups rattle. Her eyes are full of tears and fury. "Gideon and Fabian don't ring me up to tell me they love me; they ring me up to tell me stupid jokes and tease me when I complain about my problems. That—" She points at her cell. *"That* was a message to specifically tell me they love me, and they wouldn't do that for no reason, Dorcas. *Something* happened to them, and you know what it is."

"I don't know anything," Dorcas denies, remaining calm, unwilling to escalate the situation.

"Then why have you been talking about them in the past tense, like they're already gone?" Molly rasps, and when she blinks, her tears fall.

Shit, Dorcas thinks once again. She's spent the last two days mourning Fabian and Gideon, overly aware that they're dead, and this is the worst way for it to manifest. An unconscious shift from *is* to *was,* because they are already gone.

When Dorcas has been silent for too long, Molly chokes out, "Tell me. Please just tell me. They're my *family,* Dorcas."

"I don't know anything," Dorcas repeats, her heart clenching in her chest, but she remains steady.

"You're lying."

"Molly, I'm not lying. I'm sorry about your brothers, alright? I really am, but I *don't* know anything."

"Yes, you *do,"* Molly snaps, and with that, she grabs her teacup and proceeds to launch its contents right at her.

Dorcas flings herself back with a shriek, because the tea scalds her skin. She crashes into her pantry door, hands flying up to cradle her face, cheeks burning. Due to this, she doesn't see Molly coming, so she's not at all prepared to be slammed back into the door, Molly's forearm pressing into her throat.

This is when Dorcas learns that she *can* throw a punch. It's not just a theory now, proven by the way Molly stumbles back with a groan from the force of Dorcas hitting her in the face. Even still, Molly is a woman scorned, driven by grief and the need for answers as well as closure, so she just keeps right on coming. In seconds, she's flinging herself forward to wrap both hands around Dorcas' throat, throwing her to the floor.

Gasping for air, Dorcas claws at Molly's arms as she climbs on top, *squeezing* at her throat until Dorcas is choking. The lack of air makes her brain *scream,* and no matter how hard she fights, Molly just holds her down—until, abruptly, she lets go.

"Tell me!" Molly bellows, glaring down at her with tears streaming from her eyes. "Tell me, or I swear I'll kill you!"

"Please," Dorcas croaks.

Molly's face twists, and she dives for Dorcas' neck again, audibly weeping. "Just tell me. Just —please just—"

"Th-They're dead," Dorcas chokes out on a wheeze, and Molly's hands instantly go slack around her throat. Dorcas sucks in deep, painful breaths, her chest heaving.

Molly looks stricken, her face sagging with immediate sorrow and grief. She shakes her head, making a small noise, and then she slumps right off of Dorcas to scoot back against the cabinets beneath the sink. In seconds, Molly is sobbing as she covers her face with both hands.

Slowly, Dorcas sits up, pressing her fingers to her tender throat, still shaking from the assault. Her heart is racing and terror has cold hands wrapped around her spine. She's never been so

close to—well, anything like that, honestly. Violence has only ever existed to her in theory, and she's not at all prepared for how it feels in reality.

It's more painful than she was expecting. Her hand throbs from where she hit Molly, and her head is fucking *pounding.* It hurts to swallow, and her throat is sore from the inside out.

And yet, Dorcas thinks the one in the most pain right now is Molly. She's sobbing like she's dying, just these horrible, raw sounds of pure agony. This is only part of what Dorcas was trying to save her from, and it makes her heart ache.

"I'm sorry," Dorcas rasps as she shuffles over and carefully wraps her arm around her. Molly instantly folds over into her arms, weeping into her shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Molly."

"No, no, no," Molly moans. "No, it isn't true. Please tell me it isn't true. Not them. Please, no…"

"I'm sorry," Dorcas says again, because that's all she can really say. "They were such good men. Brave, honorable men. They knew the risks, and they still chose to do the right thing. I know it's not fair, Molly, I'm sorry."

Molly lifts her head slowly, sniffling. "Risks? What risks?"

"I—" Dorcas grimaces. "They wouldn't want you involved. It's not—it isn't *safe,* do you understand? Don't keep pushing. Just let it go, please."

"My brothers are dead," Molly declares, and her voice cracks. Again, tears well up in her eyes, but there's a lot of anger and grief within them as well. "If you think I'm going to stop now, then you know nothing. *What risks?"*

Dorcas takes a deep breath, wincing at the pain it causes. Well, Molly is in this now, isn't she? Frankly, Dorcas doesn't see any other way around this, and all she can do is send a mental apology to Gideon and Fabian, who would have wanted their sister safe. But it's too late for

that. "Alright, let's get up so I can clean up the glass all over my floor, take care of my face, and throat. Then I'll tell you about the Order of the Phoenix."

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Sirius heaves a sigh of relief as he steps through the door to the suite. It has indeed been a long fucking day.

He's spent it doing exactly what he expected he would have to, smoothing over Regulus' reaction after Evan died. Most people seemed appeased by Sirius saying it was a response to his grief and the message was intended as a solidarity thing, but because of that and the lack of any interaction between him and James, the support for him has waned. Even James is sort of disappointing people at this point, because he's not flirting with Regulus like he was before. He's not talking at all.

Sirius' stomach tangles into knots with the thought. A quiet James is a cause for concern, because James is rarely quiet. Of course, he has his quiet *moments,* like when he's really invested in a book, or when he's briefly distracted by something shiny, or those random times when he'd get so deep in thought about something that he'd just fall silent because he's so focused. In general, though, James isn't really a quiet person.

It's just not a good sign. Sirius is worried that neither of them are going to manage to bounce back from what's happened so far, and that's unfortunately unacceptable, because there's still so much they have to do. The games aren't over yet, so giving up is *not* an option, not for either of them.

Thankfully, there's been a break. Regulus and James have been traveling all day, but they're taking their time, seeming to embrace the chance to just—adjust. It's a small breath of air in all this shit, and Sirius can't blame them for how they're using it. Sometimes, interacting with people is hard when your life is falling apart on all sides, and it doesn't matter who the person is. It can be someone you grew up with, or even the man you love, and it's still fucking impossible. Sirius understands.

As for Sirius, despite all the sweet-talking and the work he's put in today, he's had something of a break himself. Not having to see James and Regulus fight for their lives or come within inches of death has worked wonders on his nerves. It's his little breath of air after suffocating,

one he desperately needed. He's still fucking terrified at all times, but the break has left him basking in the lack of stress too high to handle.

The games are still on, of course, but there's not much happening. No one has died, and the gamemakers are wrapping the day up sooner than normal, dropping the temperature before the sun even sets.

It forces the death eaters to go back over the river, Juniper to dig herself a hole, and the others to settle into their cave. Regulus and James didn't find a cave this time, so they're camping outside next to a big boulder. It's mostly secluded, but it means they won't be able to light a fire through the night for very long without risking someone or something finding them, which forces them to huddle for warmth. Still, it could be a lot worse, and they're so close to the allies that are *still* hoping for James' return.

Sirius is surprised to see the screen off when he comes inside, because usually Remus is waiting for him to watch. He can hear distant voices from the kitchen, so he follows it warily.

"There he is," Pandora says warmly as soon as he comes in. She breaks out into a smile and pushes away from the counter, where she and Remus seem to be in the middle of making…a pan of brownies? Pandora moves over and immediately wraps Sirius into a tight hug. "Been waiting for you."

"Been missing you," Sirius replies softly, hugging her back as he flicks his gaze to the hologram screen in the corner of the room. Pandora has it set up for them, he's assuming, so they don't have to watch in the sitting room. On it, James and Regulus are passing water back and forth in complete silence while getting ready to settle in. Sirius rips his gaze away and leans back to look at Pandora. "How is your father?"

Pandora presses her lips into a thin line. "Not—not doing well, honestly. He insists he'll be fine, though, so he kicked me out and told me to get back to work. He knows how worried I've been for you."

"I'm sorry, Pandora," Sirius whispers, swallowing thickly. Her father is very sick, and has been since the previous year; she would usually stay with Sirius during the games full time, otherwise, but he knows how important it was for her to go check on him.

"No," Pandora assures him. "It's—well, the caretaker is handling him just fine. I'm a handler for you, for our tributes, so I should be here."

Sirius frowns. "If you need to—"

"Stop, Sirius. I want to be here. It's really fine," Pandora says with a heavy sigh.

"Well, if it makes you feel better, I'm glad you are here," Sirius declares sincerely, dipping in to kiss her cheek, pleased when she smiles.

Pandora beams at him. "Remus is making me brownies for my efforts, and my woes."

"Is he now?" Sirius flicks his gaze over to Remus, who gives him a tiny smile as he stirs brownie batter.

"I'm helping," Pandora adds cheerfully. Remus shakes his head behind her back, but there's humor in his eyes.

Sirius chuckles. "I'll help, too."

So, that's what they do. They all come together to make a pan of brownies, and they all clean up the dishes they use, and they all eat warm brownies with a scoop of ice cream when they're ready. Sirius doesn't finish his plate, because he's painfully, viscerally aware that Regulus and James are currently going without such luxury at the moment. In fact, throughout all of this, James and Regulus show up on the screen a few times (not very often, because they're not being 'entertaining'), and they're always just sitting in silence.

Sirius stares at his brownie and ice cream and wishes with all that he has in him that he could just—give it to them. So, yeah, his appetite practically vanishes, and he doesn't finish it.

Still, Sirius feels his chest ache and also go warm with the thought of James and Regulus sort of being here with him right now, even if they don't know it. They're as safe as they'll ever get in the arena, at least for now, and so Sirius feels like he can breathe easier. Of course, them being on a screen isn't really them being *here,* but it's…better than nothing.

If they were here, though, Sirius would nudge Regulus' once, twice, and then a third time until he finally looked over with an exasperated sigh. Sirius would cross his eyes and wiggle his eyebrows to make Regulus smile, like he used to when they were children, and Regulus would try so hard to fight it, but a smile would spread across his face anyway.

And James. Oh, James would be the heart and soul of all the joy and laughter they would all be having if he was here. A grin on his face, warmth in his voice, bouncing around and making them all crack up and tease each other. Tugging on one of Regulus' curls like he used to do when they were young, when he thought Sirius didn't notice, and it would make Regulus scowl instead of blush the way it did when he was a child. Chattering away to Remus, entertaining him with endless little fun facts, getting Remus comfortable with opening up one warm laugh at a time. Teasing Pandora, stealing her brownie when she's not looking, pretending he's innocent when she squints at him suspiciously. Breathing in perfect sync with Sirius, because they're always doing that, always breathing at the same time; even now, every time James inhales and exhales on the screen, Sirius matches him.

It's when he starts cleaning up with Pandora and Remus that it happens. He's wrapping the brownies individually so they can just grab them and eat them whenever they like, and also so Pandora and Remus can wash the pan. He's fighting with the thin plastic wrap when he sees Regulus hold up his finger, indicating for James to give him a minute before they actually curl up under the blanket together.

Their camp is already set up. They have a place to make a quick fire if they get too cold, all the tools within reach and ready. They've had water, but they'll need to refill it tomorrow when they find a source for it. They've had food—the rabbit earlier and also the berries that James had picked for them. So, they're safe, and they've had a relatively calm day, compared to all the ones before it.

Regulus is clearly leaving to take a walk around and make sure they're as secluded as they can get, just one last check that he takes seriously, because he has his dagger in hand. It comes from a sense of paranoia, Sirius knows; if it'll help him actually manage to sleep tonight, Sirius can't begrudge him that. It's clearly cold, though, because Regulus' breath billows out in front of him in a white cloud as he moves silently.

The camera cuts to James suddenly, who has his head tilted back as he looks up at the stars, whispering, "Sirius, I hope you had a better day than I did."

At the sound of James' voice, the kitchen goes silent. Sirius quickly wraps the last brownie and gives James his undivided attention, his heart clenching in his chest.

"It's, ah—well, I don't even know if you're seeing this, if they're showing it to you, but I just…" James swallows thickly and blinks rapidly up at the sky. "I miss you, you know. Maybe it's selfish of me, but I wish you were here. Not *here* here; just here to talk to, I guess. I—I really wish—" He halts, clearing his throat, and then his voice gets softer. "Do you remember when…? I mean, do you remember all the things I said to you? All of it was true, you have to know that, but I—I feel like a hypocrite, because it's—it's so much heavier than I could have ever imagined. I, um, get it now."

Sirius is pretty sure his heart breaks. He has to brace his hands on the counter to keep his legs from buckling, because he *knows* what James is saying. What he isn't saying, more accurately. How hard all this is, how heavily it weighs on you; he gets it now. Sirius can't think of anything more tragic.

James releases a weak laugh, sniffling. "Yeah, I get it now. You are so—you're the strongest person I've ever known, Sirius, and I'm so fucking sorry you had to be. You say—you've *always* said you admire me, but you really don't know how much I've always admired you, especially now." He takes a deep breath, slowly letting it out. "But it's—it's going to be okay. It *will* be. I'm still in this, alright? The plan is still the same. I'm just… I was just having it a little rough, but I'll keep trying. I'm not giving up. Neither is he. We're still in this; we're still here."

Sirius' eyes flutter shut, those words washing over him like a balm to his soul. It's like being gently electrocuted, tenderly shocked awake, so much purpose and relief making something inside him vibrate. He feels—driven, and also soothed. When his eyes peel open again, James is smiling more sincerely.

"I really, *really* hope you've eaten something today. Something like…so good. Like, mouth-wateringly good," James says, then groans quietly. "I'm thinking pornographic thoughts about

cake right now, and you can't judge me for it, because I have every right. Did you see what I had today? Fucking *rabbit."*

Sirius doesn't realize he's crying until a wet laugh bursts out of him, a little choked and hitched, his shoulders bowing in as he raises the back of his wrist to his mouth. It's so strange how he suddenly becomes aware of the tears spilling out of his eyes, despite the fact that this might be the best he's felt in days. Acceptable tears. James *always* makes things better.

"Just a cute, little bunny going about his day," James says solemnly, heaving a sigh. "It's alright, though. It's—"

"James, who the fuck are you talking to?" Regulus snaps in a low hiss, abruptly stepping around the boulder.

James jolts, hand flying up to his chest. "Fuck, Regulus, don't *do* that. You nearly scared the piss out of me."

"Well, if you were more alert, that wouldn't happen," Regulus says coldly. "Why are you talking? Shut up."

"If you *must* know," James mutters, "I was talking to Sirius."

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "About?"

"Er, cake, mostly," James mumbles sheepishly.

"Cake," Regulus repeats flatly.

James clears his throat. "I could really go for some cake right now. What about you?"

"Stop talking, James," Regulus says sharply, moving over to snatch up the blanket so he can climb underneath it.

"Shit, Reg, you're *freezing.* Come here, love."

"Don't touch me."

"A bit fucking difficult to do when we're *cuddling,* you utter bastard. Stop being stubborn and —ow! Hey, *watch it."*

"You watch it."

"Then where do I put my hands?" James complains, the mounds of their bodies shifting under the blanket as Regulus visibly struggles to not be close to James even while needing to be close to James to be warm.

Regulus huffs. "Stuff them down your pants for all I care."

There's a pause, then James says, "Or I could—"

"Don't," Regulus snaps.

"I'm just saying, maybe you'd appreciate it if I put them down yours instead," James teases.

"Another word out of you, and I'll put *my* hands down yours just to rip your fucking cock off," Regulus hisses, then makes a low noise of fury as he essentially burrows himself as close to James as he can get, clearly furious about his circumstances.

James falls silent at the threat, as any smart man would, but he seems mostly appeased by the fact that he's holding Regulus now. Sirius exhales slowly in relief, because yeah.

Yeah, they're still in this. They're still here. They're still trying. Somehow, they're going to bounce back and keep going, and this is the first step. They remain quiet, and Sirius watches his brother fall asleep slowly, fitfully, in his best friend's arms.

For now, they're safe, and that's enough.

It's not long before the camera cycles through all the other tributes and Rita comes on the screen. Pandora immediately moves over to blip out the hologram, releasing a deep breath as she turns with a small smile.

"Alright?" Pandora asks him.

"Yeah," Sirius whispers, surprised to find that, for tonight, it's mostly true. "Yeah, I'm alright."

Pandora nods. "Good. Well, I'm in a desperate need of a shower and some sleep. The brownies were good, Remus, thank you. Sirius, I'll see you in the morning, yeah?"

"Of course," Sirius says.

"Goodnight, Pandora," Remus murmurs as Pandora gathers her hologram projector and returns the sentiments before leaving the room with a wave.

Sirius breathes for a little bit, then turns around to find Remus leaning up against the counter behind him, his hands resting by his hips, leaving the target of his torso wide open.

Sirius attacks it.

In the least violent way possible, Sirius slams into Remus' chest and practically melts against him with a deep exhale, his eyes sinking shut. Remus needs no time to catch up; he has his arms around Sirius in seconds, holding him like he was born to. For a long time, they just hold on and breathe.

Sirius doesn't cry. He feels—good. As good as he can feel in his situation. He knows it won't last, and he wants to make the most of it. Just…for right now, for tonight, he has relief and hope coursing through him, and he wants to hold onto the feeling. He wants to hold onto Remus, and be held in return, and he lets it happen. Lets himself have it.

"Hi," Remus whispers.

"Hi," Sirius whispers back.

"Good?" Remus asks, his lips moving against Sirius' temple as he speaks.

"How do you always know?" Sirius whispers, tilting his face closer, hoping to feel more of Remus' mouth. He pressed kisses to his temple and cheek last time, and Sirius wants it again. He wants that, and more.

"I'm assuming you're essentially granting yourself the things you want because you're in mildly better spirits," Remus explains, because he's so smart, and he has Sirius all figured out already. *How* he's managed this, Sirius doesn't know.

"Pretty much," Sirius admits, because now is the best time. There's no guilt for right now. No stress. Maybe it makes him weak, but he wants to bask in it as much as he can. Or maybe that just makes him human. Sometimes, he forgets that he is.

Because Remus always, *always* knows, he gently presses kisses down the side of Sirius' face. Sirius' breath hitches helplessly, his heart thumping heavily in his chest, his entire body fully just tingling by the time Remus' lips graze his jaw. Remus pulls back slowly, looking at him, *studying* him. Sirius sees his eyes flick down to his mouth, then right back up.

Sirius sways forward like a worm on a hook.

Remus' lips twitch.

"Do you need to brush your teeth?" Remus teases, lifting his hand to gently card it through Sirius' hair as he leans in.

"Shut up. I panicked, alright?" Sirius mumbles, a little breathless because of Remus' proximity. "Are you—I mean, are you going to kiss me? Is that allowed?"

"Is that—" Remus chokes on a laugh and leans back to stare at him like he's something amazing. "Sirius, *what?* What does that even mean? 'Is that allowed'?"

"It has just hit me, very belatedly, that this was maybe a bit ridiculous of me to say—"

"A bit?"

"—but, in my defense, I temporarily forgot that it's quite literally not allowed for you, considering your position, but also really acceptable while you're in the suite, should you so wish," Sirius continues to explain, in a ramble. "Not that you have to, obviously, but if—if that was something you...wanted to do, then of course you could. Just—I mean—"

"Sirius," Remus says, amused.

"It's—I only mean it's your choice to do it if you want, or not if you don't. Not—I'm not saying—well, you know, you have that freedom here. With anyone." Sirius pauses briefly. "Wait."

Remus tucks his lips in. "Yes, do go on. I would *love* to hear how you talk yourself around that one."

"Um," Sirius says, frowning. "Well."

"Waiting," Remus reminds him.

Sirius frowns harder. "I don't like it."

"No?" Remus arches an eyebrow. "So, my freedom doesn't extend past the borders of what *you* like? I can only live in the perimeters of what pleases you, is that it?"

"I—no, of course not. You can do whatever you want, as I've said many times before," Sirius mutters, "but I should tell you, if you kiss anyone else other than me, I'm going to be terribly jealous."

Remus' eyebrows fly up. "Oh, just right to it. No talking around that one at all. I barely even got to fuck with you."

"I'm learning."

"I'm oddly proud?"

"Is that—" Sirius pauses, chewing on the inside of his lip, then he blows out a deep breath. "Is it...too much? To feel—to be that way when we're—when this is…" He takes another second and feels his eyebrows tug together. "To be honest, I don't even know what *this* is. What we are."

"What we are," Remus echoes, his voice softening. "I'd say what we are is tragically inevitable and woefully pointless."

Sirius feels like he was just struck. Like *Remus* just struck him. Well, shit, that hurt more than he was expecting. Oh, he's in deep, isn't he? "Pointless. We're...pointless?"

"Reality has never felt the need to be kind," Remus says gently, looking so very sad. "Sirius, we are irrefutably barreling at full speed towards something, but we can't get anywhere. We'll go nowhere. Tell me you know that."

"I don't know that," Sirius croaks.

Remus sighs. "This is my life, Sirius. My servitude to the Hallow is—that's my future. I can't offer you anything else, and I won't try to pretend otherwise. In less than a week, you'll leave the Hallow to go home, and I'll still be here."

"I—I did know that," Sirius confesses, even if he hasn't really allowed himself to think about it. He's had enough to be fucking upset about, hasn't he?

"All that we do here, it means something. Our unavoidable conclusion doesn't take away from that," Remus murmurs, pulling his hand back to cup Sirius' cheek. "We are *something,* but we can't be everything. I—I do wish that we could be. Or I wish we could at least try. If it's easier to be nothing, because we can't be everything, then I understand."

Sirius breathes for a moment, then says, "I don't think I can be nothing with you."

"Is that so?" Remus asks, and it's so soft it's nearly a croon.

"I feel too much," Sirius confesses in a whisper. He exhales shakily. "I—I do have to come back every year, you know. I can bribe the right people to get you assigned to my suite every year, Remus. If—if that's something you'd want."

Remus hesitates for a long moment, lips parting, and then he looks pained. "I can't ask for that, or even expect it. Sirius, you can—you can have a life, one I can't give you. You can have someone who doesn't already belong to other forces out of our control. Someone you can see more than a few weeks out of the year. I can't give you everything, but someone else *can."*

"I'd take being something with you over being everything with anyone else," Sirius tells him.

"Oh, now why would you say that?" Remus breathes out, like he's just been punched.

"It's just the truth," Sirius says softly.

"I told you to warn me," Remus whispers, then slips his hand further down to cradle Sirius' jaw, the only warning he gives before he dips in and kisses him.

Just like that, Remus kisses him.

It's tentative, a little slow, not deep at all. He's being careful, and Sirius' mind has gone blank. All thoughts come to a screeching halt, and he's just frozen in place, not doing anything. He can't help it, because *Remus is kissing him.* Every cell in his body is vibrating at a frequency that's a little concerning, actually, as if he's about to spontaneously combust on the spot. His nerves are pinging all at once, lighting up and flooding him with an overwhelming sense of *everything.*

Sirius doesn't kiss him back, mostly because the whole world seems to have stopped for a moment, and he hasn't the faintest fucking idea what he's meant to do with that. The last time he kissed anyone, or was kissed by anyone, was ten years ago. He doesn't remember if it felt like this; he doesn't really remember it at all, because his memory is shit.

Remus pulls away, careful, and Sirius doesn't remember closing his eyes, but he opens them now to see Remus staring at him cautiously. "Should I not have done that?"

"No," Sirius croaks. He releases a shaky breath, not entirely sure if there's enough oxygen getting to his brain at the moment. He's a little worried he's going to pass out here in a second. "If—I mean, if you like, you—you could do it again."

Apparently, Remus would like, because he does it again after only one pause. Just ducks back in and kisses him a second time, as gentle as the first. Sirius is a bit more prepared for this one, so he tilts his face up into it, letting it wash over him how much he likes it. Oh, but he really likes it. Remus' lips are soft, and he slides one hand down from Sirius' cheek to cup the side of his neck, warm fingers brushing over very sensitive skin. Vaguely, Sirius wonders if Remus can feel the harsh fluttering at the pulse in his throat; his heart is *racing.*

Remus doesn't pull away this time, and Sirius finally kisses him back, still ridiculously pliant, yet helplessly curious for more. There's a moment where it's just the tender brush of mouths, warm pressure pushing in and then alleviating before coming right back. It's almost a tease, and Sirius sways eagerly into the kiss, one hand reaching out mindlessly to settle on Remus' side. He keeps his touch light, trying so very hard not to do anything that he shouldn't.

Then Remus' hand that's still on his cheek pushes back into his hair, and there's the first hint of tongue, just a small, hot swipe along Sirius' bottom lip, and all of Sirius' thoughts of being careful promptly evaporate on the spot. His hand clamps down on Remus' side, fingers digging in slightly as he helplessly rocks forward, seeking more. This seems to please Remus, because he releases a quiet hum of approval against Sirius' mouth and kisses him deeper, now with the added bonus of tongue that Sirius is very much in favor of.

Gradually, Remus goes from kissing him to *really* kissing him, and Sirius can't actually describe the difference between the two, but there is a shift. There's more tongue, for one thing, and the whole mood has changed. It's instinctive the way they're both coming closer together, drawn in naturally as the world around them falls away—the cause behind every bit of distance they've adhered to with one another. It's gone, just like that, and Sirius isn't sad to see it go in the least.

It's like something in Sirius just—snaps. Or maybe it clicks into place. Or maybe it's both, a break that has to be reset, a boundary shattering just to be built anew somewhere else. Whatever it is, he's shaking all over and unable to stop himself from curling into Remus, sliding trembling hands up his chest to wrap arms around his shoulders, pressing them as close together as they can get. Remus responds in kind, kissing him harder, deeper, with more urgency.

But it slows again. With effort. Mostly Remus, because Sirius is currently *gone* on all levels. Remus pulls away, letting them calm as he rests their foreheads together.

Yeah, Sirius is never coming back from this. He's ruined. All that worrying that it'd be him, and it turns out to be Remus. If anyone is in shambles, it's Sirius. Just from one kiss. One taste.

Sirius' eyes flutter open so he can look at Remus, and he thinks, *is it too soon to be sure I love you?*

"What we are…" Remus pulls back slightly and slides his hand forward to cup Sirius' jaw, gently dragging his thumb over Sirius' bottom lip. "What we are is something. We're something, Sirius."

"As long as we're not nothing," Sirius whispers.

"No, never that," Remus whispers back, reassuring him, and he lets Sirius tug him back into his arms. In silence, they lean into each other and hold on.

It's a long time before they let go.

Chapter End Notes

IF YOU WANT TO SKIP THE VIOLENCE, THE SCROLL PAST WHERE DORCAS APOLOGIZES TO MOLLY AND SAYS SHE DOESN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT GIDEON AND FABIAN!!!!

if you just want the warning: molly stops by dorcas' place to basically interrogate her about gideon and fabian, looking for answers. dorcas repeatedly lies to her, and in her grief and desperation, molly attacks dorcas. she throws hot tea at her face, and dorcas punches her, and then molly pins dorcas to the floor and briefly chokes her while demanding answers. she immediately stops the moment dorcas admits that fabian and gideon are dead.

for those of you who have finished the chapter...

LILY LILY LILY!!! LILY MY BELOVED!!!! you all have no idea how long i have been waiting to share this chapter, because we finally get to see her. and we have confirmation that she will indeed live!!! LILY IS ALIVE AND SHE IS SAFE!!!

she is also...Dealing With A Lot, clearly. yes, lily is a total rule-breaker, and she's out there sweeping every woman in her age range off their feet, unapologetically and with no shame. a girlboss!!! not letting herself have any meaningful connections in the last five years out of grief, less girlboss of her, but it's valid!

dumbledore.... that man. oh, That Man. i can't really get into depth about him yet without spoiling anything, but there is So Much going on with that man. can't wait to hear everyone's theories!!! also, if he could leave my girl lily alone, that would Be Great. but nooo, of course not, he's decided to Put Her On The Frontlines, whatever that means. we'll see more on that later, i assure you. it'll be a while, but. well, at least now you know she's alive and safe and won't die!!! awful that she believes remus is dead, though :(wonder how she's so sure about that...

(also, side note, kingsley and sybill are gems, i love them so much!!!)

okay, next we got a brief moment with all the mentors, which i think was nice. it was exciting to get to show more of frank and emmeline, who we haven't seen much about just yet. we'll see more of them later.

then you've got dorcas, as well as molly!!! a tense, fraught first meeting, admittedly, but a necessary one. you have to understand where they both were coming from, in this situation. molly knew her brothers were missing and had a feeling that something awful had happened to them, due to gideon's voicemail, and she was desperate and terrified, which made her lash out. meanwhile, dorcas was lying to molly to attempt to protect her and keep her from getting involved, because she thought fabian and gideon would want their sister safe; she was trying to do the right thing.

so, it was one of those things, like, they weren't fighting/having issues because they actually had a problem with each other—they just were in a very shitty, tense situation. we will indeed see molly again!

moving along, we got pandora back!!! now we know why she left to begin with; her father is sick, sadly, but she's back for good now!!! pandora my beloved <3

also that whole scene between james and sirius? heartwrenching, but like, in a good way??? regulus and james still aren't doing well, obviously, but we'll see more of them the next chapter. at least they got a day to just...rest/breathe.

finally, wolfstar!!! oh, wolfstar my loves <3 THEY KISSED!!! i mean, there was a bit of angst bc of their situation. quite literally star-crossed lovers, in this case. like, the whole thing about them being pointless? devastating. and yet they still made the conscious choice to choose each other anyway??? im throwing myself at walls. i adore them so, so much.

tragically inevitable and woefully pointless... so, wolfstar in canon, basically? but never nothing. never that.

alright, let me do numbers:

tributes remaining: 11
tributes who have died as of this chapter:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
eight unnamed/unknown others

hope you all enjoyed. as always, thank you all so much for the support and lovely comments. i genuinely can't express what it means to me <3

Full Circle

Chapter Notes

hello, hello! hope everyone's having a good weekend!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to animal death (because of the whole arena thing, and it's brief, and it's not described in explicit detail)
-references to death/murder
-discussions of dissociative amnesia (just an honest, open conversation about it)

and that's it! enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus knocks on Sirius' door without a moment of hesitation.

Just raises his hand, by his own choice, and knocks. No fear, no worry, no restraint. His inner restrictions have been clipped away, and he feels really, *really* good about it.

It doesn't take Sirius very long to open the door, and then there he is, standing in place with bright eyes and damp hair. He looks more rested than he has in days, though the bruises under his eyes from the lack of overall sleep remains, even if they've faded a bit overnight. He's gorgeous, of course, and the first thought Remus has is that he would like to kiss him.

This is…probably rude, honestly, but the thought persists anyway, wild and defiant and wanting. No hello? *Get it together, Lupin,* he thinks, but in his defense, he now knows what it's like to have Sirius' mouth against his own. His lips are so, so unbearably soft. Remus is obsessed already, after one kiss.

"Hi," Sirius breathes out, fidgeting with the doorknob mindlessly as he looks right at Remus with a flush steadily rising in his cheeks.

"Hi," Remus responds, lips curling up.

"I was—I mean, I've been up. Awake. I just had a shower. I wasn't avoiding you," Sirius blurts out.

Remus arches an eyebrow. "I didn't think you were. Why would you be avoiding me?"

"Do you remember last night?" Sirius asks, his voice strained.

"Hm," Remus hums, lips twitching again. "Last night… Last night… We watched the games, then we made brownies... Yeah, I remember."

This doesn't make Sirius smile or blush, like Remus was expecting it to. Instead, he looks… uncomfortable, or maybe anxious and vaguely upset, or all three. "Remus, you—um, just don't—don't fuck with me about...memories. I have this—I have memory issues, so it's—complicated."

"Memory issues," Remus repeats, a surge of guilt rising within him in an instant, because he *was* fucking with Sirius. He had assumed that Sirius' reaction yesterday and the starting day of the games was something of a trauma response. He wasn't aware that it was a common thing, a recurring problem in day-to-day life, even on good days. Or, mostly good days.

"It's not—" Sirius heaves a weary sigh. "It's not from my time in the arena. Well, it is, but not physically. Like, it's not from a head injury or anything. I mean, I have a lot of different issues I accumulated from the arena, and most of them affect my mind more than my body. I just—sometimes, I sort of...blink out of existence, it feels like, and I can't remember anything that happened while I was gone. My body carries on, but I'm not *present,* really. Like you said, when it seemed like I was gone for a little while; that's because I *was."*

"Oh," Remus says softly, his heart clenching. He knew, or he could guess, but he didn't have all the details before this. "Is that—are there triggers for it?"

"Sometimes, yeah," Sirius admits. "Could be a form of defense, I think, because it can happen when I'm...really upset, or angry, or stressed. Too much of it to handle, and my brain just sort of—blocks it all out. But sometimes, no, it just happens. Nothing I can really do about it, honestly. It used to be much worse when I was younger, so it's gotten easier to live with, but it's still—well, it's never going away."

"You don't get the memories back?" Remus asks.

"No. Never," Sirius tells him quietly. He takes in a shuddering breath and starts fiddling with his shirt. "My memory is pretty shit. It's really spotty, especially before the games, and I barely remember my first year *after* the games at all. The games themselves—of course I remember them, every single second, which is just—" He scoffs. "The one thing I'd *like* to forget, and it's what I remember the most."

Remus grimaces. "That's…"

"Fucked up? Bad luck? Yeah, I know." Sirius tosses up a hand, looking agitated, and he has every right to. "Anyway, memory is a complicated, delicate sort of thing for me, so… And, well, sometimes I have really happy memories that aren't—they're not real, or I can't be sure they are, or they're really disjointed and out of order. Who knows what the fuck my brain is doing, honestly? So, if—if I have really, *really* good memories that feel too good to be true, I...tend to doubt them."

"I see," Remus says quietly, aching for the man across from him. The man who doesn't deserve this. No one deserves this, but Sirius… Oh, it's breaking Remus' heart. It makes him want to get a hold of every person who had a hand in hurting Sirius and fully just—rip them apart.

Sirius clears his throat. "Right, so I have this really very good memory of last night that I'm desperately hoping I didn't just dream up in my head. Please tell me we actually kissed."

"Yes, we did. It was lovely," Remus tells him, and tension eases out of Sirius' shoulders instantly. His eyes absolutely light up, and then there's that grin of his, the one that nearly turns Remus into a puddle each time he sees it. As sad as it is that Sirius had to ask, it's sort of sweet that he gets to be this happy about it a second time. He was this visibly happy the first, too.

"Brilliant!" Sirius declares with genuine delight, like he really is an outside audience having a thrilling theory confirmed and ceaselessly pleased to be right about it. Remus has never seen something so simultaneously tragic and adorable all at once. Sirius gives him a playful sultry look, and perhaps his 'smoulder' is meant to be a joke, but it looks...unfairly good, actually. "Was it as good as I remember?"

"It was exactly as good as you remember," Remus assures him, amused when Sirius grins wider and pretends to bow.

"Thank you, thank you," Sirius says grandly, as if he's winning an award and giving his acceptance speech. "I'd like to thank Mary Macdonald, my pillow, the side of my hand, and James Potter's cheek that time I licked him to assert my dominance and stake my claim when I was thirteen and Zachary Zilloway dared to call James his best friend."

Oh, he really did give an acceptance speech. This idiot. Remus huffs out a weak laugh and covers his face with his hand, so helplessly smitten that it's pathetic. "You *licked* him?"

"Like a dog, just right up the side of his face, then stared directly into Zilloway's eyes until he was so uncomfortable that he literally just left," Sirius says cheerfully.

"And what did James have to say about this?" Remus asks in amusement as he drops his hand.

Sirius chuckles. "He thought it was hilarious."

"Of course he did," Remus says. "You're both ridiculous."

"I believe his exact words were *oh, just piss on me next time, why don't you?* And then I told him not to challenge me, because I absolutely would. And then he dared me to do it the next time, and I *would have,* mind you, but Zilloway got a new best friend a week later. James says he was unfaithful, but I like to think he knew I had defeated him," Sirius explains with a shrug.

"Why does that not surprise me?" Remus mutters.

"In my defense, I was only thirteen." Sirius' smile slips a bit, his eyebrows furrowing. Then he frowns. "I think. Or maybe twelve? I don't really—I mean, I know we were young. I do know that. Ah, it doesn't matter, really. You get my point."

Remus offers him a gentle smile. "I do, yeah." He pauses, then takes a deep breath. "Can I… ask? If you're uncomfortable talking about it, of course we don't have to. I just—"

"No, it's fine." Sirius clears his throat. "Ask away."

"It's just…" Remus trails off, trying to figure out how to word what he wants to say. "Well, what would *you* like me to do? When it happens, I mean. You just—carry on as usual, so I suppose I'm asking how you'd like for me to help."

Sirius blinks. "Oh. Well, I—don't know, honestly. I mean, before you, no one ever realized I was…gone. Because, like you said, I just carry on, so it's hard to notice."

"Okay," Remus says. "If there's anything you *don't* want me to do, you can tell me that as well. I mean, I wouldn't do anything anyway, really, but you get my point."

"Yeah, I know. It doesn't bother me," Sirius tells him. "I mean, well, obviously it bothers me that I'm just forgetting shit all the time against my will, but that's not what I meant. Just, it doesn't bother me that it happens around you, or however you respond to it. I trust you."

He says it so flippantly, so casually, like it's a fact that's set it stone, one everyone should know already, not even a big deal. *He* clearly doesn't seem to think this is a big deal at all, not even batting an eye about it, like he's known it forever.

Remus feels his heart swell until it almost *hurts,* like it might fucking explode. He's not aware of how he's going to reply to this until the words are already tumbling from his mouth in a breathless rush. "Please tell me you've brushed your teeth already, because I would very much like to kiss you again."

Sirius breaks out into a grin, stifling a laugh, and then he reaches forward to grab Remus by his collar and slowly, oh so slowly, reels him in. He teases, "You're in luck; my teeth are, in fact, brushed," and then tugs Remus in a kiss to prove it.

There's no hesitation this time. Sirius goes for it eagerly, like he wants it just as much as Remus does. He cups Remus' jaw and winds his other hand into Remus' hair, kissing him and kissing him and kissing him so deeply that Remus sort of loses track of…everything, honestly. Anything that's not Sirius in his arms and Sirius' mouth against his own just *does not matter.*

Remus pulls Sirius closer to better feel him, and he's so—fuck, he's just perfect. Everything about him is wonderful; the heat of his mouth, the soft feeling of his hair, the shape of him as he leans forward to press them closer together. There's the soft drag of Sirius' tongue, experimental, and then he's making a quiet noise into the kiss as he turns mindlessly to push Remus up against the door. Remus goes willingly, already distracted by his hand in Sirius' hair and the feeling of Sirius' teeth nipping at his bottom lip, testing, exploring.

It's almost—novice? Like he's not entirely sure what he's doing, what he enjoys, or what he doesn't…so he's figuring it out. Remus doubts that's true, but he can admit that he likes how thorough Sirius is, taking the time to make the kiss really, *really* good. It's mind-blowingly good, so his efforts are *not* wasted. The longer they do it, the more settled into it Sirius becomes, and Remus is more than happy to stay right here and let Sirius take his time to do whatever he wants.

However, Sirius' bottom lip is eventually too tempting to ignore, and he just *needs* to feel it between his teeth. Actually, he needs to do a lot of things, and he sets out to do them because Sirius is *letting him.* In fact, he seems on board and in full support, if the soft moan that escapes him and the way he curls into the kiss are anything to go by. He's so, so responsive; reacting to it all like he's never felt it before, like Remus himself is introducing him to what it is to feel good. Remus knows that's not possible, but he relishes the feeling anyway.

The kiss breaks as Sirius sucks in a deep breath, his fingers flexing in Remus' hair, a shudder rippling through him as he takes a second to breathe. He's panting. Remus chuckles, low and warm, then ducks his head and mouths along Sirius' jaw, heading right for his neck.

"Oh, that's—mm, that's really—" Sirius cuts himself off with a choked noise, his head falling back as Remus apparently finds a sensitive spot. Sirius must *really* like it, because he arches closer with a muffled groan.

Remus pulls back minutely, with a truly impressive amount of patience. "I shouldn't do that too much. You bruise so easily."

"Don't care. Do it," Sirius whispers, tugging on Remus' hair.

"People will see," Remus warns. "They'll come up with their own conclusions and make assumptions—

"Let them," Sirius cuts in breathlessly. "I don't care what anyone thinks when they look at me. Don't let that stop you, because it's certainly not about to stop *me."*

"No one will know. They'll look at you and think you've gone to bed with some sponsor; they'll look at the marks and be jealous of some made-up rich person in their head. Some people will even claim that it's them, but no one will know. No one but you, when you look in the mirror," Remus murmurs, giving in and dragging his mouth back to Sirius' neck. He starts slowly, humming when Sirius practically vibrates against him. "And me. I'll know, too."

"Yes, yes, yes," Sirius chants, his voice pitched high, and he sounds like he's just heard the best news of his life. At this moment, Remus thinks he could get Sirius to agree to absolutely anything. He's so eager. So *earnest.*

Remus does it on purpose then, and does it *with* purpose, too. Single-minded focus. He leaves marks on Sirius' throat, up and down the side, high and low. Throughout, Sirius breathes hard and gasps and hisses between his teeth, and Remus closes his eyes to bask in the beautiful sounds of him. Sirius squirms against him, tugging restlessly on his hair, so Remus drops both hands to his waist to hold him still.

Sirius proceeds to curse under his breath and slam his free hand against the door right next to Remus' head, over his shoulder, and Remus reflexively jumps a little and pulls back to make sure Sirius is alright. Sirius groans and says, "Sorry, sorry, I'm—shit, I'm sorry. That was—I just wasn't expecting this to feel so good. Sorry. Don't—you don't have to stop, I'm fine. I am *so* fine right now, Remus."

"Okay," Remus says, stifling a laugh. He wrinkles his nose playfully and leans in to bump it against Sirius', earning a soft huff of laughter. "Just don't break the door. Or your hand."

"I'll do my best," Sirius mumbles, sounding winded.

Remus grins at him and teases, "What, no past lover ever made it good for you before?"

"Um." Sirius clears his throat. His pupils are blown and his face is already flushed, but Remus can tell when he's blushing from being flustered, rather than riled up. He shifts a little and gives Remus a weak smile. "Well, that's the thing. I've never *had* past lovers. I'm—I've never been with anyone."

"You—" Remus blinks, genuinely startled. "What?"

Sirius frowns. "I know my reputation suggests otherwise, but I thought you said you didn't believe any of that shit."

"I don't," Remus says quickly, eyes wide. "I just assumed—I mean, maybe at home? Or maybe a Hallow here or there, just not as much as they say. Which is—that would be *fine,* Sirius."

Sirius huffs. "Well, no, I haven't. The only thing I've ever done is kiss Mary Macdonald when I was sixteen and nothing else since. Believe it or not, becoming a sex object for the Hallows tends to put one off sex."

"Okay, that's—that's okay, Sirius," Remus murmurs, holding his gaze. "I mean, actually, no, that's not okay. That's awful, and I'm sorry you've had to deal with that. But I mean, it's okay as in—we don't have to do anything."

"Well…good," Sirius snaps, clearly defensive. Somehow, Remus has offended him, or upset him, or both. He pulls away, not looking pleased at all. "Good, because we're not."

Remus holds his hands up in surrender. "Of course."

Sirius frowns at him some more, and they just stand there in near-stifling silence for a few minutes, and *then* Sirius is right back on him like he never even left. In seconds, he's kissing Remus again, basically pinning him to the door with his enthusiasm, groaning into the kiss like a man discovering a miracle. Remus laughs breathlessly, unable to help it, and Sirius mumbles *smug bastard* against his lips before essentially shoving his tongue in Remus' mouth to give him something to do other than laugh. Remus takes it like the gift it is.

They're still going at it (rather thoroughly, too) when a yelp makes them both split apart to see Pandora clapping her hand over her eyes as she half-turns away. "Oh! I didn't—I was just going to wake Sirius. I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Remus clears his throat and straightens up. "Really, Pandora, you're fine."

"I made breakfast," Pandora says weakly, still not uncovering her eyes. Her lips curl up. "Sorry to interrupt. I wasn't aware that you two had…made it to this point."

"It's a new development," Sirius mumbles.

"Well, that's lovely," Pandora declares cheerfully. "I'll just go, then. Leave you to your… development. Right. Excuse me."

"Thank you for making breakfast!" Remus calls after her gratefully, and Pandora just waves over her shoulder with a quiet giggle as she disappears up the hall.

Sirius groans and drops his forehead against Remus' shoulder, gently banging his head to it. "I didn't even hear her coming."

"If it makes you feel any better, neither did I." Remus reaches up and cards his fingers through Sirius' hair, then gently nudges him to tilt his face up. Sirius does, and Remus leans in to give him a sweet, short kiss that makes Sirius sigh softly when he pulls away. Remus smiles. "Come on. You have a long day ahead of you, and you need breakfast."

"Right," Sirius says. "Yes. That."

Chuckling, Remus reaches down to grab Sirius' hand to tangle their fingers together, then tugs him up the hall. Sirius follows after him with a lopsided, triumphant grin.

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James knows where he and Regulus are, but he's taking care not to mention it. He's planning to just casually go, "Oh, look at that convenient cave over there," and then drag Regulus inside before he gets suspicious. Surely that will work.

It's day five. Eleven tributes still remain. No one has died since Mulciber, and the fact that a group of people have lasted in a cave undetected and *safe* for this long means that James wants almost fervently to get Regulus there. Just for a day or two, at the very least. They'll outnumber the death eaters that way, too, and since he and Regulus killed three out of seven of their members, he feels it's in their best interest to get somewhere they won't be easily found. They need more time.

The previous day was—bad. Very, very fucking bad. Well, all days have been bad, frankly, but regardless. James and Regulus spent the previous day not speaking or looking at each other, the both of them too lost in their own head, dealing with their own pain and grief and anger.

It has carried over into today. They've gotten a late start, because they both kept waking up from nightmares, so neither of them really slept well. Regulus is being quiet again, and James is so fucking exhausted that he's tempted to join him in silence. It suddenly feels like the hardest thing to do to crack jokes and find things to talk about; Regulus has shut down, and James would swear that some inner light in himself has gone out.

Still, James meant what he said to Sirius last night. They're still here, and they're still trying, and the plan is still the same. James is getting Regulus through this, and nothing is going to stop him. There is no force in this world that *could* stop him, at this point. Really, it's his most driving motivation now, especially inside the arena. It's the one thing that's keeping him going when he wants to sit down and just—weep.

In a way, James wants to thank Regulus for that, because even now—even here—James is finding comfort in him. Purpose. Hope. Without him even knowing it, Regulus is giving him something to live for, to *fight* for, simply with every breath he takes.

In just knowing that, and experiencing the arena, James is starting to learn things about himself that he never really stopped to think about before.

For one, he's a caretaker. He *likes* to take care of people. It makes *him* feel better to make other people feel better, and he generally knows how to do that. It comes naturally to him and gives him a sense of accomplishment. Sometimes it's tiring, and sometimes it drains him, and sometimes he forgets that he needs to be taken care of, too, *but* overall—it's the most rewarding thing he's ever done in life.

Another thing, he's a bit too attached to his morals. He thinks, if Regulus wasn't in here with him, he would struggle to fight as he has. Having a purpose to focus on, a *goal* that supersedes what he's willing to do to survive, might just be the one thing that's helped him survive this long. He's killed people. Like, he's taken lives. He's not sure if he would have been able to do that if he wasn't fighting *for* something—or someone, more accurately—because he doubts he would have been willing to put the importance of his own survival over anyone else's, in which case he would have been dead by now.

Lastly, he's a lot more resilient than he ever realized. He has now suffered things he's only been exposed to through those closest to him, and he honestly never thought he would be strong enough to handle it, and yet he is. Somehow, he is. Somehow, despite everything, he's still going.

He just keeps going.

That means something to James. That's *important* to James. Maybe it makes him an optimist, he's not sure, but he really believes what he said to Regulus. Who he is, who they *really* are, that's theirs; no one can take that from them. It can be altered, and it can be shaped beyond recognition, but what they're made of, what makes them up as people, *can't* be erased. And James is still holding onto that, refusing to ever, ever let go. He'll be him until his last breath.

So, James ruminates on these things for the first hour of the morning when he and Regulus are getting ready and setting out in silence. It's actually a bit of a soul-searching moment for him, if he's honest, and it helps settle him more than he's expecting it to. Of course, the fact that they still have a long way to go and a lot ahead of them also helps him essentially get his shit together, as much as he's able to.

Next is Regulus himself, who has most definitely gotten as distant as he possibly can whilst stuck traveling *with* James. It's eerily similar to the way he was at fifteen, how he's just *pulling away,* refusing to let anyone get close to him. Losing Evan was a major hit for him.

Frankly, James is upset about it because Evan was nice and helpful and funny, and death is upsetting, but it's not hitting him as hard as Regulus, who actually got close to him seemingly by accident. Of course he would never do that on purpose, purely to avoid exactly what he's feeling right now, but it was one of those things that just happened *anyway.* Without even meaning to, he made a friend that he trusted, and then he lost him. James' heart aches for him.

James doesn't know what to do about this. How to help. He doesn't even know if he *can* help, because this is one of those things where Regulus should be *allowed* to hurt for it. He should be allowed to take the time to grieve how *he* needs to.

The problem is, they're in the hunger games, and they're not afforded such luxuries. Regulus *can't* slow down to grieve. He *can't* shut down and retreat into himself. He *can't* do all the things he should be allowed to do in response to losing a friend, because if he does, he could die as well.

James spends a lot of time trying to figure out the best way *to* help, but he genuinely can't think of one thing to do or say, which oddly gives him anxiety. Then, out of nowhere, Regulus abruptly changes direction *away* from the cave where the others are, and James has his opening.

"Wait, wait, where are you going?" James blurts out, skipping forward to whirl in front of him and cut him off.

Regulus blinks, dead-eyed. It's unsettling. "That…way?"

"Why?" James asks, baffled.

"Because we can't keep going *that* way," Regulus says slowly, like he's talking to an idiot. He points in the direction they were just going in, the direction James *really* wants them to continue going in, because they're so close now. "It's not smart. We'll just loop back around, and eventually, we'll run into the death eaters if we keep going."

James purses his lips. "You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. This place is a circle, James. The woods wrap around in a ring."

"How do you know? Have you completed a circuit?"

"I—" Regulus huffs, looking offended. "No, but I don't *need* to. The crimson river wraps around the cave and the entire forest wraps around the crimson river. It's just common sense."

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" James asks, hands on his hips.

Regulus narrows his eyes. "I do, actually."

"Yeah?" James inclines his head in the direction he wants to go in suggestively. "Prove it."

"I don't *have to,"* Regulus snaps. "There's no need for me to prove I'm right. I'm just fucking *right.* Now, shut up and walk."

"I think you do have to prove it this time," James hedges. He knows he's pushing it, but—well, desperate times and all that. He raises his eyebrows. *"This time,* I think you're wrong."

That does the trick. Regulus' eyes light up. With fury, yes, but they do light up. James is taking his wins, at this point.

For the next twenty minutes *at least,* James dissolves into a long-winded bickering war with Regulus about his sense of direction, which James doesn't *actually* have a problem with in reality, but if there's one thing James has learned in the last decade, it's how to get on Regulus' nerves. Really, James takes great pride in the fact that no one annoys Regulus like him.

At one point, James has admittedly let Regulus' tirade fade into the background a bit, but that's not his fault, really. He can't be blamed for it. Regulus has a flush on his cheeks, and his eyes are brighter than they've been since the third night, and he's just—he's so beautiful. Even here, having gone four days without soap and a shower, only water to essentially have quick bird-baths with, still covered in dried blood and flipping his dagger carelessly, mindlessly through his fingers—even right here, like this, he is so fucking beautiful.

Frankly, James is having borderline inappropriate thoughts, which is how he comes to the conclusion that he is severely depleted of his need for affection. He feels like he's going to go insane if he doesn't get to touch someone the way his fingers itch to. Not even in a sexual way; he wants to just—bump shoulders with someone, or just sit with his thigh pressed to someone else's, and he'd probably collapse if someone just so happened to hug him right now. Fucking hell, he's *touch starved.* Literally starved for touch.

Holding onto Regulus at night honestly might be the only thing that's kept him sane so far, but he's overly aware that Regulus doesn't *want* to be touched, especially recently. There was, of course, all the gentle touches between them when they were using the salve, but that was

in the aftermath of violence. There's so much violence, and James wants… Well, he wants affection for the sake of affection.

He wants *Sirius,* frankly. They're always affectionate, and have been since they were children. Regulus, less so, even when he *was* a child, though he sometimes let Sirius be his exception. Even when Regulus had a crush on him, he was never one to go out of his way to touch James; he let James touch him, even seemed to get flustered and pleased every time James did, but of course James took that for granted and didn't do it very often. By the time he started *wanting to,* it was already too late.

James wonders how many days, how many weeks, months, *years* Regulus went just hoping that James would touch him, and now James wants to do exactly that so badly that his hands fucking *ache,* only for Regulus to be perpetually out of reach, even when James could just reach out and touch him. It's not wanted, and that makes all the difference in the world.

"—just basic circumference, and the cave is the midpoint of the diameter," Regulus is ranting, utterly oblivious to how much James wants to hold him right now.

Blinking violently, James clears his throat and says, "Oh, yes, keep talking about math. There's absolutely nothing more attractive. You're a swot. If you tell me what the mitochondria is, I'm not sure I'll be able to restrain myself."

"The mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell," Regulus mumbles, then frowns. "First of all, that's science; that's not even *close* to math. Second of all, I'm not a swot."

"You're absolutely a swot," James replies with a snort. "You've always been a little nerd, what are you on about? Don't think I've forgotten about your journals, all that writing you used to do, your obsession with sad boy poetry. Oh, I remember."

Regulus scowls at him. "Sad boy poetry? Fuck off."

"Baby Black and his little diaries with the flowers pressed in between the pages," James teases, helplessly fond. He's always found that unbearably cute, quite frankly. "You know, I'll bet you used to write about *me,* didn't you?"

Regulus scowls harder, his face growing even more red than it has so far, and he very aggressively does *not* answer.

James chokes on a stunned laugh. "Wait, actually? You *did?"*

"Fuck off, James," Regulus grinds out.

"No, shut up, that's *adorable,"* James declares breathlessly, more delighted than he's been in *days.* "You had a crush on me and wrote about it in your journals. That is so… You cannot *imagine* how pleased I am by this. Go on, what did you write?"

"Why would I remember that?" Regulus grumbles. "Obviously I haven't written anything about you in the last ten years."

"No?" James asks, oddly disappointed, because even if Regulus was just writing about how much he hated him, then at least he'd still be writing *about* him. "Well, I mean…surely you've read your old journals, Regulus."

Arching an eyebrow, Regulus says, "No, I haven't, because I burned them."

"You—" James is inexplicably betrayed by this. "What, why?"

"Because, when you're a fifteen year old boy, that's what you do to get over your first—" Regulus halts, that sentence hanging there in the resounding silence after he snaps his mouth shut so hard his teeth clack together.

James raises his eyebrows. "First…?"

"Crush," Regulus fills in, and it's like pulling teeth. Actually, James is pretty sure that Regulus would much prefer to rip his teeth out one-by-one from the root than admit out loud that he used to have a crush on James. "When you're fifteen years old and getting over your first crush, you burn all the journals that have any shameful, incriminating evidence of said crush, so at least four years of journals are ash thanks to you."

"That's really… I don't know, love, that's a bit much, isn't it? Seems like it came from a place of passion, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you."

"Well, I'm just saying," James murmurs, tipping his head to the side. "It's a shame about the journals, really. Maybe if you read them again, you'd remember what you liked about me."

"Oh, I never forgot," Regulus says. "I just grew to hate it."

James' lips twitch. "So, what *did* you like about me, then? What was it you grew to hate, Regulus?"

Regulus looks at him for a long moment, and James doesn't think he's going to answer at first, but then—shockingly—he whispers, "You made me feel."

"Feel what?" James asks, his heart racing.

This time, Regulus doesn't answer. He just turns and starts walking away, leaving James to stare after him as his mind struggles to figure out what *exactly* he made Regulus feel, and how he could possibly do it again.

Though, really, there's no point in trying. James knows how this ends, so every single moment that feels like something important, something *special,* can't go anywhere. James just finds himself lost in it over and over, compulsively seeking it out, because he can't help

how he feels. To him, there's so much meaning in it, in all they get to have, in every interaction and stolen slices of time they have left together.

That's another thing James is learning. His love is a lot like survival. It just keeps going, no matter what. Survival is an ugly process, and here they are, still so hideously alive; much the same, James is still so hideously in love.

"No, really, feel *what?"* James insists, rushing to catch up to him, quite literally desperate to know.

Regulus continues to ignore him, clearly reaching his quota for sharing today. James knows he's not getting anything else out of him, not now, so he sighs and internally puts a pin in it. He *will* be returning to that later.

For now, the goal is to not alert Regulus to the fact that he's going back in the direction James originally wanted him to go in. Another twenty minutes of walking, and they'll reach the others. Honestly, James is eager to see Vanity, especially. He's been worrying about her during the cold nights. It'll be nice to see Peter, Irene, and Mathias, too.

He starts getting mildly nervous as they get closer, because he's just—assuming that they're there. For all he knows, they could have moved days ago. James has been gone since the morning of the second day. He's not entirely sure if the gamemakers would have just…left them alone, but at the same time, there was so much activity over the last few days with them and the death eaters that maybe the gamemakers didn't feel the need to bother with anyone else.

The viewers can only watch a few things at one time. The gamemakers wouldn't want to overwhelm them with too much too quickly. Sirius did mention that fact and how it might be used to their advantage, so James is hoping that the others are safe at the moment and still where he left them.

As they draw closer, James *really* hopes that's the case, because there's rustling in some bushes that makes him and Regulus both freeze. They both have their weapons raised and at the ready in an instant, always a little bit on edge now, just this persistent paranoia and preparation to fight.

Regulus is closest to the bushes, and he moves even closer in complete silence, his dagger held in his hand. The bushes rustle harder, and then a form comes bursting out of it, which Regulus responds to immediately. In seconds, he's sweeping whoever it is off their feet and crouching down to put his dagger to their throat, cutting off their sharp yelp.

"Peter?" James blinks, then brightens. "Peter!"

"James?" Peter asks, his voice shaking.

"Hey!" James says cheerfully, rushing over to beam down at him. There are discarded mounds of fur on either side of him that James is pretty sure he had in his hands; animals from traps, no doubt. "Oh, collecting food?"

Peter makes a quiet noise of pure terror. "Ah, yes."

"Alright?" James asks with a frown, and then it belatedly hits him that Regulus is *still* pinning him to the ground with a blade to his throat. James' eyes bulge, and he dives forward to quickly peel his wrist away. "Fuck's sake, Reg, it's just *Peter."*

"Thank you," Peter wheezes, shakily pushing himself up. He blinks at them, taking a deep breath as he reaches up to press his trembling fingers to his throat. "Um, nearly dying aside, it's brilliant to see you, James. We've been worried."

"I told you I'd be back," James informs him with a grin. He can't actually remember if he promised that or not, not anymore, because it feels like a lifetime ago now—but, well, it feels like something he would have said. "Is Irene and Mathias here? I sent them this way."

"Yeah, they're here," Peter confirms, nodding as he reaches out to gather what he dropped.

Abruptly, Regulus launches to his feet and stalks away without a word, making James stare after him. Peter blinks, then looks at James in visible confusion.

"Just, er, give us a second," James mumbles.

"Having a bit of a domestic?" Peter asks wryly.

James heaves a sigh. "You have no idea."

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Regulus is going to kill James. Considering his current setting and situation, this isn't an idle threat. He hasn't heard a cannon in a while, and a part of him is itching for it, signaling that he's closer to the end. James being dead; one step closer.

Oh, Regulus is absolutely going to murder him. Just—just take out his dagger, put it to his throat, watch the way he gets that look in his eye every time. A *gleam.* A twinkle. That arrogant, self-assured confidence that Regulus could smother right out of him by sliding that blade slowly, so slowly, across his throat until blood bubbles up, and maybe James' breath would hitch, maybe he'd *moan*—

"Oh, I'm fucked up," Regulus mutters under his breath, utterly furious. Lovely, he's gone fully mental. So exposed to violence that it's even starting to blend with *sex.*

Growling under his breath, Regulus stomps further away into the forest, his whole body itching. He's angry, yes, and also reluctantly impressed that James managed to guide him here purely because he knows him so well, knows exactly what buttons to push. Oh, Regulus *hates* that he fell for it. James fucking *swindled* him into this. Manipulative prick.

Regulus comes to a halt, taking a deep breath before slowly releasing it, dagger in hand and ears straining as he listens for sounds of any possible approach. Reflexively, he glances up to scan the trees. He always thinks to look up now.

Evan is never there.

For a moment, Regulus lets his eyes drift shut. Things have been—difficult. He's been feeling like he's moving under water since Evan died, since James killed Mulciber. Fussing at James earlier sort of felt like…resurfacing for a bit, which he hadn't seen coming. He'd thought he was appreciative of how muffled everything had gotten, like it was all coming from a distance and he was left in a fugue state.

He's been on autopilot, but only in the sense that the plane has been crashing in slow motion. Shutting down, as it turns out, isn't quite the simplest thing to do when he's overly aware that doing so could kill him. It's like his survival instincts were at war with the feeling that he was already dead inside.

So, no, he wasn't expecting for it to feel—good to just…be, for a moment. Like coming up for air he desperately needed, even though he didn't even know he was hoping for it. Just hearing the sound of his own voice, the life in it, left him feeling less disoriented. Hearing *James'* voice, seeing his smile, feeling the warmth of his gaze… Well, strangely, it turned out to be the most comforting thing to happen to him in a while.

Which is a shame, because Regulus is going to *kill* James.

In a moment. Whenever he catches up.

Regulus doesn't doubt that James is going to follow him, even with his stupid *allies* within range. It's sort of nice being alone for a few minutes, though. He's been in such close quarters with James for the last few days with barely any breaks, and he hasn't been able to get away, even for a moment, at least not in situations that didn't involve running and fighting for his life. And that… That's been suffocating in its own way, which is bewildering, because how can James be both a breath of fresh air and the sensation of being smothered?

Regulus just—he just needs *one* moment.

He gets it.

For a longer than a moment, even longer than two, Regulus is left completely, entirely alone. At first, it's good. He breathes. He takes the time to just *breathe,* inhaling deep and exhaling slow. His mind is empty, wiped clean, and for a bit, he's completely calm. Just sort of existing, really.

And then Regulus looks around. He's careful about it, making no noise as he swivels in place, looking for something. It takes him an embarrassingly long moment to realize that no, he's not looking for something at all, but rather *someone.* James. Less than a minute without him, and he's searching for him.

There's a creeping sense of doubt crawling through him that maybe James isn't going to follow him. He's found his allies, hasn't he? Maybe he's done with all Regulus is indirectly (and sometimes directly), yet indisputably responsible for putting him through. Frankly, if Regulus could cut himself loose and get away, he would the first chance he got, all while saying *good fucking riddance.*

Swallowing, Regulus stands in place and feels ridiculously small. Like a lost child unsure how to find his way home. Fumbling in the dark, desperate for some light.

Then, like the living embodiment of the sun that he is, James breaks through the trees with his hatchet in hand and a wary, yet determined expression on his face. Regulus hears the tiny, quiet exhale of relief that escapes his own lips and hates himself for it.

James, of course, is clearly expecting an argument, but it's obvious from his demeanor that he's ready to put up a fight. Regulus, of course, is absolutely going to argue with him, just as soon as he shakes off the urge to go over and crawl into his arms and never, never leave them again.

Why is he having heart flutters *now?* James hasn't even done anything! He's just—there.

Yeah, Regulus is going to have to kill him.

"I'm going to kill you," Regulus announces.

"Listen—"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Just hear me out, yeah?" James says, his voice strained. He moves closer almost cautiously. "You remember when you said you would think about it?"

Regulus glares at him. "I haven't exactly had the time to do much thinking about it, have I?"

"No, maybe not, but you don't need to," James tells him. "Reg, they are secluded and *safe*. With them, we outnumber the last four death eaters, and maybe we can actually *do* something with that. The death eaters have a place to go back to, and they move in numbers, don't they? That's because it's smarter."

"Yes, and look where that's gotten them, James."

"Having numbers and a base claimed isn't the reason they've lost three already. *We're* the reason, so don't even try it."

"I know," Regulus murmurs, because he's very aware of what he and James have done. It's imprinted in his brain. "I just—"

"There's a steady source of water, and they've plenty of traps set up that actually catches things," James continues in a rush, shaking his head. "They've insulated the cave to be warmer, or so Pete says, and you can burn a fire in there without drawing attention. Irene and Mathias are fairly good fighters, and even Peter can throw a punch, so it's not like they're all helpless. I mean, even Vanity is willing to beat the piss out of someone if she has to. I've seen

it. She really had a go at Peter when we first showed up here, you know. And—and they've survived here for *days,* Regulus. Days. So, we can, too."

"James—"

"And I know you're worried about the death eaters because they're no doubt looking for us, and they have weapons, but apparently the others are working on a way to get weapons for themselves as well, and I think we should help them."

"I don't *trust* them," Regulus snaps.

James hesitates, then heaves a sigh. "Alright, fine, you don't trust them. I'm not asking you to trust them. You trust *me,* don't you?"

"No," Regulus mutters.

"I—what? No?" James sputters incredulously. "You better be lying, Regulus Black. If you don't trust me after all we've been through and all we've done together, then—then—"

Regulus arches an eyebrow at him. "I *don't* trust you. I don't trust anyone. Better that way."

That's not true, whispers a sinister voice in his head, and it makes a lump form in his throat. It's right, because Regulus trusted Evan, and it got him killed. Regulus trusted him, and he's dead now. Gone. Regulus killed him. Regulus—

"Oh, for fuck's sake," James says, sounding exasperated. He reaches up and shoves his hand through his perpetually messy hair. "That's shit, and we both know it. But sure, fine, stick to whatever suits you. Clearly you don't need to trust people to tolerate them, considering you've been with me for the last few days, so just do the same thing with the others. They really do have a plan to get weapons, and they'll need help, so I think we should help them. The death eaters will be easier to stop if we have help, Regulus, and you can't deny it."

"I'm not denying it. I'm asking—and then what?" Regulus declares, raising his eyebrows at James, who falls silent. "Go on, James. What's next after that, hm? Say we do handle all the death eaters, and then it's just us and Juniper out there wherever she is. What do you expect to happen? Are we all just going to play as pacifists until…what?"

James doesn't say anything. He swallows, a strain around his eyes, and Regulus knows he's upset.

"Turning on each other isn't an isolated event only the death eaters know about," Regulus continues firmly, refusing to back down about this. Maybe it's harsh, but it's reality. "What do you think is going to happen when this little group is all that's left, *especially* if they have weapons?"

"They're not—"

"I know you think you're a good judge of character, James, but you're really not. You just see the best in people, and out here? That doesn't mean anything."

"Well, maybe you see the worst in people," James snaps, clearly agitated about this entire subject.

"And maybe that's necessary in a place where the worst is dragged out of people no matter how hard they fight it," Regulus replies calmly, gesturing around to encompass the entire arena as a whole. James gets his point. "I'm just—I need you to think about this, alright? Really, properly think about it. Best case scenario, we help them get weapons, and they help us deal with the death eaters; let's say, by some miracle, we all manage to survive. *And then what?* How long will it take before all water sources dry up and all the animals disappear, so we have no way to survive other than fight?"

James presses his lips into a thin line. "Regulus…"

"I know you hate it," Regulus says, his voice softening, because he can't help it. "I just need you to really think about this. Yes, maybe it's smart in some ways central to the present, but the future? It's a risk. A really big risk."

"I know that, alright? I do, but I just…" James heaves a sigh, his shoulders slumping. "Maybe it's my bleeding heart, but I care about them. I—I want to help them, and if they help us at the same time, then brilliant. Let's…compromise."

"Compromise," Regulus muses, raising both eyebrows.

"Yeah, you know, we meet halfway for a solution we both can feel comfortable with," James explains, as if Regulus might not know the meaning of the word. Regulus does, even if he's never actually done it. "My parents do it all the time."

Regulus purses his lips. "Yes, well, they're married, James."

"Well, in another life—"

"Don't."

James grins, his eyes sparkling. "You already know, so I don't even have to. So, compromise?"

"I'm not very good at compromising, I don't think."

"Have you ever even done it?"

"No."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

Regulus rolls his eyes. "Shut up. My solution is that we leave and keep moving."

"That's not even *close* to a compromise," James mumbles, looking baffled. "Regulus, that's not—no. Just…no. Look, how about this? We help them, yeah? They have some sort of plan, so I think it's worth it to at least see what it is. And, if they're willing to help with the death eaters, we let them do that, too. But we don't have to stay. Two days, max. That's it."

"And then what?" Regulus challenges, yet again. "Because, if we do that, they'll have weapons. Which means that they'll be a threat. You think just because they're your friends means they won't kill you? Because they will."

"No one's killing anyone," James says wearily.

"We're quite literally in an arena to do exactly that," Regulus reminds him, and it makes his chest go tight to see how tired James looks as soon as he's said it. "What are you going to do? I mean it, James, what are you going to *do?* What happens when one of them thinks to kill you because you don't want to fight them and they think you're an easy target?"

"They won't," James whispers.

"You say that, but you don't *know,"* Regulus insists. "What will you do when it's just them remaining? Let them kill you?"

James looks away, his eyebrows furrowed.

A spike of sudden and visceral fear scrapes down Regulus' spine at the thought, and he doesn't know what he's going to say until the words are tumbling from his mouth, firm and sure, "I'll kill them if they try it. I'll kill them all before they ever got a chance to lay a hand on you."

James' gaze snaps to his, startlingly intense and full of wonder. There's surprise, too, but not as much as there *should* be, considering that *Regulus* is really fucking shocked by the announcement, as well as alarmed. Regulus' brain scrambles to make sense of that, but it can't, really. What an incredibly ridiculous and violent thing to say. He doesn't even know if he meant that, but he sure sounded like he did. Frankly, for a moment there, he'd sounded quite *dangerous,* actually.

James exhales an astonished laugh, reaching up to swipe his hand over his grin as he looks away, then down at his shoes. When he drops his hand, he's still grinning, and when he looks back up, his eyes are warm with delight. "Sure, love, whatever you say. Fine. There's our compromise, yeah? If anyone tries to kill me, you do whatever you need to do. Does that suffice?"

"I can work with that," Regulus admits.

"Brilliant," James chirps, clapping his hands together as he bounces on his toes. "In that case, let's go."

Regulus heaves a sigh, but he does, in fact, go.

Chapter End Notes

starting out with wolfstar!!! the discussion on sirius' dissociative amnesia was so, so important. like, remus knew about it, in a way, but he didn't know all there was to know about it overall, and it's obviously not something sirius shares with just anyone, so it was a big show of trust. sirius TRUSTS remus, and that's so, so special to me <3

also lmaoooo, not sirius getting offended because remus just assumed that he'd been with people before. remus obviously didn't mean it in a bad way, but sirius is touchy about these things for obvious reasons. he has some issues with sex/pleasure that are addressed later, i assure you. remus is so respectful, though. mr. "five years ago, i would have fucked him by now" being like: okay, we never have to do anything, don't even worry about it, babe, im just happy to be here 😭😭😭 an icon!!!

i better not see any pandora slander for interrupting them. sirius has work to do anyway, and he can't just stand around and make out with remus, as much as he might wish to.

don't worry, pandora redeems herself for interrupting later, plus she's so supportive, i love her to bits <3

and then jegulus...

well, they're clearly still struggling, but at least they're trying. or james is, at least, and he's sort of helping regulus do the same. it was nice to see them bickering again. lmaooooo james calling regulus a little nerd 😭😭😭 him and his "sad boy poetry" that's so mean, james STOP. he doesn't mean anything by it, he thinks it's adorable, but poor regulus wanted to sink into the ground and never resurface.

also "that's what you do when you're getting over your first—" no, no, finish what you were going to say, regulus. go on, we're listening 🎤🎤🎤 SPEAK YOUR TRUTH, BABE!!!

also² "you made me feel" and james being like 😳 OKAY BUT FEEL WHAT? FEEL WHAT REGULUS TELL ME??? GIVE ME THE CHEATSHEET I WANNA DO IT AGAIN!!! FEEL WHAAAAT??? 😩😩😩 this himbo, i love him so much. like, he's aware that it's pointless, and he's still like: please for the love of god just let me sweep you off your feet i am trying SO HARD.

oh, and james just being like HI PETE 😃 wait why are you freaking out rn? because regulus is pinning you to the ground with his dagger to your throat??? stop complaining, how does it feel to live my dream? LIKE HIS CONFUSION PLS 😭😭😭 he really did not even see the issue at first. he was like: consider yourself lucky, what i would not GIVE to be you rn

but yes, jegulus has located the allies!!! we see more of them next chapter <3 not regulus threatening to kill them all if they so much as breathe near james wrong. he's such a good boyfriend. james was batting his eyelashes and twirling his hair, as he should. can't even blame him, i would do the same thing.

side note: all the mentions of evan is just. devastating. like, yeah, he's dead (rip, and sorry to all of those who are in denial, it's okay babes, you stay in denial, he's just sleeping) but his presence in the fic will remain, so it's like...double the damage 😭😭😭

anyway, let me do numbers:

tributes remaining: 11
tributes who have died thus far:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
eight unnamed/unknown others

The Bridge

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to animal death (nothing explicit and for the whole arena thing)
-brief mention of preparing/cooking animals (very vague and not explicit at all, but still)
-references to implied child death (because of the whole arena thing)

that's all, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus can see why the others have survived in this cave. It's very hard to find, and even with how observant he is, he doesn't spot it until James actually points it out. There's some foliage put in front of the entrance to disguise it further, which James informs him is new.

As soon as they enter, Vanity is scrambling to her feet and shrieking, "James! You're here, you're back!"

Regulus watches her launch herself forward to hug him, which he takes with a laugh as he hugs her back. They actually look like they're squeezing each other tight enough to hurt, but neither of them seem to mind. Vanity is comically shorter and smaller than James, but he pretends like she's about to knock him over, teasing her about being so strong. From the side, where he's boiling water, Peter watches with a soft smile.

Irene and Mathias also share fond chuckles, but they're handling food at the moment—or what *will* be food—so he doesn't look at them very much. He's seen enough blood and death to last him a lifetime, at this point.

"What's this? This is new," James says, reaching up to gently run his hand over the artfully twisted hair on top of Vanity's head.

"Mathias did it for me." Vanity beams up at him. "They did a really good job, didn't they? It looks nice like this."

"Yes, very pretty," James tells her with what Regulus knows is genuine sincerity.

"I was really worried about you," Vanity declares, then hits him on the arm. "I thought you weren't coming back."

James rubs his arm with a wince. "No, I was. I promise I was. I just had to, er…" He glances over at Regulus, then clears his throat and gives Vanity a lopsided smile. "Well, I had to find him and bring him back with me. Got a little sidetracked."

"Oh, right, *Regulus,"* Vanity sing-songs, giving James a teasing look that makes him snort. She pokes him in the stomach, her eyes bright with laughter, and something about it—her youth and how sweet she is—makes Regulus ease up and calm down a bit, leaving him just slightly less on edge. "You had to go get your boyfriend."

Lovely. Even here, Regulus can't escape that assumption. At least no one is calling him *lover boy.* Though, at the thought, he feels his heart sink. Only one person ever called him that. He would walk around with that moniker printed on his forehead if it meant Evan was still alive to say it.

"Hey, Regulus?" Mathias calls eagerly, hopping to their feet to amble over with hope in their eyes. "Can I steal a dagger? Wait, that came out wrong. I mean, um. I just—I'm skinning the squirrel, and that's really difficult to do without anything sharp. I have—well, I have chipped stones, but a dagger would make it so much easier, and it'd be less messy, so if—if I could *borrow* a dagger—that's what I meant, *borrow,* not steal, obviously, because I will absolutely give it ba—"

"No," Regulus says, and Mathias snaps their mouth shut, their eyes wide. An uncomfortable silence settles in the cave, and Regulus sighs. "I'll just…help."

Mathias brightens instantly. "Brilliant. Come on, then. Irene is so good at it, but I absolutely *hate* this part. Actually puts me off eating, really, but…also I don't want to starve, so…"

Reluctantly, Regulus trails over to the side of the cave where Mathias leads him and Irene is already hard at work. He shoots James a narrow-eyed glare as he goes past, but James just grins at him. He mouths *be nice,* and Regulus flips him off, which makes James stifle a laugh before he focuses back on Vanity, eventually moving over to chat with Peter as well.

"Brought reinforcements, have you?" Irene asks with a grunt as Mathias and Regulus crouch down next to her.

"He has a dagger he's willing to use to help," Mathias says cheerfully.

Irene snorts. "Least he could do if he's showing up to eat with us." She raises her eyebrows when he scowls at her. "Don't look like that. You want food? Earn it. Looks to me like you have two daggers." She holds out her hand and holds his gaze without wavering. "No use in not letting someone else use the other one. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we eat."

"I'd rather starve," Regulus says stiffly.

"Prick," Irene declares bluntly.

Mathias coughs. "Okay! Let's just…get this done, yeah? You don't have to give up one of your weapons, Regulus, that's fine. We get it. I don't think I'd be eager to do that either. Thanks for helping, though. We appreciate it, don't we, *Irene?"*

Irene remains silent. Clearly, she doesn't appreciate it. They all dip into silence for a bit, though Regulus does help with his own dagger, because he's willing to do that, at the very least. Eventually, the silence is broken.

"Can I ask how you actually got them, though?" Mathias asks, glancing at him curiously. "The daggers, I mean. We know the river ices over at night, but the death eaters are always there, and you had them by the second day. If there's a way over—"

"There's not," Regulus murmurs, focusing on his hands and what they're doing. "Well, not a way that works, not really. I climbed over with—" He halts, his voice catching, and then he forces himself to keep going because Irene and Mathias both stop to stare at him, obviously picking up on the emotion in his voice. He clears it away by clearing his throat. "Rosier and I climbed a tree and used one of the limbs over the river to swing across. It was risky, but we managed it, except it didn't work so well on swinging our way back across. The branch broke and I got stuck on the other side. Don't recommend it."

"Noted," Mathias mumbles.

"And the, um—the spider?" Irene says, a shudder rippling through her body. Not a fan of spiders, clearly, and Regulus can safely say he's not either, after *that.* "How the fuck did you manage to survive that thing?"

Regulus sighs. "I let it chase me to the river, then tricked it into falling in."

"Oh, that's *brilliant,"* Mathias says, gaping at him in disbelief, eyes wide with pure wonder. "That thing was terrifying."

"I've had nightmares about it literally every night," Irene grumbles, her face twisting, and she squirms a little bit before making a frustrated noise and dropping what's in her hands to frantically pat up and down her own arms.

Mathias leans over and whispers, "She's terrified of spiders."

"Yeah, I got that," Regulus replies.

"Shut up, Mathias. *You're* scared of the dark," Irene snaps, and Mathias begins sputtering immediately.

Regulus falls silent, listening to them bicker, strangely soothed by the sound. It reminds him of… Well, Sirius and himself, honestly, back when they were younger and they'd get into

arguments over the smallest things. They used to fight like cats and dogs, and Regulus finds himself missing it, oddly enough. Clearly, Irene and Mathias have that same sort of dynamic, and Mathias effortlessly falls into the younger sibling role, because they *are* younger, while Irene fits right into the older sibling role with ease.

Over in the corner, James is still with Peter and Vanity, which Regulus accidentally keeps an eye on. He doesn't mean to, if he's honest, but his eyes keep flicking over to them, watching James laugh and look more relaxed than he has in days. He's always shined in social situations, always the type of person to feed off the energy around him, rather than be drained by it. Regulus is on the completely opposite end of the spectrum in that regard, and he always has been. There's genuinely nothing more exhausting than a group of people, in his opinion.

"Hey, can you help me strip this, since you won't give up your dagger?" Irene asks, drawing his attention again.

"Fine," Regulus murmurs with no heat to his tone, because there wasn't any in hers. He may not like her, but he has no interest in provoking her. He helps her without a word.

James comes over at one point to crouch down behind him and start digging around in the bag, saying, "I'm taking the water canister to fill up, that way we can all share instead of repeatedly boiling water over and over. Clears up the fire to use for the food, too."

Regulus doesn't respond, but he doesn't protest, and when James leaves, Irene mutters, "Oh, so *he's* welcome to borrow your things." He glares at her, and she flashes him a broad smile. "Can't say I blame you, Regulus. I'd let him take whatever he wanted from me, too."

"Irene," Mathias says with a sigh.

"What?" Irene asks, laughing. "I *would."*

Mathias rolls their eyes, then gives Regulus a playful smile as they shake their head. "Please don't kill her in her sleep. I know she doesn't make it obvious, but she's actually a good person." They bust out laughing when Irene immediately swats them over the head. "Oi, watch the hair! If you get blood in my hair, Irene, I swear I'll—"

"What? You'll what, Mathias? Hm?" Irene cackles and proceeds to dive forward with both hands outstretched, trying to press her fingers into Mathias' hair while they yelp and scramble backwards, laughing along with her.

It sort of feels like stepping into an entirely different world, one he wouldn't haven't felt out of place in only a few days ago, at least not the way he does now. Where the sight of blood doesn't make him picture Avery's gushing throat, or Evan's bloodstained fingers, or Mulciber's chest split open. Where loud shrieks don't make him tense up instinctively, thinking of the scream James released when he was caught in a bear trap, or the sound of Mulciber screeching when Regulus chopped his hand off. Where a joke about murder is just a joke, and not a very real possibility that Regulus has to just—live with.

Irene and Mathias do eventually stop playing around, and they finish up with Regulus' help, so the food is ready to cook. The three of them go over to join the other three. Vanity is telling James how she managed to keep from freezing to death every night as the smallest person in the cave.

Not just the help from the fire, or even the body heat from Irene and Mathias crowding her, but she apparently found a colony of fiendfyre ants. They're Hallow-made and quite deadly if you get bit by too many of them, apparently. But she discovered some in the forest and managed to capture them, which she crushed up and boiled into water, then took sips of through the night in very small, concentrated amounts to raise her core temperature. It has made her vomit and given her a rash (which she excitedly shows James by rolling up her sleeves), but it's what keeps her alive.

She's absolutely fascinated by the ants, of course, and James tries to hide his horror for what she's resorted to, but Regulus can see it anyway. Even Peter, Irene, and Mathias—who are all aware of this already—seem uncomfortable about the whole ordeal. Regulus thinks that it's smart, on an intellectual level, but on a *human* level, it's fucking awful. She's *fifteen.* She should *not* have to risk drinking lethal ant juice just so she won't freeze to death.

"We have a blanket," Regulus announces rather abruptly, completely interrupting Vanity mid-conversation. Everyone goes silent and stares at him. "You can use it."

Vanity blinks at him. "But I have my ant juice."

"You're using the blanket," Peter declares firmly, pointing at her and raising his eyebrows. "No more ant juice."

"But—"

"No."

"Peter," Vanity mumbles, "it's so *cool,* though. The way the venom affects the—"

Peter waves his hand through the air, looking exasperated. "No, no more ant juice. No more talking about ant juice. Regulus is kind enough to let you use the blanket, so you're going to use the blanket. James, tell her."

"It's a very nice blanket," James confirms, his voice soft. When Regulus glances at him, James is looking right at him, a tender smile on his face that Regulus quickly looks away from, feeling awkward and undeserving as always. "It'll keep you warm enough to make it through the night."

Vanity huffs. "But my ant juice was—"

"No more ant juice," Peter, Irene, and Mathias all announce at the same time, which makes Vanity scowl. Peter huffs out a weak laugh and shakes his head. "It's the blanket from here on out, alright? Say thank you to Regulus."

"I'm not *five,"* Vanity snaps. "Fuck off. I'll drink my ant juice if I want to drink my ant juice."

"At least until too much erodes your internal organs to the point that they begin to shut down one-by-one in a slow, agonizing death," Regulus says, and Vanity blinks at him again, her lips tipping down. "But sure, drink your ant juice if you want to. I'll keep my blanket."

There's a long beat of silence.

"No, I'll—I'll use the blanket," Vanity mumbles. "Thanks."

Regulus just hums in vague affirmative and goes back to lazily flipping his dagger through his hands, entertaining himself with that rather than joining the conversations, save for that one moment. It takes a while for the talking to start back up again, but eventually, it does.

It's about mid-day, so they have quite a few more hours left in the day before it starts to get cold. The inside of the cave is obviously a sanctuary, and the others have made it as safe and comfortable as possible. They've put down padding from leaves and vines to sleep on, and they've stuck up leaves and mud to close any crack where wind can get in, also insulating the walls much the same way. Not the back portion of the wall where water trickles down, though.

Regulus can begrudgingly admit that it's a good show of survival on their parts. They're safe, secluded, and as warm as they can get.

The food from the traps today is apparently the most they've had so far. James has a bundle of berries in the bowl they got from Evan's bag, which he passes out and shares between everyone without hesitation. Regulus shakes his head when James offers him some, settling for his portion of the cooked meat, since it's more than enough.

It strikes him then that he didn't stop to think of getting Evan's supplies off his body, or even picking up Quinn's spear. From a survival standpoint, it's a huge oversight and moment of stupidity; but, again, from a *human* standpoint, the thought of actually doing that makes him uncomfortable. It's sort of nice to realize it, that their humanity hasn't escaped into the void the games seem so desperate to open up in all of them.

"So," Peter declares in the middle of the meal, "I was thinking we head out after we're all finished up. Regulus, you've been across the river, Irene and Mathias said; do they have food over there at all?"

"In the supplies, no doubt," Regulus says. "Mine came with dried meat and a granola bar. I haven't been back to take a proper look, but I'll bet the death eaters have all the food in one place for easy access. They also probably have what food their sponsors sent them."

"I would love something sweet right now," Mathias tells them with a wistful sigh. "Like, I dunno, cake."

"Yes!" James bursts out, utterly delighted. "You read my mind, Mathias. I've been thinking about cake since last night."

"Sweet, sweet icing," Mathias says dreamily.

"Soft, fluffy cake," James agrees.

"It would be in layers, of course," Mathias continues. "Like, at least four layers, and each layer—"

"—is a different flavor," James finishes for them, then proceeds to let out a truly indecent moan. "Oh, that sounds so good. I'm going to fucking *cry."*

"Please stop talking about cake," Vanity says mournfully, frowning at her meat. "It's making me sad."

"Right, no more cake talk. I don't even like cake, and I want cake right now," Peter mumbles with a sigh. "So, I vote we get weapons, then rob the death eaters of all their food."

"Everyone in favor," Irene declares, then puts her hand up. Mathias and Peter immediately join her, which prompts Vanity and James to do the same.

They all look at Regulus, and he sighs. "Sure, but how do you plan to do that, exactly?"

"The bridge," Mathias informs him. Regulus just stares at them. "We've been building a bridge to get across the river."

"As soon as it touches the water, whatever is in that river is going to pull it under," Regulus says.

Peter bobs his head. "Yeah, we thought of that, so that's why we made a raised bridge. The ends of it go up like ramps. It's quite big, so it's outside, but three people can carry it."

"We can't go across at night because the death eaters are there, but we're barely surviving without supplies and weapons," Irene adds. "They're away during the day, so it's our best option."

"And if they come across us on our way there?" Regulus asks.

"Well, that's where you and James come in," Vanity says, and she smiles sweetly when Regulus arches an eyebrow at her. James pauses mid-bite, staring at her with wide eyes. "You two have weapons, so obviously you two are the muscle."

"Such good muscle, too," Irene muses, grinning at James, who inhales his bite and proceeds to choke on it. Regulus rolls his eyes so hard that he nearly catches a glimpse of his own brain.

"We're joking," Vanity tells them with a giggle. "Obviously we've thought of this. Actually, Peter thought of this."

"That I did," Peter confirms, reaching over to pound on James' back and offer him water. James takes it with a weak thumbs-up. "So, the plan is to set a sequence of large fires to draw them away and keep them from the cave for long enough that everyone else can get in and out before they even knew we were there. Well, they'll find out, but we'll be long gone by then."

Regulus narrows his eyes. "Who's setting the fires?"

"That would be me," Peter says, taking a deep breath. He grimaces slightly. "It was my plan, so I should…do it, I suppose. I've gone out with Irene to set them all up already, so all I have to do is light them and run."

James looks at Regulus expectantly, and it's very fucking annoying that Regulus immediately knows what he wants. With a sigh, Regulus mutters, "I have matches you can use. Only six left, so don't waste any."

James beams at him.

"Oh, that would be helpful, thank you," Peter tells him with a broad grin. "It'll give me more time to run, that's for sure."

"You know, Pete," James starts, "if you don't want to—"

"Shut up, James," Regulus cuts in, glaring at him, and James shuts up. He clearly isn't happy about it, but he does.

Peter looks a bit disappointed that he's not getting out of this, but he still says, "No, it'll be fine. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Yeah, it'll be fine," James agrees, like he can make it so if he simply believes it enough.

He should know that doesn't work by now.

~•~

James has to admit, the bridge is a bit of engineering genius. It's long, thin branches weaved together and stacked on top of each other with two ramps off the ends that will keep the wood raised above the water. Mathias did most of the work with help from the others, and it took them two days.

The agreement they all came to whilst carting the bridge through the woods was that Regulus and James would rotate out on carrying the bridge with the others so that one of them is ready with a weapon at all times, and the other three would rotate out whenever they got tired. James takes the first shift with Vanity and Irene, while Regulus and Mathias walk behind them, talking. Well, Mathias is doing most of the talking, but Regulus doesn't mind because he hasn't told them to shut up yet, and James knows he would if he *did* mind.

Peter has already gone off to reach the first fire point, and James would be lying if he said he wasn't worried about him. His stomach is cramping with anxiety. He really had wanted to offer to go in his place, but Regulus was quite clear about not allowing that, and James…gets why. He could practically hear Sirius screeching in his head, *don't you fucking dare, James; take that hero-complex I gave you and shove it.*

So, James didn't push the matter, for once. One of the main reasons other than the fact that he feels compelled to listen to the Sirius living in his head and also the Regulus right in front of him is that he doesn't fancy letting Regulus out of his sight.

"Come on, Vanity, take a break," Mathias calls softly, keeping their voice low.

"It's really not that heavy," Vanity mumbles, but she dutifully lets go when Mathias comes up to take over.

"Speak for yourself," Irene complains.

Regulus practically appears at James' shoulder. He doesn't even say anything; he just slides his daggers away and pokes at James' hand to indicate that he should let go. James' lips twitch against his will, and he's so helplessly fond. They swap places without a word, and James falls back with Vanity.

"I'm really upset about my ant juice," Vanity tells him. James is also really upset about her ant juice, but for an entirely different reason than her, so he keeps this to himself. "Not that I'm not grateful for your boyfriend offering your little love blanket; I am, I'm grateful, but—"

"Our little love blanket," James repeats, blinking rapidly.

Vanity holds her hands up in surrender. "Look, I'm not judging, alright? Just don't tell me the details so I don't have to think about it when I use it. Desperate times and all that."

"I—" James stares at her in bewilderment. "Vanity, there are no details. We used it to stay warm."

"Sure, James," Vanity says, her eyes bright with humor.

Chuckling, James shakes his head. "You're a menace."

"I think it's cute, really," Vanity muses thoughtfully, her lips curled up. "You and Regulus, I mean. In a very 'opposites attract, borderline doesn't make sense, but somehow makes so much sense' sort of way. Oh, and the 'best friend's brother, secret history, forbidden love' way also."

"Thank…you?" James says.

Vanity hums. "I read a lot of romance novels. I'm still waiting for my prince to come save me, you know."

"Oh, is that so?" James teases. "Have anyone in mind?"

"No," Vanity mumbles, but he can tell she's lying instantly because she ducks her head and kicks at the ground.

James snorts. "Yeah, you do. Go on, I won't tell anyone."

"Promise?"

"I'll take it to my grave."

"He doesn't know," Vanity whispers, reaching up under her sleeve to scratch at her rash distractedly, chewing on her lip nervously. "I, um. Well, you know Hodge…?"

"Hodge?" James asks weakly, his heart sinking. "The one who was reaped with you? That Hodge?"

Please don't let it be that Hodge, James thinks, but of course Vanity sighs and says, "Yeah, that Hodge. We're friends. Sort of. I mean, we're in some of the same classes because we're only a few months apart. He—he actually turns fifteen tomorrow. Maybe Marlene can convince one of the sponsors to send him something, like a treat, at least."

"Maybe," James says softly, his heart clenching. He doesn't know what else to say.

"But anyway, I get it," Vanity murmurs, gesturing between James and Regulus. "Well, sort of. I mean, only a bit. We didn't grow up together or anything, but he was always nice to me in school when we *did* talk. I didn't really have a crush on him until we got here, though. He's just been really, *really* kind to me. He found me crying once and sat down to talk to me, and I just—I know it's stupid, but I was thinking about how I've never even had my first kiss, and I probably never will. Then I thought it would have been nice if *he* was my first kiss, but that's never going to happen either."

James swallows thickly, stricken by how utterly devastating that is. She's never even had her first kiss. Fuck. "I'm sorry, Vanity. That's—that's really awful. I'm so sorry."

"You've kissed people, right?" Vanity asks.

"Er, yes," James admits.

Vanity frowns at him. "Am I missing anything?"

"Absolutely nothing," James replies immediately, sending a mental apology to everyone he's ever kissed, especially Ravi. They were a *brilliant* kisser. If they're watching, James hopes they understand why he's saying this. "It's mostly just—wet."

"Wet," Vanity repeats in disgust, her face scrunching.

James bobs his head. "Pretty much. Trust me, you're not missing out on anything."

"What about love?" Vanity says, blinking at him.

"Um," James replies awkwardly. He briefly wonders how he ended up in this situation and imagines that Sirius must be in stitches right about now. Clearing his throat, he proceeds to lie like his life depends on it. "You know, you're not really missing anything there either."

Vanity arches an eyebrow. "That's bullshit."

"No, really, it's—it's not even that…great." James struggles not to cringe. This goes against everything he is as a person, but to comfort her, he will do what needs to be done. "It's not like the books, you know? Most of the time, it's just…pain."

"Pain," Vanity repeats, frowning.

"Yeah," James murmurs, his gaze trailing helplessly towards Regulus. A lump forms in his throat. "Most of the time, it just *hurts.* When you think it can't hurt anymore than it already does, it'll find new ways to hurt worse."

"So…why?" Vanity mutters, sounding baffled, and she doesn't elaborate, but she doesn't have to. Why is everyone so obsessed with love? Why does everyone crave love? If it hurts so fucking much, why love at all?

James stares like a lovesick idiot at Regulus ahead of him as he sighs and softly says, "Well, that's the thing, Vanity. It's not exactly something you can escape. Once it's there, it takes a lot for it to leave, and sometimes it never does. Love's a lot like a disease that way."

"And sex?" Vanity asks.

"I—what?" James whips his head over to her, immediately startled out of his woes.

Vanity raises her eyebrows. "What about sex?"

"And you're done," James declares, reaching out to bonk her gently on the top of her head with the flat part of his hatchet. "No more questions out of you."

"Again, I am *fifteen,* not five," Vanity grumbles, swatting at his hand. "I'm just saying—"

"And *I'm* just saying no," James cuts in. "Here, hold my hatchet. Feel cool. Ooh, look, something shiny."

"That's not—" Vanity halts suddenly, distracted by something off to the side, for which James is grateful for at first, but then she turns and wanders away.

"Vanity? *Vanity,"* James hisses, tossing up his free hand before huffing and following after her. She's not going far, at least, just up to a tree a few feet away. When he catches up, she's

crouching down in front of it. "Hey, don't just wander off like that, yeah? We need to stay behind the others. Let's—"

"Shut up, look at this," Vanity says excitedly, sounding thrilled in the only way she does about bugs. She lifts her hand to wave him over insistently. "James, *look."*

James clicks his tongue, but he moves over to crouch down beside her, blinking at the bug that's crawling slowly along the bark of the tree. It looks like some sort of bee, but really big; there's a bright bulb on the end of its body that shimmers in the pouch, like it would spill out in a neon pool of green glitter if it was busted. Hallow-made, he's guessing.

James tilts his head. "What's that?"

"Horcrux Hornet," Vanity breathes out, giddy. She reaches out and clamps down on James' arm. "Hallow-made. They're so cool, James. They're basically indestructible, and their venom replenishes at an unnaturally rapid rate. I have to get it."

"I feel like you do not have to do that," James says. "An immortal bug sounds like bad news, Vanity."

"Oh, yeah, it's lethal," Vanity agrees. "One sting causes excruciating pain, but death comes quickly. Less than a minute."

"Right. We're going," James announces, reaching for her arm.

"No, no, it's okay," Vanity protests eagerly. "I promise it's okay, James. Horcrux Hornets only respond to fear. They won't attack unless you're scared. So, you know, don't be scared, alright? They're harmless as long as you're not afraid, really."

"I just found out one sting will kill me, so you could say I'm a bit scared," James mutters.

Vanity huffs. "Then *back up.* I've got this." She shakes her head and reaches out carefully, cupping her hand in front of the Horcrux Hornet without hesitation. "Imagine being a grown man afraid of bugs. You're embarrassing."

"I—you know what?" James sputters, offended. "First of all, being afraid of bugs that can *kill you* is perfectly valid. Second, why do you even want the damn thing?"

"Because we can use its venom, obviously," Vanity murmurs, gently reaching out to nudge the bottom of the Horcrux Hornet, encouraging it to crawl into her palm. "They're really lazy creatures. Don't like flying much, because their wings are so sensitive that it hurts them every time they do it, but they will if they're trying to sting you. Fiendfyre ants are their only predator; that's the one thing that can kill them, because they essentially burn up from the inside out if they're bitten by them. But anything else? Doesn't work. Cut them in half, and they'll just grow back. Squash them, and they'll just reform. It's *fascinating,* don't you think?"

James grimaces. "Sure. Fascinating."

"Are you afraid? I'll stay back if you're afraid," Vanity says as she slowly stands up, holding the Horcrux Hornet to her chest like it's precious.

"I'm not *not* afraid," James says. She arches an eyebrow at him, and he cracks a weak smile. "I'm wary, mostly."

"Better to be safe than sorry," Vanity murmurs, holding her palm up. "Oh, she looks tired. She must have flown recently."

"She?" James asks.

Vanity hums. "Yeah, you can tell because her pouch is bigger. The males have smaller ones. What should I name her?"

"Um, Vanity, maybe you shouldn't—"

"What about Vespa? A little on the nose, but…"

"Vespa?" James asks.

"Because she's a hornet," Vanity says, looking up at him. When he continues to look confused, she rolls her eyes. "I am so disappointed right now. *Vespa,* James. It's the scientific name for hornets. How can you not know this?"

James opens his mouth, closes it, then shrugs helplessly and mumbles, "Sorry? Vespa is a great name. Really…suits her."

"It does, doesn't it?" Vanity agrees, giggling. She proceeds to lift her hand and gently dump the—Vespa on her shoulder, looking pleased. "There you go, darling. You ride right there, Vespa, take a little nap. Alright, James, let's go."

"Right," James mutters, shaking his head in a mixture of disbelief and wonder. Mere moments later, they're back on the path, catching up with the others.

"I want to tell Regulus about this," Vanity says, looking fucking ecstatic. "I bet he'll be willing to dip his daggers in Vespa's venom. If it's ingested or it hits the bloodstream, it's over. I know *he* won't be scared."

"I'm never living that down, am I?"

"Never."

James shakes his head with a small, fond smile as Vanity grins at him before rushing over to essentially shove Irene away from where she's holding onto the bridge so she can start chattering excitedly to Regulus, who blinks in surprise but nonetheless pays attention. Irene falls back with James.

"You let her get a bug?" Irene asks flatly. "A *lethal* bug?"

"I did try to stop her," James admits wearily. "You know how she gets about bugs, Irene. It should be fine, I suppose, as long as we don't get scared."

Irene snorts. "Oh, right, because we're not in an arena specifically driven to put us in terrifying situations or anything, not at all."

James winces. "You may have a point."

"How do we get it away from her?"

"Don't be afraid of it."

"Failed step one," Irene mutters. "Can we kill it?"

"It's basically indestructible," James says.

"Lovely." Irene heaves a sigh and crosses her arms, shaking her head slowly. "Yeah, alright. Let's just…hope for the best. Maybe you can convince Regulus to get it away from her later. He doesn't look afraid of it, and I do *not* want that thing in the cave with us tonight. It'll break her heart, but…"

"An unfortunate, but necessary evil," James can't help but agree. One nightmare, and Vespa will be on the attack. "I'll talk to Regulus, but I can't guarantee anything. He only does what he's willing to do."

Irene hums, leaning over to bump their shoulders together with a playful smile. "I don't know. I think if anyone has a chance of convincing him, it's you."

"You are *severely* misinformed," James says with a snort, and then he clears his throat. "Um, Irene?"

"Yeah?"

"I just—I wanted to apologize if I hurt your feelings. In my interview, I mean. I—I didn't mean anything by it, you know. You're a lovely woman, but I—"

"Oh, that?" Irene blinks at him, then chuckles, waving her hand like she's swatting a fly. "No, you're fine. Don't think anything of it. I just wanted to fuck, really."

James blinks. "Oh."

"Well, you know, possible death and all…" Irene shrugs. "I wanted to feel good before all of this, and you are a very, *very* beautiful man. I assumed we'd have fun together."

"I'm sure we would have," James teases, unable to help it, and Irene grins at him. "Sorry you didn't get to have your fun."

"Are you joking? I *absolutely* had my fun," Irene informs him with a snort. She waggles her eyebrows at him. "Let me tell you, Dylan and Peter are *very* thorough lovers."

"What?" James gasps, eyes bulging. "You and—wait. Wait, at the—did you—all of you at the —"

Irene's grin is downright *filthy.* "Yeah, we did. All three at the same time. That's how I spent my last night, and I have *no* regrets. Shame about Dylan, you know. He was… Well, the fact that he was good in bed isn't as important as the fact that he was a good person, but he *was* good in bed."

"I have so many questions," James admits. "I mean, how did the three of you even…?"

"Well, there are a lot of different positions if you—"

"No! No, I mean, how did you three meet up?"

"Oh, I snuck them into my suite," Irene says, waving her hand carelessly again. "Mathias helped, because they're brilliant. They distracted Frank, our mentor. Suppose he's finding out now." She glances around with a grin. "Sorry, Frank."

"Right, but you just—decided to have sex?" James asks, his eyebrows furrowed. "Like, um, did it—did it mean anything?"

"No, of course not," Irene says. "I mean, it was lovely, don't get me wrong, but it was more… Well, it's just that we all knew we might die, so we might as well enjoy ourselves before, yeah? Sex doesn't have to mean anything, James. Not for everyone."

James feels his shoulders slump. "Right."

"Oh. *Oh,"* Irene breathes out, and her eyes are wide when he glances over at her. "James, did you and Regulus have sex on *your* last night?"

"What? *No,"* James blurts out quickly, immediately getting anxious, because it's not *technically* a lie (the parting gift took place the morning after), but it's close enough to one that he's absolutely freaking out already. "No, of course not."

Irene squints at him, looking bizarrely like she can see the inside of his brain. "But you *were* with him the last night, yes?"

"I—" James scrambles for a way to not respond to this, trying to think up a proper lie, genuinely sweating at this point. It's too late, though. Irene's face clears, and she *knows,* so of

course James immediately caves. "It wasn't like that, alright? We just sort of…slept together. *Not* sexually, obviously. We, um. We…"

"Snuggled?" Irene teases.

"I mean, a bit," James mumbles, ruffling his hair and feeling ridiculously flustered just from the memory. It's so different from holding Regulus every night *here,* because he knows that comes from a place of necessity. But that night? Regulus did that on his own, because he *wanted* to.

"Wow." Irene shakes her head. "I genuinely can't even picture Regulus *snuggling* someone. James, you have to tell me and all the people at home. This is crucial information. Was he the big spoon or the little spoon?"

James tucks his lips in and mimes zipping them.

Irene groans and nudges him playfully, and they both laugh as they sway back and forth. "You're no fun."

"Stop fishing for details," James says. "He'd *hate* me if I said anything. Well, he already hates me, but he'd hate me more."

"I don't think he hates you at all," Irene replies.

James sighs. "No, he does. It's—I mean, I suppose it's not a secret now, really, but he definitely does."

"Mm, no," Irene says simply. "I think he likes you, actually. In fact, I'm quite sure he fancies you as much as you fancy him. Trust me, this isn't an unrequited love situation."

"No, but it is, though," James mumbles mournfully.

Irene smiles at him. "Really? Because he's looked back at us at least five times, and the poor thing is so jealous he can barely walk straight. I just *know* he's imagining slipping his dagger between my ribs right now. It's sort of funny, if I'm honest."

"What, really?" James blurts out, his head snapping up to look at Regulus, who isn't looking back at all. He's in the middle of talking to Mathias. "Irene, you lied. That's mean."

"Look at his hands," Irene whispers, moving closer and slipping her arm through James'. "He's gripping the bridge so tight it's like he's trying to break it. Wait for him to look back again and watch how pissed he gets that I'm touching you."

James can see that she's not lying about Regulus' hands. He's holding onto the bridge so hard that his knuckles are white, entirely bloodless. Still, "I really don't think he cares."

"Fancy a wager?" Irene asks.

"Terms?"

"I bet Regulus will turn and see us like this, then call you to carry the bridge to keep you away from me. If he doesn't, I'll be the one to tell Vanity she has to get rid of Vespa. If he does, it's on you to break her heart."

"Oh, he's definitely not going to do that," James tells her with a snort. "You're on."

Irene chuckles and sort of snuggles closer to him, leaning her head over on his shoulder. "We shall see. In the meantime, do you want to hear about how talented Peter's mouth is?"

"You know, actually, I really do," James murmurs. "It would keep me from worrying about him."

"Hey," Irene says softly, squeezing his arm, "I'm worried, too, but Peter is smart. He has a thirst to survive. He'll be fine."

"Yeah, but surviving is hard out here," James whispers.

"I know," Irene whispers back. They fall into heavy silence, strolling along together, and it's actually really nice to have her leaning against his side like this. Just a point of contact shared between friends, but that doesn't make it less comforting. James is much less touch-starved now. "Okay, here it comes. Regulus is about to look."

"How can you tell?" James asks, baffled.

"He's flexing his fingers, and it's been about forty-five seconds since he looked the last time," Irene explains.

James snorts. "You *timed* him?"

"What can I say? It's fun pissing him off. If he didn't dislike me so much, I would have tried to fuck him, too. You and him both. Oh, *that* would have been fun," Irene announces with a wistful sigh.

"Yeah, no, that would have never worked."

"Because he's jealous?"

"Because *I* am," James corrects.

Irene makes a quiet *huh* sound, like she's mildly surprised, but also not at the same time. "You know, I can see that for you. Well, at least you're both well-suited for one another." She hums and presses closer. "Here it comes."

Sure enough, Regulus glances back, just like Irene said he would. He's glaring, but he's always glaring, generally. James can't tell if he's jealous or not. Frankly, Regulus would have absolutely no reason to be jealous, because James genuinely forgets other people exist when he's around, and honestly? James has spent the last ten years rather stuck on him, so that's certainly not going to change now, and Regulus *knows* that, so there's no way he's—

"James," Regulus calls, coming to a screeching halt so sharply that he actually yanks on the bridge and makes Mathias and Vanity stumble a bit. "Stop fucking around. Swap. Now."

"Told you," Irene mutters under her breath.

"I'll be damned," James breathes out, astonished.

"Didn't I say?"

"You did. You absolutely did say."

"Never doubt me again."

"Right, but—I mean, maybe he's not *jealous.* Maybe—"

"James," Regulus snaps.

Irene stifles a laugh. "Oh, he's *seething* with it, just look at him. I almost feel bad for him. Almost. I bet if I kissed you on the cheek right now, his head would explode."

"I'm not taking that bet," James says.

"Because I'm right about him being jealous?"

"Because I'm not risking his head exploding. I'm rather fond of his head being firmly attached to his body."

"If that's the case, you might want to go swap with him. I can practically see the steam coming out of his ears," Irene tells him, sounding thoroughly entertained.

James clears his throat. "Right, yeah, I'll just—"

"Remember, you have to tell Vanity," Irene reminds him as he pulls away. "That was the deal."

"Lovely," James mutters with a grimace, but he dutifully nods before he starts over to the bridge.

Regulus doesn't even speak to him. He just continues to glare at him before snatching out his daggers and moving over to walk with Irene. James joins Vanity and Mathias in carrying the bridge. Every time he glances back, Regulus is flexing his fingers around the handles of his daggers like he wants to use them, and Irene is grinning like she knows it.

James huffs out an amazed laugh and keeps walking.

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Regulus isn't entirely sure if the bridge is going to work. Not that it isn't well-crafted, because it is. It's sturdy, despite the fact that it's not very wide, just enough for a single file line of people to walk across and that's it. That's not the problem.

The problem, Regulus fears, is that it might not be long enough. The river isn't too wide, just about the length of three grown men lying down, stacked head to feet. That alone is going to

make the bridge difficult to get over the water, but if it falls short, then all of this is for nothing and Peter is out there risking his life for no reason.

When they get to the field they all started in five days ago, Regulus knows they're a little behind schedule. Peter's already lit the first fire, the smoke from it visible in the sky. The second isn't going yet, so they're not *too* far behind, but it definitely makes them pick up the pace.

"Alright, we have to do this carefully," Mathias says when they reach the edge of the river. They've stood up the bridge with James on the other side, holding it in place. It's quite tall, which is promising. "James, we're going to lower it *slowly,* as far as we can get. Don't drop it, or the ramp on the other side might break. Ready?"

"Ready," James assures them, nodding.

"Steady now," Mathias murmurs, grunting as they begin to let it slowly sink through the air.

It's a bit of an awkward process, like tipping over something very tall and trying to ensure it falls in slow motion. It involves a lot of balance and strength, but it's a two-person job, so no one can help them. Regulus can only stand back and stare at the veins on James' forearms, lightly covered in dark hair, and the bulging muscles from where he's straining. Why did he roll his sleeves up? *Roll them down, for fuck's sake,* Regulus thinks almost desperately, unable to rip his gaze away.

There's one moment where it seems like the bridge isn't going to make it all the way across, but then Mathias and James lift and *push,* and the bridge hits with a quiet thud. It rattles a bit, but it's there, just like that. Raised up above the water, a clear platform for them to walk across. No hands lift from the crimson river, but they all seem to be waiting for it.

Nothing happens.

"Brilliant," James declares cheerfully.

"We still have to get across," Mathias points out. They take a deep breath and set their shoulders. "Right, well, this was my idea, so I'll—I'll go first."

"Mathias," Irene says warily, stepping forward. "Why don't I go first, yeah? Just—just let me."

Mathias gives her a tiny smile, then shakes their head. "It's fine, Irene. I believe in my bridge. Wait for me to get all the way across before you follow, and come one at a time. No need to test weight restrictions. Vanity after me, if this works."

With that, Mathias turns and proceeds to start up the bridge, one careful step after the other. They're brave, that much is obvious, because they don't falter even on the way over the water. Everyone seems to hold their breath, but no pale hands raise up, and Mathias makes it safely across.

Regulus is inordinately relieved that it worked.

"Alright, Vanity," Irene murmurs, waving her over. "Careful now. Don't look down and don't stop."

Vanity reaches up to gently cradle Vespa, then starts her way across as well. She's brave, too, and she must not feel an ounce of fear, because Vespa doesn't sting her. She makes it across and whips around to grin at them, clearly pleased. She high-fives Mathias, who is also visibly pleased.

"Come on, Irene," Mathias calls.

"Time to see how the other side lives," Irene teases, then salutes James and Regulus with a wink before making her way over without so much as a stutter.

"Your turn," James says.

Regulus shoots him a *look,* but James just smiles at him. It's a sweet, boyish smile that makes Regulus want to put his hand to James' cheek and turn his face firmly away. With a huff, Regulus whips around and makes his way over the bridge next. It's structurally sound, at least, and it only rattles a little. He makes it over safely.

Scowling, Regulus turns and waits impatiently for James to follow. As always, he does. The moment he's safely on the ground, Regulus turns around and starts for the cave.

The death eaters have definitely changed things. As Regulus predicted, they do have all the supplies and food set up in a corner for easy access, kept out in the open rather arrogantly. In fairness, it's not as if anyone could get to it during the day, and they're always guarding it at night, so no one could really come and take it, or so they thought. Their mistake is why they're being pillaged. Fucking idiots.

The weapons are mostly in the same place, though. It's clear that the death eaters picked over them, because most of them are strewn all over the place or left on tables.

Mathias immediately goes for the crossbow, and Irene has a sword in hand in seconds. Vanity bypasses all of that to go to the supplies, sorting through it until she lets out a sound of delight as she holds up what appears to be a pair of tweezers and a small, empty glass vial.

James goes over to join her, grabbing a bag to start filling with various things. Regulus does the same, uncomfortably aware of the fact that Irene and Mathias are still sifting through the weapons. He keeps a dagger in hand, just in case.

"What weapon do you think Peter will want?" Irene asks thoughtfully. "We've got a spear, a mace, and another sword."

"Spear," James replies. "It gives him a bit of long-range, but he can still use it close-range, and if he needs to, he can throw it."

Regulus squeezes his eyes shut, but that doesn't drown out the sight of Quinn's spear in Evan's stomach behind his eyelids. He takes a quiet, shaky breath and swallows down the lump in his throat, blinking hard and fast.

"Hey, Regulus," Vanity whispers, moving closer to him with a hopeful look in her eyes. "Can you help me?"

"With what?" Regulus murmurs.

Vanity proceeds to hold up Vespa where she has her clamped in between the pair of tweezers. "I need you to cut her."

Regulus blinks. "Cut…Vespa?"

"Yes, please," Vanity says. "It's okay, it won't hurt her. You see her pouch here, with the green stuff in it? That's her venom. She has no nerves in her pouch, so she won't feel a thing."

"Won't she…get upset?"

"No. She won't care as long as we're not scared."

"I mean, sure?" Regulus says slowly, eyebrows furrowed. Vanity beams at him, pleased, so he just goes with it. He knows she would never do anything to unnecessarily harm *any* bug, let alone the Horcrux Hornet she's clearly made her pet.

"Right. It doesn't need to be a big cut. Just a little one. Right on her pouch, go on," Vanity instructs, holding Vespa up.

Regulus frowns, but he moves forward and carefully pushes the tip of his dagger into the glowing, green pouch until it punctures through. He waits for something to happen, but Vespa shows no signs of agitation. Vanity releases a quiet squeal of delight and hovers Vespa over

the vial. Gently, she squeezes the tweezers, and the venom slowly seeps out of the small cut and drips into the vial. Regulus peeks at his dagger, curious, but none of the venom gets on it like this.

"It's not a lot," Regulus comments, helplessly curious and a bit fascinated by the whole thing himself, honestly. The venom only fills the vial a quarter of the way.

"Yeah, I know, but watch," Vanity breathes out, so Regulus does watch. Vespa's pouch proceeds to knit back together, and more venom fills it in seconds. Again, Vanity squeals and bounces in place, grinning at him. "How cool is *that?"*

"Very," Regulus says, and he's not even lying.

"Do it again," Vanity encourages. "I want to fill the vial."

Regulus pauses, then shrugs. He does it again, faintly amused by how excited Vanity gets about it every time. It reminds him of himself the first time Sirius made him a dagger. When they were alone, Regulus didn't mind sharing how excited he was about anything, not at that age. He hasn't had such childish excitement since he *was* Vanity's age. It makes something tender flare in his chest for her.

They repeat the process two more times before the vial is nearly full. Vespa remains completely unbothered throughout the whole ordeal, and Vanity occasionally informs her that she's doing so well. Regulus' lips curl up against his will.

"Oh, what the fuck?" James blurts out when he wanders over to see what they're up to. He sounds *appalled.* "Why are we stabbing Vespa? Can we stop stabbing Vespa?"

"If you're going to be a big baby about it, you can go," Vanity declares with no small amount of sass.

Regulus hums, glancing up at James with a smile. "Yeah, if you're going to be a big baby about it, James, you can go."

"I—" James purses his lips, putting his hands on his hips as he squints between them. "See, no, I don't like that at all. A few conversations with Regulus, and you're getting mean, Vanity. He's a bad influence. Don't listen to him. Stay sweet."

"I'm only sweet when it suits me," Vanity says dismissively.

"Smart girl," Regulus praises, and Vanity flashes him a grin.

James bites his lip, clearly struggling not to smile, and his eyes are so, so soft. He clears his throat. "No, really, can someone explain why Vespa is being stabbed and why she's just…fine with that? She's not even twitching."

"She doesn't know it's happening," Vanity explains with a long-suffering sigh, like she's so exhausted being surrounded by people who don't know about bugs the way she does. "All we're doing is taking her venom. It doesn't hurt her."

"So, you *are* dipping your dagger in the venom?" James asks, glancing at Regulus with a small frown.

Snorting, Vanity shakes her head before Regulus can even respond. "No, not at all. Vespa's pouch is too thick for that to work like this, and he's not pushing in far enough. It's fine, we'll do that later when we have more time."

"Vanity, what weapon do you want?" Mathias calls out.

"I have my weapon right here," Vanity calls back. "Vespa is my weapon, and she's all I need."

"James," Irene says firmly.

Blowing out a deep breath, James focuses on Vanity, who looks up at him with a frown. "Vanity, I'm sorry, I really am, but you can't keep Vespa. You need to get rid of her."

"I won't," Vanity protests, her eyes narrowing. She gently places Vespa in her palm and sits the tweezers down so she can close the vial, keeping it in her hand.

"You have to," James tells her apologetically. "She's far too dangerous to keep around, and we can't bring her back to the cave with us. There's too much fear in this arena, and any one of us could get hurt."

Vanity looks ready for mutiny. "We need her venom, though."

"We really don't," James says softly. "No one deserves to die in excruciating pain, no matter how quick it is."

At that, Vanity deflates a little bit. She looks at Vespa with very sad eyes, like she might start crying. Regulus frowns, then frowns right at James, genuinely unhappy with him at the moment. He softens, though, because James looks like he might cry right along with Vanity. She's utterly *crushed,* because he's right, and he's crushed right along with her.

"You can keep the venom you collected," James offers weakly, his eyebrows furrowed. "That way you can always have a bit of Vespa with you. I know it's not the same, but…"

"Can't I just keep her for a bit longer?" Vanity asks, looking up at him with wide, watery eyes. "No one is afraid of her *now.* I'll just leave her behind when we go. Maybe she'll handle the death eaters, you never know."

James immediately gives in, because his spine is the consistency of a roasted marshmallow. "Yeah, that's fine. Keep her for now, but when we go, she stays behind. Deal?"

"Fine," Vanity mumbles, heaving a sigh as she gently puts Vespa on her shoulder. With that, she turns and marches off, clearly not pleased at the moment.

"Oh, she hates me," James says sadly.

"She's not the only one," Regulus replies, and he immediately regrets it when James looks even closer to tears than he did before. "Stop it. She doesn't hate you. She may hate that you were right, but you *were* right. You did the right thing."

"Yeah, but she's mad at me," James mumbles.

Regulus rolls his eyes. "She's fifteen. She'll get over it."

"You didn't," James says.

"That was different."

"How?"

"You weren't her first crush," Regulus tells him, hating the way the word fits in his mouth. *Crush.* So inadequate for what it really was, even so young. He *knows* what it really was, but he hates the truth even more. "That complicates things a bit."

James looks him up and down. Slowly. Then he says, "Yeah, clearly. I'm back to thinking you have unresolved feelings."

"Ah, more delusion," Regulus says flatly.

"You're obsessed with being mean to me," James declares, like this is a major selling point in his favor.

"Reparations." Regulus flicks his fingers. "Nothing more."

"Reparations?" James chokes out, laughing. "For *what,* Reg? Because I teased you a little when we were kids?"

Because you stole my brother from me, Regulus thinks, but he doesn't say it. *Because you made my heart flutter, and you're doing it again, and I hate you, I hate you, I hate you,* he thinks, but he doesn't say that either. *Because it's easier; you're going to die, and this is easier,* he thinks, and he'll never say that to anyone. He barely lets himself think it, slamming the thought down under lock and key and ignoring the rattle that begs him to open it and explore it further. No. There's no point.

"Reparations for having to be around you," Regulus says instead, which sums all of that up. Sort of.

"Ah, you'd miss me if I wasn't around," James teases, and then his smile falters. Just for a moment. Just a flicker in his expression. Regulus can't fathom the change, or why it's there, but James smiles again anyway. Like it never even happened at all. "Well, the joke's on you, love. Negging is wrong and bad and shouldn't work, but when you do it…"

James makes a silly *mm mm mm* sound like he's tasting something exquisite, and he kisses his fingers, which makes Regulus roll his eyes as he mutters, "You're pathetic."

"See? Like that. Fuck, it gets me *every time,"* James says with a theatrical shiver. "Oh, yes, please insult me more. You have me absolutely *hooked."*

"I wish that was sarcasm," Regulus tells him. "Like, genuinely. But you're not joking. Where is your self-respect?"

"Wherever you want it to be," James replies. "I am but a man lost to the charm of Regulus Black."

Regulus snorts. "You do *not* find me charming. I'm the least charming person on the planet."

"Mm, we're going to have to agree to disagree on that," James informs him, stepping closer and leaning his hand on the table of supplies so he can sway closer, smiling that smile of his. The one that's hard to look at. "I do wonder sometimes what it would be like for you to be nice. Sincerely nice, I mean. What if I didn't like it? Would that mean I have issues?"

"You have issues regardless," Regulus says.

James grins. "Yeah, that never gets old. You don't even know how to be nice to me, do you?"

"You're *so* funny, James. Funny and kind and handsome and just the absolute best all the time! You brighten every room you walk into, but that makes sense because you're the *sun,"* Regulus declares in an overly peppy voice, folding his hands together and tucking them under his chin as he smiles sweetly and bats his eyelashes.

"Fuck you, that was *awful,"* James wheezes, shaking with laughter as he shuffles forward, clearly entertained. "You're not even trying, Reg."

Regulus lets his expression drop and his hands fall as he rolls his eyes. "That's what you get for fishing for compliments. If you think *I'm* going to stroke your ego, you're a fool."

"Well, if you won't stroke my ego," James teases, "you could always try stroking my—"

"I will give you the Vespa treatment, James," Regulus cuts in, reaching forward to press the very tip of his dagger to the soft give of James' stomach.

"How's that saying go? No pain, no gain?" James raises his eyebrows and steps forward into the blade, forcing Regulus to draw back a bit so he won't *actually* stab him. The fact that James just trusts him to do that is infuriating, only more so because Regulus instinctively *does it.* "You're always so much sweeter when I've been hurt."

"Well, I'm not a monster," Regulus mutters under his breath, abruptly turning away to grab the bag and busy his hands. James is so close, and Regulus suddenly feels like he's fourteen again, which is not a sensation he's pleased with. Yeah, moving on. "Don't stand around doing nothing. We are on a bit of a time limit here, remember?"

"Hey, the second fire is burning," Vanity calls from the mouth of the cave, drawing their attention.

"Chop chop, people," Irene announces. "We're leaving as soon as the smoke from the third hits the sky."

Regulus gives James a pointed look. "You heard her. Get to it. Wouldn't want to disappoint *Irene,* now would you?"

James breaks out into a grin, which instantly gets under Regulus' skin, but he doesn't say anything. James just releases a huff of laughter, soft and exhilarated, and he grabs his own bag to start gathering supplies. He leans over to press their shoulders together, and Regulus wishes with everything in him that he had the power to pull away.

He doesn't.

Chapter End Notes

JEALOUS REGULUS JEALOUS REGULUS JEALOUS REGULUS!!! i am LIVING for regulus just quietly seething about the fact that james is all smiles and easy touches with someone else, until he finally just reaches the end of his rope and is like: ok they need to be separated Right Now 😭😭😭 he was so upset PLS. like, babe, what's the matter? any particular reason you're annoyed? no?

meanwhile, james is completely oblivious to it until irene points it out lmaoooo. she's a real one for that! irene my beloved <3

actually, i love this whole group so much. i know they're basically acting as if they're not all technically in a death arena, but it's kinda one of those Heavy Subjects that you just don't really talk about until it becomes a more primary issue. they're ALL avoiding reality, and i can't blame them. james legitimately just found the people who don't actually want to kill anyone and went: ah, yes, These People Are My Allies, which if you think about it, that was kinda smart of him. also stupid, but still.

regulus so obviously is not a group person, which i totally get. i, too, sort of fade in the background and go quiet around people i don't know very well. it was sweet of him to offer the blanket and give peter his matches, though. like, he's not TRYING to be a prick on purpose. he's just a grumpy little shit. i love him <3

and vanityyyyy!!! she's lovely. i adore her so much. her and james crack me up, because it's very much an older brother/younger sister dynamic, which i find absolutely hilarious. also, the fiendfyre ants and the horcrux hornet was so exciting to introduce because they play a pretty big role in the fic overall. but the fiendfyre ants were how vanity survived the cold nights, for those of you wondering how that worked!!!

so basically, this chapter was overall not so bad. had some humor, some flirting, some jealousy, a bit of angst as well. i am forewarning you now that the next chapter is rough. it was the one that was hardest for me to write, so keep that in mind. there's a two day break before it gets here, though. idk if that's better or worse, but it is what it is.

anyway, let me do numbers:

tributes remaining: 11
tributes who have died thus far:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
eight unnamed/unknown others

Massacre

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone.

warnings for this chapter:

-depictions of violence
-depictions of injury
-depictions of murder/death
-depictions of children/minors dying (mostly brief, but not as background as it has been up to this point)
-depiction of a mercy-killing
-mentions/descriptions of blood
-depiction/description of a panic attack (mostly brief)

this chapter is, quite frankly, very rough. it's very fast-paced, and a lot happens very quickly, with basically no break once it starts. i highly recommend reading this while alone and where you can squeeze something soft and cry in peace. i also implore all of you to please, PLEASE be mindful of the warnings and don't hesitate to check the more in-depth warnings in the end notes of the chapter, and also just—don't read if it's best for you not to. that's perfectly valid.

take care of yourselves first, always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius has known from a very young age that a good plan is dependent on three factors. Preparation, execution, and each individual variable in aforementioned plan. A *good* plan has no such thing as unforeseen circumstances, but all variables in a good plan are prepared for unforeseen circumstances anyway, and they execute the plan in spite of them.

This? This is a bad plan.

The preparation is good, no doubt. They set up the fires perfectly. The bridge is well-built. They all have their roles, as well as their rendezvous points.

The execution is even going well. James, Regulus, Vanity, Irene, and Mathias do make it to the cave and do as the plan dictates by absolutely cleaning the death eaters *out.* Even Peter is sticking to the plan, though in his nerves he has sped up the process a bit, lighting fires too soon and running too hard to get to the next one, which doesn't give the others much time. Sirius can't blame him for that, really. He's undoubtedly afraid out there on his own, wanting to get everything over and done with as soon as possible.

The problem is all the variables. They didn't properly consider them all, even from the beginning. The plan could have been ruined before it ever got started if the group on the way to the cave just so happened to cross paths with the death eaters, and it was pure luck that kept that from happening, at least until Peter lit the first fire to get the death eaters' attention.

The death eaters are a very important variable, and Sirius is worried because no one really gave much thought to them in the unforeseen circumstances that they showed up. They're all counting on the death eaters to be stupid and bloodthirsty enough to follow the fires, and fortunately for them, that does seem to be the case. Somehow, the plan is working, despite the fact that it's not a very good one by his standards.

"Sirius, m'boy," Slughorn says, coming to a stop next to him with a broad smile. "Enjoying the games this year, are we?"

Obviously not, you fucking idiot, Sirius thinks, but he rips his gaze away from watching the screen to smile at Slughorn as diplomatically as possible. Slughorn has hardly left the gamemaker room, so Sirius has barely seen him at the watch parties, but with the dwindling numbers in the arena, he has a bit less work to do. Less lives to fuck with. Less chaos to cause. Besides, the ones in the arena are clearly capable of getting into trouble on their own today.

"They're certainly more intense this year than the one prior," Sirius replies, dipping his head and raising his glass in an unspoken toast to Slughorn, because he's not above buttering him up a bit, if that would help James and Regulus.

Slughorn chuckles and glances at the screen, clearly pleased with the praise and proud of his work. "I have to say, I owe a portion of the good reviews to your tributes, Sirius. The people are quite invested in their blossoming romance. May I ask how you feel about it?"

"Ah," Sirius says softly, raising his glass to take a careful sip and buy himself more time. He has to tread carefully here, as difficult as it is to do with such personal matters. He can't just say that he hates it, purely because it's not everyone else's *business;* at the very least, James and Regulus deserve their privacy, regardless of Sirius' feelings on the subject. He doesn't really *have* feelings on the subject, though, quite frankly. He cares more about Regulus and James' survival than their love lives. Still, he can't say that, so… "Well, a best friend only wants their best friend to be happy; a sibling only wants their sibling to be happy. I can't deny that I appreciate that they take such comfort from one another."

"Well said, m'boy," Slughorn muses thoughtfully, watching the screen with mild delight. It takes him a second, but then he looks at Sirius. "You know your brother well, Sirius. I must ask, what holds him back? He's very resistant to James. I've worked out that some of it is just his personality, but he never really breaks past whatever blocks he has up. Sometimes it seems he has feelings for James, yet at other times it seems as if he would kill James just to get away from him. It's very confusing for the viewers, you know."

Sirius clears his throat. Again, he has to be careful. "Yes, a lot of that is just Regulus' personality, as you said. Isn't it more gratifying that way, though? That *will-they, won't-they* everyone is so keen on. Keeps them…hooked."

"Mm, yes, but with no pay off, there's just disappointment, Sirius," Slughorn says in audible disapproval. "I do not intend to leave *any* viewer disappointed, so what is it, I wonder? What will it take to break through to Regulus? What push does he need, and how can we facilitate it?"

Sirius briefly pictures shoving his wine glass down Slughorn's throat, stem-first, slowly and painfully. He indulges in the violent fantasy for a moment, fingers twitching around his glass, and then he forces himself to exhale as he banishes the images. It's just *sickening* how casually Slughorn is talking about controlling lives, outright asking Sirius to give him advice on how to better control his brother to get the results he wants. And Sirius can't just beat the shit out of Slughorn for daring to think he's entitled to *anything* involving Regulus, or even James, for that matter.

All he can do is play this smart and try his best to make this easier for Regulus—and James—because Horace Slughorn is missing some very vital information, and it's that Regulus only does what he's willing to do. If there's one thing Sirius knows for sure about his brother, it's that. As far as he can tell, there's very little that would push Regulus to be willing to do what the Hallows want from him, and frankly, the last thing Sirius wants is for it to reach that point.

So, Sirius clears his throat and says, "Well, what Regulus really needs is—"

"Sirius," Marlene hisses, abruptly rushing up to stand next to him and clamp down on his arm. Immediately, Sirius and Slughorn both simultaneously focus back on the screens, abandoning the conversation in favor of watching.

It becomes apparent what she's worried about instantly. The miniature map in the corner displaying every remaining tribute's position makes it very fucking clear that something is about to go terribly, terribly wrong. The death eaters may be bloodthirsty, but they're not as stupid as they need to be for this plan to be foolproof. Peter is just now reaching the third fire point, but the death eaters are right behind him, following his trail and only seconds away from reaching him.

Sure, they fell for the trap, but not for long enough that they didn't realize they were being baited. The thing about being bait is that it's too fucking easy to get bitten.

Sirius feels his heart drop, darting his gaze back to where the screen shows James and Regulus still helping gather food and supplies with Irene and Mathias. Vanity, in a fit of teenage angst and fury, has boycotted helping with all the pillaging in favor of sitting outside with her pet bug, clearly upset that she's going to have to leave it behind. The five of them are safe for now, but the third fire point isn't that far from the cave, so if Peter doesn't light it, they won't know to leave, and the death eaters might make it back before they're gone.

It'll be a massacre.

"Come on, come on, come on," Sirius chants under his breath, watching desperately as Peter fumbles for one of the matches, breathing hard. His hands are shaking.

"Shit," Marlene whispers, "he's not going to make it."

"No, indeed he's not," Slughorn agrees, sounding thrilled.

It's true. Peter is not going to make it, which becomes obvious the moment the death eaters come barreling through the trees, essentially startling him so much that he trips backwards and drops the matches before he ever gets one lit.

Sirius holds his breath, waiting for Peter to at least attempt to dive for the matches, because if he's going to die, he could still help his friends. If it was Sirius in that situation, that's what he would do. James, too. Regulus…? No, he'd probably run, and really, Sirius can't exactly think of him as a bad person for that. It's about survival, right?

It turns out that Peter is more like Regulus in this scenario, because he turns and runs without a split second of hesitation. Sirius reaches over and grabs Marlene's hand, the both of them squeezing tight as they watch in tense silence. Maybe it's ridiculous, but Sirius finds himself thinking *go, Peter, run.* He hopes he gets away, because if he doesn't, he's going to suffer a really painful death at the hands of those chasing him.

Peter does not get away. Willa shoots him with an arrow that lands in the back of his leg, sending him tumbling to the ground with a shout. He scrambles to rip it out, trying to get back to his feet, but the death eaters reach him first.

Bernice is on him in seconds, launching herself forward to punch him in the face so hard that he hits the ground again. Peter scrambles around on his hands and knees, then grunts when Axus kicks him in the side. Willa joins them, as well as Bernice, and they all start beating Peter right into the ground while Hodge hovers on the edges, knife in hand.

Sirius can see Marlene's face screwing up at the violence, but he keeps his own neutral, especially with Slughorn so close. It's grotesque to watch, as always. Peter is getting the same treatment that Dylan got at the very start. Simply beaten to death. Even with weapons, the death eaters see an easy target and decide to make it hurt first. They know how to put on a good show; they know what the viewers want to see.

Peter is curled up on his side, groaning and crying, when Bernice abruptly announces, "Alright, alright, that's enough. I'll kill him. He's from my district, after all."

"Bernice, please," Peter chokes out, face swollen and bloody as he holds up one shaking hand and feebly tries to crawl away from her. "Please don't. Wait. Just—just wait. *Please,* you know me. You—you—"

"No hard feelings, Peter," Bernice says, swiveling her sword in her hand as she moves forward. "You chose your side, and you'll die for it. You have nothing to offer me."

"No, no, please," Peter begs, gasping for air. "I'm sorry. Bern, I'm sorry. What do you want? I'll give you anything. *Please."*

Bernice snorts and raises her sword. "The only thing I want is Regulus Black and James Potter *dead,* and you're certainly not going to be able to give me that."

"Wait!" Peter blurts out frantically. "Wait, I—I can give you that! I know where they are."

"What?" Bernice asks, pausing to stare at him.

Sirius' heart stops in his chest. No. No, not this. *Peter, no, don't you fucking dare,* he thinks, panic immediately flooding his nervous system until he's suddenly shaking.

Peter is silent for a long moment, then he swallows harshly and rasps, "I know where James and Regulus are. I can take you to them. Just—just please don't kill me."

Slowly, Bernice lowers her sword. "On your feet, Pettigrew." Sirius watches as Peter slowly, shakily pushes to his feet, barely able to stand up straight and limping on his bad leg. Bernice points her sword at him. "Start walking."

Sirius struggles to breathe, because without hesitation, Peter does exactly that. He starts walking. Slow, but steady. Leading them right to James and Regulus.

"Well," Slughorn announces, "this is about to get interesting."

~•~

"Still no smoke?" James asks as Irene comes back over from the mouth of the cave.

"Not yet," Irene says. "Maybe he's trying to give us more time?"

James glances over at Regulus, who has his lips pressed into a thin line. He looks uneasy, and James can't help but feel the same way. They've all lost track of time, between worrying about Vanity and going through everything in the cave, as well as packing supplies and food. They were relying on Peter's fires to signal them, and now it's starting to feel like they've run over on their time a little *too* much.

"And Vanity?" James mutters.

Irene sighs. "Still sitting outside with Vespa. She's fine, just a little upset. She'll be ready to go when we bring out the bags to her, I'm sure."

"We're not going to be able to carry all of this," Mathias announces with a frown as they stare at all the bags they've stuffed full of supplies and food.

James grimaces, because they're right. Between the five of them, they can carry *maybe* two bags a piece while still carting their weapons with them, and Regulus already has a bag of his own. There are fifteen bags in all, including Regulus', which means they'll have to leave five bags behind. That's enough for the death eaters to survive on, which is counterproductive to what they're going for here.

"We'll drop the extra in the crimson river," Regulus declares, glancing around at everyone expectantly.

Mathias bites their lip. "That's such a *waste,* though."

"Yes, but it's better than leaving them behind for the death eaters to use," Regulus points out.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Irene says wryly, "but I'm with Regulus on this one."

"What if we made two trips?" Mathias asks.

James shakes his head. "Too risky. We're already pushing it now. I think—I'm worried we're running over the time limit. I really think we need to go. Now."

"What about Peter?" Irene demands. "He hasn't lit the last fire, James. Why wouldn't he—"

"There was no cannon, so he's still alive," Regulus cuts in, and James is thankful for how rational he's being right now, because James himself is so anxious and worried that he feels like he might vomit. "Something could have happened that kept him from making it to the last fire, but there's a chance that he's fine. Maybe he went back the cave to hide, which means it falls on us to get the fuck out of here."

"Regulus is right," James agrees. "We need to leave. Grab the bags we're tossing and—"

"James!"

The scream from Vanity outside makes them all freeze in despair, because she sounds downright *terrified,* and then they're all running for the cave entrance at the same time, weapons in hand and bags forgotten.

James is immediately horrified by the scene that greets him outside. Willa is dragging Vanity by the hair across the bridge while she struggles, and on the other side are the rest of the death eaters, as well as a beaten Peter. He's on the ground, flat on his back with Bernice holding him down with her boot to his chest. He isn't moving.

"Stop *struggling!"* Willa screeches. "Fuck! If—if you knock us off this damn bridge, I'll—"

"Let me *go!"* Vanity snarls.

They're all running. Of course they are. Desperate to reach Vanity before Willa yanks her to the other side of the bridge. They don't manage to make it in time. James watches it as if it happens in slow motion; Willa drags Vanity all the way across and stumbles from the weight as Vanity fights with all her might to get away, and Willa lets out a quiet yelp from how close to the river she is. She sounds scared. Vespa must think so, too, because she abruptly flies up from Vanity's shoulder, where she was peacefully resting, almost docile despite the fact that Vanity must be so scared right now.

And yet, Vanity isn't the one Vespa stings. Instead, Vespa flies right over to Willa and stings her, which causes her to release a scream so shrill and so full of pain that there's no doubt in James' mind that Vanity wasn't lying about the agony of a Horcrux Hornet's venom. Willa reflexively tries to squash Vespa where she stung her in the arm, even while tripping backwards. She goes down, still screaming when she hits the river with a splash, and hands immediately raise up to drag her and Vespa under, abruptly cutting off her shriek.

"Vespa!" Vanity shouts, scrambling forward, only to cry out when Bernice surges forward from Peter to grab her by the hair and continue dragging her back.

The cannon goes off.

"Yeah, that's right, Black. Come and get her," Bernice calls, fully just tossing Vanity to the side as Regulus sprints right across the bridge. He's the fastest. Of course he makes it first. Irene is right behind him, and James is right behind her, with Mathias bringing up the rear.

Regulus doesn't even hesitate when he makes it over. He slams into Bernice so hard that they both go to the ground in seconds. He fucking *flattens* her, but Bernice fights back, and she fights dirty. She yanks on his hair, punches and kicks and bites, and Regulus fights back just as hard.

Irene makes it over next, and she goes right for Axus, who is rushing over to help Bernice. She doesn't hesitate either, slashing out with her sword across their leg, which makes them shout and stumble to the side. Axus whips around, their hook in hand, and they swing out expertly to catch the blade in the curve of their hook, twisting and *yanking* to snatch the sword right from Irene's hands. Irene takes it in stride and fully just throws herself at them until they're both just rolling around on the ground with yelps and curses.

The thing is, the death eaters are outnumbered now. It's just Bernice and Axus, because Hodge clearly isn't going to do anything. Or that's what James assumes as he pounds over the bridge, his heart in his throat. Because Hodge has never done anything before, so James doesn't even *think*—

"No, no, Hodge, please," Vanity chokes out, trying to crawl backwards as Hodge stoops down over her. Even from here, James can see that his eyes are wide with fear.

"Kill her! Fucking kill her! She killed Willa, and she'll kill you next, Hodge!" Bernice bellows, grunting as she slams Regulus' head back against the ground.

"No! Hodge, *don't!"* James shouts, running as hard as he can, making it to the other side in just enough time to watch Hodge slit Vanity's throat.

Vanity collapses back, making a horrible gurgling noise, and Hodge gasps as he stumbles to the side, dropping his knife. James goes barreling over, finally reaching them. He doesn't mean to do it. That's the thing. He just shoves Hodge further away, not even aware of his own strength in his state of panic, and—and Hodge is so small, he's only fourteen—

James doesn't know what he's done until there's a splash. His head whips around as he hits his knees by Vanity, and he only gets one glimpse of Hodge in the water before the hands are dragging him down, just like Willa. James sucks in a sharp breath, left reeling from the sight and the realization that he just mindlessly pushed Hodge into the river.

He would have turned fifteen tomorrow.

It takes a minute, even longer than Willa—likely due to the fast-acting venom from Vespa—but then the cannon sounds, leaving Hodge eternally fourteen.

Another choked noise snatches James' attention back to Vanity. She's staring up at him in pure fear, throat coated with blood, some bubbling up from her mouth. James makes a weak noise and shakily cups her throat with his hand, his eyes blurring with tears as he lifts her up a little to cradle her head against his legs. She tries to speak, but no words come out.

"Shh, it's okay. You're okay," James whispers, his voice cracking. A wet breath escapes him, his chest feeling like it's caving in. "You're—you're going to be—"

Vanity's eyes glaze over, and the cannon sounds. She's limp against him, no pulse in her throat, no breath causing her chest to rise and fall.

"No, no, I'm—I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Vanity, I'm—" James chokes off because he can't speak through his own tears. He ducks his head forward, sobbing over her helplessly.

Sobbing.

Sobbing.

Sobbing.

She never got her first kiss.

She never got to fall in love.

She never got to go home.

Her prince never saved her.

Her prince killed her.

Her prince is dead.

James feels something within him shrivel and die right along with her, like something inside him has broken with a harsh *snap,* and it'll never heal the right way again. He clutches her closer to him and weeps through gasping breaths, the world around him seeming to have no meaning at all.

Vanity is still holding the vial of venom, the last piece of Vespa she got to have. It's lying in her gently-curled palm, bright and shimmering green. With trembling fingers, James reaches out to take it from her, because that's all he'll get to have of *Vanity.* He clings to it with fingers slick with blood, burying his face in her hair, rocking her back and forth.

Sobbing.

Sobbing.

Sobbing.

~•~

Regulus spits out a mouthful of blood and swings his elbow at Bernice's head, but she manages to catch it and slam his arm down on the ground. Her other forearm presses into his throat, leaving him gasping hoarsely as he fumbles for his dagger and tries to throw her off at the same time.

It doesn't work.

Bernice presses harder, and the more Regulus struggles, the weaker he feels. It gets difficult to breathe, and his vision starts to go in and out, black spots dancing in front of his eyes as the world warps out of focus. He tips his head back, mouth opening and closing, in desperate need of oxygen that he's just *not* getting. His head is pounding, throbbing, and he can't really feel all his limbs properly. Is this dying? Is he—

Without warning, Bernice is snatched right off him, and Regulus immediately sucks in a deep breath. He chokes on it, coughing and curling up on his side as he reaches up to cradle his throat. In front of him, he can see his savior.

Peter.

Honestly, Peter can't really do much with how hurt he is, but he puts up a valiant fight. He punches Bernice in the face and manages to dodge one of her hits, but it doesn't take her very long to lash out at what looks like an injury on his leg. He goes down to his knee with a grunt, which gives her time to dive for her sword that Regulus had previously wrestled from her.

Peter can clearly tell what she's planning to do, because he hurries to get back on his feet and starts off in a limping run. Frankly, Regulus is just grateful for the time that Peter gave him. It allows him to catch his breath and slowly crawl to his feet, finally fumbling for his daggers. Peter is steadily going right for the forest, and Bernice appears agitated enough by him that she can't seem to decide if it's more tempting to follow him, or stay here and keep fighting.

Bernice whips her head back around to look towards Regulus, her chest heaving and her sword gripped tight. He can practically see the cogs working in her brain; they're severely outnumbered right now. It's just her and Regulus, because Mathias and Irene are keeping Axus busy. At the moment, Regulus doesn't know where James is, can't see him from this angle, but he'd heard the cannons and James shouting Vanity's name. He can take a guess. He doesn't let himself think about it, not yet, not now—but he knows.

If he listens hard enough, he can hear James weeping, and the sound makes him flinch, so he doesn't listen.

"Axus, *retreat,* you idiot!" Bernice shouts, and then she whirls around and starts sprinting for the forest in the same direction that Peter went in, except Peter is already gone.

Regulus goes still, eyes narrowing as he raises his dagger, tracking her as she runs in a zigzag pattern. But it *is* nonetheless a pattern he can follow, and he tugs his hand back, ready to let his dagger fly. He's going to hit her. He *knows* he's going to hit her, which is why it's genuinely infuriating when he's distracted by the sound of Mathias' horrified shout.

Grinding his teeth, Regulus lets Bernice go, choosing instead to whip around and see what's wrong. Axus and Irene are *going at it,* and it's fucking brutal. Axus' hook is buried in Irene's side, but she's not letting that stop her in the least. She just tugs it out, carelessly tossing it aside as she launches herself forward again; the wound isn't deep, or fatal, so she should be fine. Behind Axus, Mathias raises their crossbow.

The following sequence of events is just a tragedy everyone is too late to stop. Axus grabs Irene and whips around with her in front of them at the same time that Mathias shoots.

Mathias doesn't miss.

The bolt lands right where they aimed, except it wasn't Irene they were aiming for when they took the shot. It's Irene that releases a choked, wheezing noise as the bolt buries itself in her chest. Mathias' eyes widen, and they drop their crossbow.

"No. No, wait," Mathias breathes out. "Irene? I—I—"

Cursing, Regulus flings his dagger right at Axus, and it lands in the side of their arm, making them yelp and flail backwards. Irene stumbles forward into Mathias' arms, and Axus whirls around to see Regulus. Much like Bernice, they seem to realize what shit they've landed themselves in, and they start backing up slowly, eyeing Regulus warily. They leave the dagger in their arm and start backing up faster when Regulus draws out his last one and holds it at the ready.

"Help. Regulus, *help me,"* Mathias pleads, trying to hold Irene up, tears in their eyes. "Please. I—I need help."

"Get her across the bridge, *now,"* Regulus orders, moving over to reach down and scoop her legs up. Axus is still backing up, watching, clearly wary about being left alone.

Regulus will kill them if he has to, but everything is moving so fast, and Irene is the current priority. The bolt is sticking out of her chest, and she grips it through clenched teeth, but she wisely doesn't remove it as they carry her quickly over the bridge. Regulus still has his dagger in hand, and he keeps a check behind him; Axus is closer to the woods, a bit of a distance away, but they've stopped backing up. They're looking up at the sky where a Hallow heli-carrier is flying over them, making trees sway and sending a gale across them.

Irene is placed gently on the ground, leaning back against one of the poles as she takes short, labored breaths and cradles the bolt impaling her. Again, Regulus glances back to see where the heli-carrier is going, his heart dropping when he spots James on the ground with Vanity sprawled across his legs limply, cradled in his arms.

"I'm—I'm so sorry," Mathias gasps out, drawing Regulus' attention back to the matter at hand. "Irene, I didn't—I'm *sorry,* I—I never meant to—"

"S'okay. It's—" Irene clenches her teeth and shakes her head, reaching out with a shaking hand to thread her hand into Mathias' hair, tugging their head forward until she can press both of their foreheads together.

They both linger there for a moment, and then Mathias pulls back. A look passes between them and Irene that somehow, despite everything, makes Irene give them a watery smile.

"No," Mathias whispers. "Please. Irene, *please."*

Irene coughs. "I'm not—you know I'm not going to make it, Mathias. Even with the supplies here, it's not—" She lets out a wheezing breath, grimacing. "It won't be enough."

"I didn't *mean to,"* Mathias chokes out, tears spilling out of their eyes, raising one hand to press the back of their hand against their mouth as they break down crying.

"I know. I know," Irene wheezes, reaching out to gently pass her hand over their hair. "It's okay. You're going to be okay, Mathias. Can you—will you do me a favor?"

Mathias nods through their tears.

"Don't watch this part," Irene whispers. "I'm going to stay here with Regulus, yeah? Go into the cave until—until the cannon sounds. Go on."

"Irene," Mathias whispers, "I—"

"Go, Mathias," Irene orders firmly, shakily pushing at their shoulder.

"I'm *sorry,"* Mathias says, and they keep saying it, chanting it over and over as they weep and get to their feet, frantically stumbling towards the cave.

"Hey!" Irene calls after them, the word rattling in her chest and making her gasp as she reaches out to clamp down on Regulus' thigh. She smooths out her face when Mathias whips back around, even manages a smile. "I love you, kid."

Mathias' whole face crumbles, but they dutifully reply with a hoarse, "I love you, too," and then they're gone.

Irene collapses back against the pole with a gasp, her fingers flexing into Regulus' leg. Regulus may not like her, but he doesn't pull away when her hand fumbles for his, holding on so hard that it actually hurts. The heli-carrier is close now, and Regulus follows Irene's gaze to see the coffin-like cage-claw slowly descending through the air.

"Think it'll wait for me?" Irene rasps.

"Probably," Regulus admits quietly. He doesn't know if she hears him over the rush of wind or not.

"So, um." Irene licks her lips and squeezes her eyes shut, face twisting with pain. "This—this is going to take a while, and I'd really like to get it over and done with." She reaches out with her other hand, fingers trembling as they slide over his hand where he's holding his last dagger. Her eyes flutter open so she can look at him. "Show a girl a little mercy, huh?"

It takes Regulus a second to get what she means. A lump forms in his throat immediately. "You want me to—"

"Finish me off? Yeah," Irene confirms. "Surprise, surprise, but this hurts really fucking bad, and I don't want to have to suffer through pulling it out to speed up the process. So, if you would be so kind…"

"Irene," Regulus says softly, eyebrows furrowed.

"The sooner you do it, the sooner you can get to James. He needs you." Irene swallows when he doesn't move, and she squeezes his hand around his dagger. "Please, Regulus. It hurts. Just —please."

"Okay," Regulus whispers, and he squeezes her other hand as he nods and takes a deep breath. He holds her gaze, because she deserves that, at least. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Irene whispers back. "You're helping me, and I have to admit, I did not see that coming. Don't—don't feel bad about this, yeah? I'm—I'm really grateful. Thank you."

Regulus swallows harshly, because he suddenly can't figure out why he didn't like her before, and all he feels for her now is a mixture of sorrow and respect. He lifts his dagger, and he doesn't look away as he does as she's asked him to. It's quick, though not entirely painless when she's already in pain to start with, he's sure, but he tries. Her eyes never leave his, and she holds his hand until her own falls slack and the cannon sounds. Regulus' eyes sink shut as he dips his head forward.

"Axus!"

At Mathias' shout, Regulus' head snaps up in just enough time to see them come sprinting past with a knife and a spear in one hand each, respectively. Cursing, Regulus launches to his feet and whirls around.

"Mathias! *Mathias,* no!" Regulus shouts, chasing after them.

Regulus' heart drops when he sees that Axus has taken notice of James, who is still holding onto Vanity and doesn't even seem aware that the heli-carrier is hovering above him, clearly waiting to scoop Vanity's body the moment James lets it go. It's obvious that Axus plans to take advantage of his grief, but Mathias is out for *blood,* due to their own.

The problem is, Axus is close to the bridge again, and Mathias is just barreling for them at full speed. This wouldn't *be* a problem if Axus wasn't aware of that or within hook-tossing range of the bridge. It happens fast; with just three easy lasso swings above their head, Axus tosses his hook to catch the edge of the bride while Mathias is making their way across, and then they give a harsh *yank.*

The end of the bridge on the bank in front of Regulus goes sailing forward, dipping into the water, making Mathias stumble backwards. Hands instantly come up out of the water, dragging the bridge under and taking Mathias with it, leaving Regulus deserted once again on the other side.

"Fuck. *Fuck!"* Regulus shouts, pacing back and forth as he shoves his hands through his hair. Axus reels their hook in and waves at him with a playful smile before turning to head right for James, swinging their hook. "No. No, no, no. James! *James!"*

Regulus screaming his name does manage to capture James' attention. He appears to suddenly become aware of what's happening, at least with the heli-carrier, which causes him to gently deposit Vanity on the ground and step away. It's clear that he's trying to watch her get lifted out, but sadly, he doesn't have the time to do that.

The cannon sounds for Mathias, drowning out Regulus shouting James' name in pure desperation. Axus is so close.

"James!" Regulus yells again, his heart sinking because—

As soon as James turns around, Axus throws their hook, and it embeds itself into James' thigh so deep that it goes clear across to the other side. Regulus' breath punches out of him as he surges forward as far as he can before he hits the river. With one harsh tug, Axus pulls James right off his feet.

James lands flat on his back, grunting and crying out in pain, but Axus doesn't even hesitate. They wind the rope around their arms, then drag a flailing, shouting James across the field and into the forest. Regulus can only stand there and watch, trapped on the other side of the river.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!"* Regulus snarls. He paces back and forth again, like an animal in a cage, his mind in an uproar.

James. They've got James.

It's all—everything just happened so fast, and practically everyone is fucking *dead,* and—and —

Regulus didn't even see everyone die. Mathias, Irene, and Willa, yes. But Vanity and Hodge? He has no fucking idea what happened to them. Five people dead, just like that, just that quickly. Irene's body is still behind him, his dagger still buried between her ribs and in her heart. As close to an instant death as he could get. Forty-five seconds at most.

Vanity has been lifted out, and the heli-carrier is indeed flying over to get Irene. He moves over quickly to get his dagger, his heart racing. He's gentle when pulling it out, and he takes the bolt, too, trying to wipe away some of the violence that happened to her here. She shouldn't be taken home with proof of how she died. He doesn't think she would want that.

"I'm sorry," Regulus rasps one last time, then steps back to watch her get lifted out. Maybe it's stupid, but in his daze, he finds something mildly comforting about the fact that Vanity and Irene will be taken from here together.

It's not much of a comfort, but it's something.

Five people are dead. Six people remain. Bernice, Peter, Axus, Juniper, James, and Regulus himself. Regulus finds his bag and cleans his dagger as his mind races, eyes darting along the treeline, waiting for James to come back. He always—

Swallowing, Regulus takes a deep breath and slowly releases it. James is still alive. Wherever Axus is taking him, James is still alive. If he has his hatchet—wait, does he have—

Regulus scrambles forward to go right up to the river again, desperately searching the ground on the other side with his gaze. It takes him a second, and for a moment, he thinks that James *did* have his hatchet, which means he would have a weapon to fight with. But no, it's there on the ground, and the sight of it nearly takes Regulus out at the knees.

Okay, Regulus thinks, pacing again as he flexes his fingers around his last dagger. Okay. This is—it's okay, because James is still alive. There was no cannon, and it's been a few minutes now, so maybe James managed to get away. Maybe he snatched the hook out and somehow managed to hide, and that's the only reason he hasn't come back. Maybe Axus stopped to kill him—because of course they would—and James figured out a way to knock them out and get away.

There are a lot of scenarios that pass through Regulus' mind, and none of them matter, because no cannon has sounded, which means James is still alive. He just has to stay alive until this fucking river ices over, and then Regulus will find him.

Regulus is still very set on winning the games, but he can't deny that somewhere not as deep as it should be, he doesn't want James to die. It's not some big revelation, really. Regulus sort of already knew that, considering the lengths he's gone to help keep James alive. He knows—he *does* know that James is going to die. He has to die at some point. Just—just not now. Not yet. Not like this. Not when Regulus can stop it.

He doesn't know if that's his own stupidity, due to the heart flutters and the fact that he's known James practically his whole life, or if it's about Sirius in some way. Because he knows that Sirius will be absolutely fucking *wrecked* when James dies, and if all Regulus can do is put that off a bit more, just a bit longer, then he can't help but want to.

And—well, honestly, Regulus isn't ready to do this alone. He's not ready for James to leave him yet. He's not—he can't—

Boom!

At the sound of the cannon going off, Regulus goes very still. It's like the whole world stops for a second, and his ears start to ring as pressure builds and builds in his chest. He can't breathe suddenly. He's trying, but he can't, which causes him to put his hand to his chest to see if it actually caved in the way it just felt like it did. It's rising and falling at a rapid rate, but that doesn't make sense, because he's not getting enough oxygen. Briefly, he wonders if he somehow got wounded without knowing it, but no, no, he's fine. It's just superficial injuries from the fight with Bernice, so what's—what's *wrong?*

Something is wrong. He can't—he feels—

James, he thinks.

"No," Regulus says out loud. It's cold, hard denial. It doesn't *matter* if that's the only thing that makes sense, because Axus and James were the only two together, and James is injured, no weapon at all, and—and—

Regulus shakes his head, heaving out a harsh breath, choking on it. "Sirius," he rasps. "That—that wasn't him, right? Sirius, that wasn't James. It—it wasn't—Sirius? *Sirius,* was that—"

Of course, Sirius can't answer him. Sirius likely wouldn't be able to answer him even if he could, if it *was* James, because he would—he would be—

Helplessly, Regulus sinks down to the ground, trying so hard to fucking *breathe,* but he can't. He doesn't know how. *Panic attack,* his mind points out from a vague distance, which isn't really helpful information when he *can't stop panicking.*

James, Regulus thinks again. He buries his hands in his hair, rocking back and forth as struggles to breathe, muffling the broken sounds that fall out of his mouth against his bent knees. Again and again, he thinks *James, James, James.*

James.

James.

James.

~•~

"I *have* to find a way to tell him," Sirius hisses, starting to back up, but Marlene catches his arm.

"Sirius, there isn't a way you can tell him," Marlene whispers, her voice thick as she tugs him to a harsh halt. "Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

Sirius takes a deep breath, trying to keep his head about him. There are tears in Marlene's eyes, and her face is puffy. She'd been a wreck from the moment Vanity and Hodge died, and Sirius can't deny that it was fucking heartbreaking. Knowing the girl had a crush on the boy, and he killed her…

James didn't mean to push him in, Sirius knows that, but it's still hard to look Marlene directly in her eyes and see her grief right now. At the same time, James had held onto Vanity like he was losing a part of himself while losing her, and that makes it hard to look at Marlene, too. There's so much pain and loss between them, between everyone.

Frank and Emmeline are getting started on getting fucking drunk. Irene and Mathias' deaths were rough. At the time, Frank had admitted that he appreciated what Regulus did for Irene—a mercy killing, one necessary as it was, because Frank wouldn't have had the sponsors to help her anyway. Emmeline lost her last remaining tribute, too.

The cannon was for Juniper, not James.

It could have been James if not *for* Juniper. Axus had indeed been dragging James through the forest, only to fall in a hole, unbelievably enough. One Juniper had been digging in preparation for the approaching night. It had given James the time to get the hook out of his leg and run, but Axus killed Juniper, though not without her absolutely beating the fuck out of them first. Unfortunately, Axus had a weapon, so Juniper didn't make it.

James got away, though. He's hiding now, because his leg is quite bad, *but* Axus doesn't know where he went. They may be looking for him, but they're going in the wrong direction, and it won't be long before they'll need to settle down to get ready for the drop in temperature. James is alone in a cave no one's been in before, in a lot of pain, but he's alive.

The problem is, Regulus is freaking the fuck out.

Genuinely, he's spiraling. Sirius doesn't think he's ever seen Regulus like this, not once in his life. It's *that* bad. Maybe it's not obvious to most, but Sirius knows his brother, and Regulus is failing to keep it together. Until he knows James is alive, he's going to continue to lose his collective shit.

Sirius has to tell him somehow. He has to calm Regulus down, because Regulus needs to go find James as soon as fucking possible. He's the key to healing James, because no sponsor wants to send medication until Regulus and James are reunited, wanting more romance between them, because that's more important to them than James' pain.

It makes Sirius want to rip the world apart, makes him want to shake these people, scream in their faces, just fucking *lose it* on them. These people are *enjoying* the fact that Regulus seems so upset about thinking James is dead. They're all sick fucks.

Sirius has been trying as hard as he can, but no one will do anything so soon, not until they see what Regulus is going to do. So, to help James and to calm Regulus down, Sirius needs to find some way to tell him what's going on.

He can't do that through a sponsor. They'll never allow it.

It's going to have to be in the arena.

"Sirius," Marlene says sharply when he pulls away.

"I need to go," Sirius declares. "I'm—I'm really sorry about Vanity and Hodge, Marlene. I truly am. Just—I have to go, alright? I have to try."

Marlene swallows. "Be careful. *Don't* do anything stupid."

Sirius doesn't reply, because if it takes something stupid to save his best friend's life and pick up the pieces of his brother, then he'll do it without hesitation.

Here's to hoping he doesn't have to.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you who do not want to read AT ALL, and just want a quick summary so you can skip the chapter entirely (which is valid), then ill do that first. SPOILERS AHEAD: ill water it down as much as i possibly can. so, basically, peter doesn't get to light the third fire before the death eaters catch up with him. they beat him up pretty badly, and they're about to kill him when bernice makes the comment that she wants james and regulus dead. peter tells her that he knows where they are and can take the death eaters to them, and so they go. a fight breaks out that ends with willa, hodge, vanity, irene, and mathias all dying—in that order. following that, regulus gets stuck on the other side of the river again, while axus throws their hook into james' leg and drags

him off into the woods. a cannon sounds, and regulus has a panic attack because he thinks it's james, but it's juniper. seeing regulus so upset and knowing that to help james get medicine, then regulus will have to reunite with james, sirius sets out to find some way to let regulus know that james is alive.

for those of you who want/need more in-depth warnings to read:

-the depictions of violence: when the death eaters locate peter, they beat him very badly, and he gets shot in the leg with an arrow. he is described as begging for his life and crying, as well as apologizing repeatedly out of fear/desperation.

bernice and regulus get into a fight, and she nearly chokes him out, but peter saves him before she does.

axus and irene—and mathias—get into a fight as well. irene slashes at axus' leg with her sword, and axus buries their hook in irene's side, but she pulls it out and keeps fighting. mathias shoots their crossbow, but axus turns irene so that she takes the shot to the chest. regulus throws one of his daggers and hits axus in the arm with it.

-the depictions of injury: there's a description where james takes axus' hook to his thigh, and it's brief, but it is described as breaking through one side to the other.

-the depictions of murder/death (not the children/minors): mathias ends up in the river while attempting to run across the bridge, but axus uses their hook to yank it enough that the bridge gets dragged under, mathias along with it.

the depictions of children/minors dying: it's fairly brief, but willa is stung by vespa (the horcrux hornet) and falls into the river, taking vespa with her when she goes. following that, hodge uses his knife on vanity to cut her throat after bernice screams at him to kill her. james, while trying to reach her, shoves hodge aside, pushing harder than he means to in his panic, and hodge goes into the river as well. there's a brief scene describing the blood on vanity's throat and on her lips, but her death is fairly quick, just very fucking sad. juniper also dies—killed by axus, who fell in the hole she was digging—but it's not described and it's only mentioned, and it's said that she beat the shit out of axus before she died.

the depiction of a mercy-killing: after irene takes a crossbow bolt to the chest, she's carried over the bridge by mathias and regulus. she sends mathias away, and because she's in a lot of pain, she asks that regulus will kill her to make it quicker, so he does at her request. it's not described in too much detail, but it's explicitly stated that he stabs her in the heart, between her ribs, to make it as fast as possible.

for everyone else who has finished...

now you see why this one was so hard for me to write. like, i KNOW they're not real, and yet i still felt so bad. it's a lot all at once as well, which makes it even more difficult to digest.

i think it hits even harder when you realize that vanity and hodge are narrative foils to james and regulus, and also that hodge is a direct narrative parallel to regulus, if he had ended up in the arena when his name was called the first time. also, the fact that regulus stabbing irene was foreshadowed, and mathias used to miss most shots with their crossbow in the training room, but didn't miss this one...

also, regulus frantically begging sirius to tell him that the person who died wasn't james... and james being so upset about vanity, then getting injured again... im going to walk directly into traffic. goodbye, cruel world.

i say all of this as if i did not write it. just know that i, too, hate that ive written this. please don't be too harsh with me. im as devasted, i assure you.

let me do numbers, i guess :/

tributes remaining: 5
tributes who have died as of this chapter:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
willa
hodge
vanity
irene
mathias
juniper
eight unnamed/unknown others

Hope

Chapter Notes

hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-referenced to past child death
-references to past injuries
-references to past torture (sort of??? it's vaguely hinted at, but just in case)
-references to being sexualized as a minor (because of the whole Hallow thinking of sirius as a sex symbol, and it's not expressed in detail, but it's explicitly stated)
-discussions of issues surrounding sex and desire

you may not believe me, considering the previous chapter, but this one is really not as bad as the one before it—though, considering the previous one, that's not really saying much. the bar is on the floor, i am aware, but i really do think this will be soothing in some parts, at least.

enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Horace Slughorn looks mildly surprised to find Sirius requesting to speak to him, but he dutifully steps out of the gamemaker room, shutting the door behind him. Sirius plasters on his brightest smile, like his best friend isn't injured and his little brother isn't losing his mind.

"Sirius, m'boy, how can I help you?" Slughorn asks. "I'll have to ask you to make it quick, whatever it is, because we're hard at work, you understand."

Hard at work destroying lives, Sirius thinks, but he only chuckles and says, "Oh, yes, I don't doubt it. A good turnout, isn't it? Six dead all so close together. We haven't seen such action like that in…years, honestly. Positive reviews so far?"

"Overwhelmingly positive," Slughorn confirms, giving Sirius further reason to lose all faith in humanity. "Again, I have to thank you. I did not expect James and Regulus to be such a focal point this year, if I'm honest, but they're all anyone can talk about. James' moment with

Vanity was especially moving, and now your brother is a mess at the thought that James is dead. The reunion will be magical, surely."

"Oh, if only," Sirius says, adopting an apologetic frown, and Slughorn's eyebrows furrow. "It's just—well, I'll admit that Regulus will likely be relieved when he finds James again, but I'm sorry to say that he'll still be quite withdrawn. I fear the viewers might end up being disappointed, after all."

Slughorn looks startled. "Surely this is enough to bring the boy's feelings to the surface. It warrants a kiss, at the very least. Perhaps a love confession?"

"Regulus won't see it that way," Sirius murmurs, feeling sick that he's standing here, talking about his little brother's love life, plotting how to use it to their advantage while pretending to let *Slughorn* use it to his advantage. "See, you asked before what it would take to, ah, break through to Regulus, what push he needs, and I'm here to tell you."

"Yes?" Slughorn prompts, watching him eagerly, focused.

Sirius reaches out and gently squeezes Slughorn's shoulder, lowering his voice like he's trading secrets. "Hope. Regulus needs hope."

"Hope," Slughorn replies, leaning back a little to blink at him.

"Mhm." Sirius nods his head and gently squeezes his shoulder again. "Regulus isn't the type of person who believes in the saying: *it's better to have loved and lost than never love at all.* In fact, he will go out of his way to avoid love if he knows he's going to end up losing, you see, but if he had *hope…"*

"Well, unfortunately he'll end up losing regardless, so I'm not sure what you mean," Slughorn says.

"The thing is, Regulus wouldn't keep holding himself back if he knew he had a future to look forward to with James. A future to *fight for,"* Sirius tells him, his heart racing as he works to keep himself outwardly calm. If this works… Fuck, if he manages to pull this off… The mere thought makes his hands shake, but he covers it well, and Slughorn doesn't notice. "He'd put up a fight like no other if he had that hope."

Slughorn is silent for a long moment, and Sirius can see the idea taking shape in his eyes; Sirius knows what it is, because he's leading Slughorn right to it. He just has to say it, like it's *his* idea, and Sirius will play him like a fiddle. *Come on, come on, you're almost there,* Sirius thinks.

"A future," Slughorn muses thoughtfully, and again, Sirius gently squeezes his shoulder—reinforcing good behavior and approval through body language. Sirius has this down to a science after years of being a mentor. "If I could give Regulus hope, you say? Hope for a future? One in which he could be with James, even…past the games?"

"That would do it, yes," Sirius assures him.

Slughorn hums. "That would facilitate all the proper romantic peaks everyone is looking for between them?"

"Without a doubt," Sirius confirms.

"So…the promise of *two* Victors," Slughorn says softly. "Two tributes from the same district could be Victors."

"Oh, *brilliant,"* Sirius breathes out, beaming at him and squeezing his shoulder again. "You're brilliant. The best head gamemaker the hunger games has ever seen, no doubt. It's never been done before, you know. You'd be the first. You'd go down in history for it, and the audience—oh, the viewers would go *ballistic.* You'd be their hero!"

"They would like that, wouldn't they?" Slughorn agrees with a chortle, looking pleased, and of course he likes the praise. Of course he likes the idea that it was *his* idea. That's the whole point, really, because Sirius knows exactly what he's doing.

Sirius leans in conspiratorially. "They'd raise statues in your honor, and not only would you be facilitating romance, but you'd also have drama. Peter and Bernice remain as well, so that will keep the viewers on the edge of their seat if they decide to team up. Your idea—it's literally perfect. My word, I hope it isn't a bother for me to say, but your mind is at a level of which I could only dream of one day reaching."

"Oh, that's…" Slughorn turns vaguely puce, waving his hand as if to lightly brush off Sirius' words, but it's clearly pleased him. He's an older man with no children, and in his age, it seems that he wants to be influential to those younger to him; revered by them; praised by them. "Sirius, dear boy, you flatter me. I'm sure you'll be wise by the time you reach my age."

"Never as wise as you," Sirius says with a rich laugh, once again squeezing Slughorn's shoulder. "My apologies for taking your time. I'll let you get back to work, shall I?"

Slughorn smiles. "For the best. I have a lot of work to do."

~•~

Dorcas doesn't think she's ever rushed like this before in her *life.* She also hasn't looked like this where anyone could see her since… Well, frankly she can't remember a time that she's ever let herself look like this in public. She's wearing a holey t-shirt, thin pajama pants with blue cats all over them, a pair of green slippers, no accessories or makeup, and a bonnet.

Dorcas hasn't so much as left her place without being fully dressed, her hair and makeup done, wearing jewelry, and in a nice pair of shoes in *years.*

None of that matters, though, not really.

Not now.

Not when Vanity and Hodge are dead. Dorcas watched it happen, stricken enough that she broke down crying, and as soon as she got her wits enough to calm down, she started running. She barely even stopped to get her shoes.

Dorcas' chest is heaving when she finally comes to a stop in front of the door she's been running to like a maniac, not even bothering to try to get a ride. Her place was close enough that waiting for a ride wasn't something she was willing to do. So, instead, she ran. She never once stopped.

And now, here she is, gasping for air and genuinely *exhausted* as she raises her hand and knocks on the door. She tries to catch her breath, but it doesn't really work. Her whole body is screaming in protest for her ridiculous antics, but—

But Marlene opens the door, and it's worth it.

"I—I came as fast—as fast as I could," Dorcas pants out, holding her side where it aches from running.

Instantly, Marlene's face crumbles, and she practically spills out of the doorway and right into Dorcas' arms. Dorcas reaches up to wrap her arms around her tight, cupping the back of her head as she muffles a gut-wrenching sob right into Dorcas' shoulder. She's clinging, digging her fingers into Dorcas' back like claws, shuddering against her like she's falling apart. Dorcas swallows harshly and keeps an arm around her as she navigates them into the suite.

Marlene lets herself be led inside, trusting Dorcas to move her around while she's still attached, not caring if she stumbles. Dorcas doesn't care either; she closes the door and locks it, then carefully leads Marlene over to the lounge chair, pulling Marlene down on it with her. Marlene practically collapses against her and cries into her throat, and all Dorcas can do is turn her face into Marlene's hair and silently cry with her.

"They were—they were *so young,"* Marlene chokes out.

"I know," Dorcas whispers. "I know, Marlene. I'm so sorry."

It's a long time before Marlene calms down enough to stop crying, and even then, her breath hiccups out of her and she keeps sniffling. She doesn't raise her head from Dorcas' chest, and she breathes soft and slow, her fingers limp where they're draped over Dorcas' arm. Dorcas cards her fingers gently though Marlene's hair, careful not to pull on it.

"They made it so far," Marlene rasps, eventually. "Was it stupid of me to hope one of them could make it home?"

"No," Dorcas murmurs. "No, that wasn't stupid. You believed in them. You cared about them. That's never stupid."

Marlene takes in a soft, hitched breath. "I tried so hard, Dorcas, and the whole time—even from the start—I *knew* they wouldn't make it. I just… I really wanted to be wrong."

"I'm sorry," Dorcas tells her, a lump in her throat, because she is. It's not her fault, but that doesn't stop her from wishing it never happened, wishing she could fix it. She's so fucking sorry that they're gone, that Marlene is in pain, because it's not fair. None of this is fair.

"Why would he do that?" Marlene whispers, lifting her head to look at Dorcas through puffy eyes. "Hodge just—he killed her. Why would he—how could he—"

"He was scared, I think." Dorcas takes a deep breath and pulls her hand forward to cup Marlene's cheek, swiping her thumb through teartracks. "I don't know. I—I really can't say, but he was being yelled at by Bernice; his other friend has just died, Willa; everyone was fighting, and James was running right for him. Up until that point, he never really hurt anyone. I think it just came down to fear."

"It's just fucked," Marlene says. "She had a crush on him, and she spent her last moments knowing that he killed her. And worrying about Vespa, who she just saw get taken into the river, except Vespa is basically immortal, so she's just perpetually suffering, I guess." Marlene shakes her head. "I know that's *exactly* what Vanity was probably thinking about while she was dying. Oh, and James. At least she had James."

"I, um. Well, I didn't get to see everything that happened after," Dorcas admits. "I pretty much immediately left, so I have no idea what happened to the others."

"Did you—did you run here?" Marlene croaks, staring at her with wide, watery eyes.

Dorcas nods. "About four miles, yeah."

Marlene stares at her for a long moment, then shifts up and grips the cushion by Dorcas' head to lean in and kiss her. It's not a deep kiss, not harsh or biting or heated. It's soft. So soft and so gentle, just a brush of mouths, warm and sweet. For someone who doesn't remember how to be gentle, Marlene takes to it startlingly well, treating Dorcas like she's precious.

"Thank you," Marlene whispers when she pulls away.

"Of course. I—I told you, I care about them, too," Dorcas says with a weak smile. "And I care about you, if that wasn't obvious. I don't leave the house like this for just *anyone,* McKinnon. I look—"

"Beautiful," Marlene cuts in, full-stop, like it's not even up for debate. "You're beautiful, Dorcas, always."

Dorcas knows beauty isn't the most important thing in this world—there are far more pressing matters than what one looks like, which not enough Hallows know—but that doesn't mean she doesn't appreciate the compliment. She wouldn't say she's vain, or insecure, but she's grown up in a setting where beauty is almost a currency. Marlene makes her feel rich, and she's never really been poor in that regard anyway.

Marlene lays her head back on Dorcas' chest, and Dorcas strokes her hair in silence again. Neither of them speak for a long time, and Dorcas knows they're both thinking of Vanity and Hodge. They're not the only ones who cared about them, because they no doubt had family, and Dorcas watched enough of the games to see that James, Peter, Irene, Mathias, and even Regulus cared about Vanity. Hodge's closest friend was Willa, due to the similarities in their age, but even that was a bit of a stretch. Still, that's not enough. The whole world should have cared, but so few actually did.

So few actually do care about any of these people. It's like as soon as they enter the arena, the tributes are nothing more than characters in a show to them, except these are real people's *lives*. For some, the stakes are what draw them in. For others, they're willfully ignorant to the reality staring them right in the face. They don't *want* to see it, because looking at it means seeing their part in it.

One day, these people are going to find themselves caught in the midst of a war—one that's building—and they're not even going to understand why, or what's happening. Some people will see it for what it is, and there will even be some that are going to do the right thing.

Like Gideon and Fabian. They were never ignorant, and Dorcas knew instantly that they would be willing to fight. She didn't expect them to die for the cause before the war ever reached them. And now there's Molly, who is on a train right now to go see her brothers' bodies at the Phoenix, because the Order retrieved them after an informant told them where they were dumped. They'll have funerals, and Molly will get to attend, but Molly will never again get to come home. When she left, she left everything behind to fight in her brothers' name in a war that's barely even started yet.

One of Dorcas' biggest regrets is recruiting Fabian and Gideon Prewett in the Order of the Phoenix. She *knows* she's supposed to. That's literally her job, but they're dead, and she can't help but feel partially at fault. She has a lot of responsibilities in the Order from her place in the Hallow, and she knows the risks just like everyone, but it never sits right with her when she sees another person brought into this and has to come to terms with the fact that they might die.

"I want to burn the Hallow for this," Marlene rasps, and Dorcas feels her heart jump. "Sorry if that's offensive, but—"

"No," Dorcas says quickly. "That's—no, it's fine. I do, too."

"If I could, I would bring the Hallow to its knees," Marlene informs her, sounding downright *dangerous*. Dorcas swallows thickly, staring up at the ceiling as she continues to pass her fingers through Marlene's hair. "If there was some way to do it, I'd give anything to take Riddle down and end these games so what happened to Vanity and Hodge never happens again."

Dorcas holds her breath for a long moment. It's like she can feel Dumbledore's piercing gaze on the side of her head from here, which is ridiculous. He's like a shadow in the room, waiting in the corner, looming with his withered hands folded ever so gently together. She knows what he wants; she knows what she's supposed to do in this situation.

Exhaling slowly, Dorcas tips her head down to look at Marlene where she's still resting her head on her chest. Carefully, with a tenderness that makes her chest ache, Dorcas sweeps her hair back from her face, and she can't. Dorcas can't do it. She knows that she should, that it would make up for the loss of Gideon and Fabian, in Dumbledore's eyes, and it's not as if Marlene wouldn't be a brilliant asset.

But Dorcas can't do it. Whether Marlene would be willing to take the risks or not, *Dorcas* isn't willing to risk her. Not her. Not Marlene, who cares about children despite the fact that she knew she couldn't save them. Not Marlene, who has a rough grip and kindness in her heart. Not Marlene, who wants to fight, but deserves to rest. She deserves to be safe.

So, all Dorcas says is, "Yeah, Marlene, me too."

"A part of me is—" Marlene's voice catches, but she breathes, and it evens out again. "I know this is awful, but a part of me is *relieved.* Just relieved that it's over, and they're not suffering anymore. And neither am I. Maybe that's selfish—"

"I don't think so," Dorcas murmurs, sliding her hand down to cup Marlene's jaw and tilt her face up. "I think you're allowed to feel however you feel about it. This isn't… Well, you already know that this situation is fucked up as it is. We're hardly going to respond to it conventionally, are we?"

"No, I suppose not," Marlene replies quietly.

"I'm here, alright? I'm here," Dorcas tells her, then dips in and presses a short, warm kiss to her mouth, mostly in the need for comfort and the desire to give it.

As Dorcas pulls back, Marlene mumbles, "You're a really good—"

"Hook-up?" Dorcas fills in when Marlene seemingly gets stuck. Her mouth twitches up slightly when Marlene clears her throat and purses her lips.

"Well, you're a little bit more than a hook-up, at this point, I would say," Marlene tells her, gesturing to her current state pointedly, making it clear that just some random hook-up wouldn't get to see her like this—and Dorcas gets that, really. It's not exactly something you share with just anyone. Things like this can be even more intimate than sex. "No, I think you're a good…friend, Dorcas Meadowes."

"A good friend," Dorcas repeats softly, her lips curling up helplessly as Marlene avoids her gaze. The thing is, Dorcas can't really offer her anything else, as much as she would like to. Of course a part of her wants to say *fuck friends, let's be more,* but it's not that simple. She has responsibilities, and her permanence in this world—in this brewing war—is not guaranteed. Frankly, the more Marlene gets involved with her, the more danger she's in, and the more she has to lose. While Dumbledore would be willing to ask her to take such risks, Dorcas is not, so she says, "Well, I'm honored to be your good friend, Marlene McKinnon."

Marlene meets her gaze, and she looks slightly disappointed, but she has a lot of things to be disappointed right now, so Dorcas is sure she hardly qualifies. Marlene doesn't fight it, in any case. She just quirks a tiny smile and murmurs, "Yeah."

"Come here," Dorcas whispers, pulling her in again.

"Will you stay tonight?" Marlene whispers back, settling in against her once more.

"Of course," Dorcas answers, and she does.

What are friends for, right?

~•~

Remus watches with Pandora's hand holding his tight as Regulus goes through the first stage of grief—denial—then hits anger and gets stuck, or maybe he just goes mental.

Whatever it is, it's awful to watch.

Regulus moves like a man on a mission, stomping from the cave to the river over and over to drop each weapon and every bag of supplies—excluding his own—into the water to be taken under by pale, clawed, skeletal hands. He tosses away practically *everything;* every tool, every bit of food and water, and every single weapon not already gone or taken. He keeps his dagger and his bag of supplies, and that's it.

Remus is quite sure that Regulus' plan is to murder everyone. He's making it very clear that the only way to properly survive this will be to fight, and based on his visible pent-up agitation, he's just *itching* for a fight. From what Remus has gathered, Regulus is about to go from the hunted to the hunter.

It's getting late, the temperature clearly dropping, but the river still hasn't iced over yet. Remus wonders if that's on purpose, if the gamemakers are deliberately keeping Regulus in a cage. He's pacing like a wild animal, unable to be still, blatantly waiting for the chance to go. No one's ever stayed awake to chase people down before, simply because it's too cold, Remus thinks, but he's pretty sure Regulus is about to be the first. He's so vengeful that Remus genuinely believes he will find each and every remaining person to kill them.

Unbeknownst to him, however, James is very alive. He's sequestered away in a small cave, clearly in a lot of pain. Thankfully, he's wrapped his leg, but it obviously hurts him. What hurts him more, Remus thinks, is the loss of all his friends in one fell swoop. James is grieving, there's no denying that; he's just sitting there, weeping as he stares down at the vial of Horcrux Hornet venom Vanity died holding onto.

James is slumped inside his cave, and his escape has clearly taken a lot out of him, because he's starting to nod off, despite his grief. His eyes are visibly drooping, and it doesn't take long at all before he's passed out. Remus doesn't know if it's from the blood loss or the pain, but it's worrying anyway.

Remus is on edge for many different reasons. Regulus and James are in the final five, and they're both hurting. Bernice and Axus are still out there. They haven't found each other yet, both settling down on their own for the night, but Remus knows it's only a matter of time—if Regulus doesn't get to them first. Peter also remains, but his stance as an ally is undetermined, as far as Remus is concerned. Yes, he helped keep Bernice from killing Regulus, but he also sold out James and Regulus to Bernice in the first place; in a way, he's partly responsible for the deaths of so many of his allies, people that he spent time with and ended up caring for. It came from fear and the desperate need to survive, Remus knows that, but it still infuriates him, because all of that carnage could have been avoided if Peter didn't do what he did.

"Attention, all tributes," Slughorn's voice rings through the arena, loud and clear, and four of the tributes look up at the same time, because James is knocked out. Remus tenses as Pandora grips his hand tighter and holds her breath. "The current rule allowing only one Victor is now officially changed to allow two tributes from the same district to be Victors. That is all. May the odds be ever in your favor…"

As Slughorn's voice fades out, Remus feels a shock run down his spine as soon as it hits him what that means. He sucks in a sharp breath, his heart surging forward in his chest, because that means—that means James *and* Regulus can win.

Both of them.

On the screen, Regulus seems to be realizing this, too, and it apparently smacks him right out of his anger as he tilts his head up to the sky with a furrow in his eyebrows. His lips part, something shifting in his eyes, and then he slowly swivels his head as if in deep thought. It takes him a second, another, then one more, and *then* his eyes absolutely light the fuck up.

"James," Regulus breathes out, then starts running.

"No, no, no," Remus blurts out, jolting forward as panic seizes him. "Not the—oh, Regulus, the *river—"*

It's close. Too close. Regulus seems to remember at the very last moment that he can't simply walk on water, and he skids along the ground with a curse, trying to skitter back as his momentum sends him forward. His boot grazes the water, and he yelps as he frantically

shoves himself away, a pale hand darting up out of the surface to reach for him. Regulus kicks it *hard* and drags himself back, panting as he makes it a safe distance away. Remus finally exhales.

As for James, he remains passed out. He has clearly missed the announcement entirely. Remus doesn't doubt that Regulus will tell him as soon as he finds him, though.

"They can come home. Remus, they *both* can make it home," Pandora rasps, turning in her seat to stare at him with wide eyes full of tears, a beaming smile on her face.

"I *know,"* Remus agrees, breathless, and then they're both laughing and snatching each other into celebratory hugs, squeezing one another tight and swaying in place.

Perhaps ridiculously, Remus feels his heart swell, because as sad as it is that so many people are dead, there's still hope to be found. The people he cares about, *truly* cares about for the first time in five years—they're alive, and they can come home.

And *Sirius.* Oh, he must be—fuck, Remus can just imagine. Hope is an invigorating thing, and it doesn't *matter* if James and Regulus still have three people to beat, because the odds… For once, the odds are actually in their favor. They're so close, and Sirius is surely going to be fucking ecstatic.

If Regulus was desperate to get across the river before, that's *nothing* compared to him now. He seems less murderous, at least, but more frustrated than ever. The gamemakers keep him there, though, the light slowly fading and temperature clearly dropping, if the visible puffs of air leaving Regulus' mouth are anything to go by. Still, the river doesn't ice over.

First, there's the banners that play in the sky to signal all those that died, which takes place again tonight. Just like every other night, it goes in order.

To start with, there's Willa. Bernice and Axus watch from their positions, and Remus sees the grim expressions on their faces. In a way, Willa was the death eaters' Vanity; it was never Hodge, because he annoyed them all with his lack of abilities or willingness to kill. Maybe

that's why he killed Vanity, finally cracking under the pressure, just trying to make *someone* proud. He was so young. Willa was, too.

Next is Hodge, which doesn't get the response it likely would if James were still awake. Regulus averts his eyes, and Peter visibly grimaces, but no one else seems to care. Bernice even scoffs and rolls her eyes. It's fucking depressing.

Following Hodge is Vanity. Regulus' eyes sink shut, and he ducks his head. Peter weeps. Remus grimaces, his own heart clenching, because that one was rough—and of course James (even though he's asleep) and Peter are hurt; they were the ones with Vanity from the very first day, and Peter had even more time with her than James did. To know that they both tried so hard to protect her, and they couldn't… Yeah, Remus would weep, too.

Irene is next, and that one visibly hits Regulus hard. It seems Regulus blames himself in some way. Maybe because it was his dagger that put her out of her misery. Eased her pain. It was a mercy killing, one she'd requested, but that doesn't keep Regulus from feeling responsible for it, clearly, even though she was going to die anyway.

Mathias next, and again, that one gets to them, too. Peter's friend. James' friend. Remus doesn't know if Regulus saw them as a friend or not, but he obviously feels sorrow about the whole thing. Mathias died in a blind rage, desperate to avenge Irene's death, and there was some sort of cruel irony to the fact that they died on the bridge *they* built.

And, finally, there's Juniper.

This one gets mixed reactions. Bernice doesn't seem to care. Peter frowns and looks confused, his face scrunching like he doesn't even remember who she was. Axus scowls and lifts their hand to touch all their bruises that Juniper gave them, because she absolutely beat the fuck out of them before they killed her, like a feral little girl, frankly.

Regulus, though? He makes a choked noise, and then he releases a wheezing laugh and presses his face to his knees, sucking in deep breaths. It's relief. Undeniable relief. There's nothing else it could be, because that's so obviously what it is, and Remus knows exactly why. He's not relieved that Juniper is dead; he's relieved that James *isn't.*

There's confirmation. The announcement seemed to convince Regulus, but the proof brings him obvious solace.

Still, a bit later, Regulus remains trapped, and Pandora groans before saying, "Oh, they're just torturing him at this point. Let him *go,* for goodness sake."

"I *think* the river ices over at the same time every night," Remus admits with a sigh. "Not too long now."

"Look at him," Pandora whispers, watching Regulus once again pacing restlessly on the screen. "I don't think it matters how he actually feels about James. He wants so badly to get them both home. And James is…"

"Stuck," Remus murmurs with a wince, because James is, in fact, quite stuck.

Again, Remus feels concern shoot through him. Sirius still isn't back, and there's been nothing sent to James. If that wound is as bad as it looks, it's at a higher risk of infection; if sepsis sets in, he'll die. It could take as little as three days, and that's if no one comes to kill him first. Sirius knows this, so there's no doubt in Remus' mind that he's working hard to—

"Remus! Remus, it's starting to ice over," Pandora declares in visible excitement, bouncing in place. She reaches out to grab his thigh. "Almost… *Almost*... Alm—"

Regulus shoots off like a rocket before the river is even fully iced over all the way, following along the ice as it crawls across in front of him. Every step makes the ice fracture under his feet, but he doesn't seem to care. He doesn't even wait for the last little bit to ice over; he just launches himself forward and hits the ground running. On his way to the forest, he snatches up James' hatchet, and even that doesn't slow him down.

"Yes!" Pandora crows, tossing her hands up in delight.

At that exact moment, the door to the suite bangs open.

It's Sirius. He comes bursting in, eyes bright as the door shuts and locks behind him. His chest is heaving as if he's been running, and he looks flushed, something absolutely wondrous about his expression right now. Remus doesn't realize he's standing up until he finds himself moving along the edge of furniture to see Sirius better.

He's shaking from head-to-toe, rattling like he's about to fly apart with all the energy set loose within him. He's quite literally *vibrating,* and he looks like he wants to bounce around the room, bounce off the walls, run laps and shriek with joy at the top of his lungs. It reminds Remus vaguely of dogs getting the zoomies, finally unclipped from their leashes and desperate to just fucking *run.*

This turns out to be quite similar to what Sirius does, actually. Before Remus can even open his mouth to speak, Sirius sprints right for him, rushing across the room to launch himself directly into Remus' arms. Remus catches him with a grunt, stumbling back a step or two, but he mostly remains steady. Sirius has thrown his arms around Remus' shoulders while Remus catches him around his waist, and he can feel Sirius' frantic heartbeat against his own. Sirius is breathing hard, as if he's been running already.

"I take it you heard the announcement?" Remus whispers, laughing softly when Sirius squeezes him.

Sirius' hands fly up to frame Remus' face, and his voice is legitimately shaking when he croaks, "I—I did it. Remus, it was me. I convinced Slughorn to do that. I'm—"

"Brilliant," Remus says, breathless. "You're fucking *brilliant."*

"I saved them. I'm going to save them. Both of them," Sirius chants, and he's shining like a fucking star right now.

"You did. You—" Remus is cut off by Sirius kissing him, a harsh yet happy press of their mouths. It breaks quickly, and Remus thinks his heart might burst. "Yeah, you are. You're going to get them back. Both of them."

"They're going to come home," Sirius chokes out, and he's suddenly crying, even while he laughs. He's trembling still, but Remus holds onto him. "Both of them."

Sirius is clearly delirious with relief and excitement, which apparently leads him to press short—but fierce—kisses to Remus' mouth over and over in between choked laughter and a stream of tears. Remus lets him, meeting him halfway each time, feeling the moment swell around them until he almost can't breathe from it; the relief, the hope, the pure *respite* from all that's been wrong this entire time. It's like a break between dark clouds, the storm finally easing up.

Remus isn't surprised that Sirius ends up overwhelmed by it. The kisses taper off until Sirius is just hugging him, burying his face into the bend of his throat, and that's where he stays for long enough that Remus thinks he's probably not going to let go first. That's fine. He can do whatever he wants.

Carefully, Remus turns his head to glance over at Pandora. She's giving them privacy, watching Regulus on the screen instead, who has started his search.

"Sirius," Remus says gently, and Sirius raises his head slowly, seemingly calmer now. "Regulus is looking for James. Is—I mean, was no one willing to sponsor him?"

At this, some of Sirius' palpable joy wanes, but only a bit. He shakes his head. "No, people were *definitely* willing to sponsor James, but they want… Well, they want Reggie and James to earn it, basically. They want a show, of course."

"Don't they always?" Pandora asks bitterly. "Animals, the lot of them. They don't care about *James;* they only care about how he can entertain them. Oh, I could just—"

"Yeah, me too," Sirius says with a soft smile as he watches her mime strangling someone with her hands. He leans his head over on Remus' shoulder, not bothering to pull away from him as he talks to her. "It's okay, though, because Regulus *will* find James, and then I'll make sure James gets healed, and then it's just three. Only three, and then they're home. Pandora —"

"I know," Pandora breathes out, turning to reach over the back of her seat, holding her hand out to him. Sirius breaks away from Remus for this, grabbing onto hers, and he looks mildly startled when she dips her head over his hand and kisses it. He blinks, then seems to realize she's essentially telling him that she admires him, and he—blushes.

"Oh, don't do that," Sirius mumbles, flustered. "Stop that, Pandora, I'm your *friend."*

Pandora looks up with a smile. "Yes, you are, and you're one of the smartest men I've ever known. That *deserves* admiration. You're going to bring them home, Sirius."

"Well, they're going to bring themselves home," Sirius says sheepishly, "but I did make that possible, yes."

"Incredible," Pandora murmurs, then smacks a more playful kiss to the back of Sirius' hand, chuckling when he ruffles her hair as soon as she pulls away.

"There's still Peter, Bernice, and Axus to worry about, but I think—" Sirius takes a deep breath and focuses on the screen, crossing his arms. "I really do think James and Regulus stand a good chance, especially once James is healed up."

"All Regulus needs to do is find James," Pandora says.

Sirius heaves a sigh. "Which he won't be able to do tonight. He went in the wrong direction, unfortunately. The good news is that there's a trail, so he will find James, just not when it's cold and dark. He'll eventually settle in for sleep before he passes out, then start again tomorrow. James should be fine where he is until Regulus reaches him, so long as no one else does first."

"You don't sound too worried," Remus comments, admittedly surprised by this, because Sirius would usually be *a lot* more stressed right now.

"I'm not." Sirius cringes a little. "Slughorn and practically all the viewers are desperate for Regulus and James to reunite and show them romance, so I don't doubt that Slughorn is going to do everything to make that happen. People would be very disappointed otherwise, and he won't let *that* happen. Is it awful? Yes, but it's to our advantage, so I'll take it."

"We can work with that," Pandora agrees. She taps the seat beside her. "Come on. Come watch."

Sirius reaches back to grab Remus' hand, tugging him along, and that's what they all do. Just like every other night, they all watch, but there's something different this time.

They watch with hope.

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As predicted, Regulus eventually does settle in for the night. Sirius knows he's exhausted, barely having slept at all the night before, suffering from being emotionally *and* physically drained after the day he's had. James remains passed out in his cave, cold and alone.

Still, despite the less-than-best (not even acceptable, really) circumstances in which they'll spend their night, Sirius doesn't feel that bad. Actually, he doesn't feel bad *at all.* He feels fucking fantastic, because Regulus will be back with James very soon, and as long as Regulus can figure out what it will take to heal James, everything will be fine. Regulus is smart; he'll work it out, surely. And then all that's left to do is make it through three people. Only three, and then they're lifted out of there and on their way home.

Sirius is feeling really, *really* fucking good about it. He's aware, of course, that it's not a good idea to celebrate too soon. Things could still go wrong. He also knows it's a bit fucked up for him to be so excited when all of his mentor friends just lost their tributes. On top of that, there's still all the problems that will arise when James and Regulus *do* make it home; every single thing they'll have to deal with, all the grief and pain and fear and trauma, as well as how they'll cope with it.

Yes, Sirius isn't ignorant to all of that, but for one second, just *one day,* he wants to be fucking happy about something. He wants to drown himself in his hope and let himself feel every inch of what could be. He'd clung to this so hard before, that James and Regulus would both survive somehow, because he couldn't fathom anything else, and he fucking *made it happen.* He's going to get them back. He's going to be able to wrap his arms around them both and know he did it; he did everything he could to save them both, and it fucking *worked.*

So, Sirius is in a good mood, despite all the negatives, and he refuses to feel guilty about it. Whatever may come, all the ways it could go wrong—Sirius doesn't want to exist there yet. He wants to exist here, where, for now, he has something to look forward to, something to actually hope for.

"I'm going to suffer through Rita to see what the response to the rule change is," Pandora informs them when the cameras fade out and the woman in question shows up on the screen.

Sirius nods gratefully, knowing she'll tell him anything he needs to know in the morning. He stands up and tugs on Remus' hand to encourage him to do the same, even as he looks at Pandora and says, "I'm going to change and head for bed, I think. It's been a long fucking day."

"Yeah, alright," Pandora murmurs. "If I'm in bed before you make your way out, Remus, goodnight."

"Same to you," Remus replies, letting Sirius tug him along.

It has indeed been a very long day, making this morning when he told Remus about his memory issues and kissed him for the second time seem like a lifetime ago. So much happens in such a short amount of time, and Sirius just wants it all to stop. He wants to push everything to the side and just…forget it all, for a bit. As a mentor, especially working so hard to keep James and Regulus alive, he doesn't really have that option, but with this rule change, it's as close as he's going to get.

"Sirius?"

Blinking, Sirius looks back as he pushes his door open and lets Remus sweep in before shutting it. "What?"

"Any particular reason you've brought me with you?" Remus asks, looking faintly amused. "You said you were going to bed, and as much as I'd like to join you…I will have to leave soon."

"Oh. Right." Again, Sirius blinks rapidly, reaching up to scratch the side of his head. Frankly, he doesn't know why he dragged Remus along; he just wasn't ready to let him go yet. Though, really, he never is. "Sorry, I suppose I just got a bit caught up in holding your hand. You didn't—obviously you didn't have to follow. Um, when do you need to go?"

Remus glances past him to look at the clock. "Mm, I don't have to go for another two hours. I can stay until then."

"Do you want to?" Sirius checks. "In here, I mean. With me."

"No, it's torture," Remus teases, and he shakes his head when Sirius huffs out a weak laugh and looks away. "Yes, Sirius, I'd like to stay with you until I have to go."

"Brilliant," Sirius declares, feeling a jolt of delight slam through him, and with all the good news, he can finally appreciate the feeling in its entirety. "No, yeah, brilliant. I have just the *most* energy right now, so do you mind—I mean, is it alright if I just talk your ear off as I change? Because, honestly, I feel like I'm going to explode. You don't have to listen; you can just tune me out and nod along, and that will be enough to keep me entertained."

"I'm happy to listen," Remus tells him, amused.

Sirius snorts and moves over to grab Remus by his shoulders, walking him over to the bed and gently pressing down so he'll sit on it, facing the closet. "If you last five minutes without tuning me out, I'll be shocked. No one can do that once I get going, except for maybe James, but he's usually going right along with me, so that's different."

"I like hearing you talk," Remus murmurs, tilting his head to look up at him, his long throat on display.

"Well, you're in luck," Sirius replies with a smile, then swivels on the spot to throw open the closet and step inside.

The next twenty minutes pass with Sirius chattering away at a rapid pace in between looking for something to sleep in; he wants something nice, something really nice that makes him feel good, sort of like a reward for actually accomplishing what he has today. Randomly, he pokes his head around the closet door to see if Remus is paying attention, and he always is.

Every time Sirius peeks out of the closet, Remus is sitting patiently in place, a mild smile curling his lips. His gaze is always warm with affection and fondness, and Sirius feels his heart beat faster with each stolen glance. He keeps retreating quickly, his face hot and his body…also hot.

Sirius does indeed spend plenty of time talking about the fact that Regulus *and* James both could be home, and how the first thing he's going to do as soon as he has the chance is hug them and maybe, possibly never let them go again. He also goes on a long tangent about clothes when he gets distracted by them, because he has *options* in the Hallow.

"I don't often feel good enough to actually wear a dress in the Hallow, but you should know, Remus, that I look fucking *marvelous* in a dress," Sirius feels the need to point out.

There's a beat, and then Remus says, "I won't believe that until I see the proof with my own eyes."

"You just want to see me in a dress."

"Yes, absolutely I do."

Sirius grins and pokes his head around the closet door to raise his eyebrows at Remus. "You should see me when I get my hair and makeup done. Oh, and put me in some heels? It's been ages, but I break necks when I walk by."

"I don't doubt it," Remus tells him, clearing his throat. Sirius leans further out until he's resting one arm against the wall, his torso on display in the closet doorway. To his credit, Remus is fighting valiantly to be a gentleman about this, not dropping Sirius' gaze to ogle him with his shirt off. Sirius can tell he's tempted, though; it's not off-putting when it's him.

"Do you really want to see me in a dress?" Sirius asks.

Remus blinks. "Sure, if you'd like."

"Come pick one, then," Sirius says lightly, then slips back into the closet, tucking his lips in to hide a grin.

"In the closet?" Remus calls.

"Where else?"

"Just—I mean, are you naked in there?"

Sirius stifles a laugh. "Only one way to find out, but the question is *do you dare,* Remus Lupin?"

Again, more silence. Sirius turns and waits, because he already knows what Remus will do. It might take him a second, but he's a rebellious bastard, always enticed by trouble and mischief, so much more daring than he lets on, so of course he will be in here with Sirius momentarily.

Sure enough, only a few moments later, Remus ducks inside the closet, which isn't *too* small, but not big enough for two grown men to have more than a two steps between them.

"Oh, hello, hi," Sirius teases.

"Hi," Remus replies, then tilts his head. "You're not naked."

"Yes, I'm still in my pants. Disappointing, isn't it?" Sirius says with a mock-sigh.

"Absolutely crushing," Remus murmurs, but he's distracted reaching out to trail the very tips of his fingers over the scar down by Sirius' left hip, on his stomach.

"Nearly killed me," Sirius comments, glancing down at it. Ten years later, and it's faded only a bit. "It would have if it wasn't the last wound I got before I won. They pulled me out and patched me up before I bled out, but not all wounds can be healed without scar tissue remaining behind."

"Yeah, I know," Remus says softly. He traces it again gently, and Sirius feels a shiver go up his spine at his touch. "You have more, don't you? You said that before."

"I have one on the back of my calf from where I was shot with an arrow," Sirius tells him, then turns around. "This one across my back where I was slashed with a sword."

Remus hums and reaches up to trace that one, too. It spans from Sirius' left shoulder all the way down to the small of his back. "It aches when it gets cold, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does," Sirius murmurs, eyebrows furrowed. Remus speaks like he knows, like he *understands,* but he did say he had scars as well, didn't he? "I also have a burn scar on my right knee. That one is rough. It's not too big, but it healed inside the arena, so there was nothing they could do about it."

"It should've never happened," Remus whispers.

Sirius turns back around slowly. "Too late for that now. But, you know, on the bright side, scars are sexy."

"I—" Remus blinks, then chuckles, his eyes softening as he breaks out into a grin. "Is that so?"

"Well, you can't deny that I'm only more attractive for it, can you?" Sirius asks, waggling his eyebrows and actively fishing for compliments at this point. He wants them. He wants Remus to look at him and like what he sees.

"No, I can't," Remus agrees, and Sirius resists the urge to do a little wriggle of triumph. "Really, your body is a galaxy, and your scars are your stars."

Sirius is once again caught off-guard, and it flusters him in seconds. He knows he's blushing, not only because he can feel the heat in his face, but also because Remus gets that fond, pleased look in his eyes. Sirius feels winded, like Remus just stole his breath, and so his voice is a soft rasp when he whispers, "Fancy a trip to space?"

"There is nothing I would like more," Remus says.

That's all Sirius really needs to close the distance between them, and then Remus is swooping in to kiss him before he can make it there first. Sirius is immediately swept up into it, pressing as close as he can get and winding his hands into Remus' hair. He shudders as Remus' hands land on his bare skin, roaming along his sides and his back.

They're both breathing a little shakily, heavy and panting as their mouths break apart and come right back together over and over. Remus' hand on Sirius' lower back slides up, and the other drops down to grip his hip, holding on firmly as he starts walking Sirius back.

Sirius goes wherever Remus wants him to, willing to do anything or go anywhere, whatever Remus wants. This ends up with him bumping into the closet door, making it clatter since it's in the way, but Remus mindlessly yanks it aside without ever breaking the kiss. He shoves it away so hard that it rattles as it flings open, and Sirius' breath hitches at the sound. It fills the space around them with a sense of urgency, and Remus is so single-mindedly focused on him right now that Sirius feels like his knees are about to buckle.

Remus pushes him back, keeping him from tripping, and Sirius doesn't even care about his balance at the moment. All he cares about is the world-altering heat of Remus' mouth, and the way one of Remus' hands sink into his hair.

Remus does something downright *sinful* with his tongue that drags a low groan out of Sirius' throat. He's never heard himself make that noise before, not for anything, and he's not sure how he feels about it, because it sounded needy and desperate. Whether *he* likes it or not, Remus sure seems to. His fingers tighten in Sirius' hair—not enough to hurt, but enough to encourage Sirius to tip his head back, which he does—and he pulls away from the kiss to bring his mouth to Sirius' throat instead. Sirius doesn't even mean to, but he arches into it, his hand tightening in Remus' hair, which is soft between his fingers and winding around his knuckles.

The attention that Remus gives his neck makes Sirius' head all foggy, like he's in a fugue state, his consciousness dancing somewhere out of reach. He feels weak all over, and terribly shaky, but in a good way? A really, *really* good way. He actually feels like he's about to just —fall over, like he'll tip back on the floor and take a moment that he may or may not need. He doesn't want it, not in the least, but he's so overwhelmed that he kind of feels like he should lay down.

Remus does not seem to pick up on this, but Sirius can't really blame him; he's really focused on what he's doing, and Sirius sure as hell isn't about to be the one to stop him. There's the catch of teeth against his throat, an exploratory nip more than anything, and Sirius hears himself make that sound again. High and thin in his throat, he moans a bit too loud, probably, but again—he can't help it. At least Remus seems to like it, which he makes obvious by pressing closer to Sirius.

"Remus, your—the—can I—I want—" Sirius can't form complete sentences at the moment, but Remus seems to pick up on what he's asking for anyway.

Without hesitation, Remus pulls back and snatches his shirt off, tossing it off over his head carelessly. It's the same one he always wears, the one all servants wear—a boxy, grey shirt with long-sleeves. Very unassuming. Nothing noticeable or eye-catching about it. Also a damn crime, because what it's been hiding *underneath*…

And look, Sirius has had the privilege of running his hands all over Remus' chest and shoulders, so he *knows* just how firm Remus is, but *seeing it* is something else entirely. Sirius can only make a hoarse noise and reach out to touch, genuinely feeling a bit weak in the knees. Remus is fucking *fit.*

"When I get bored in my cell, I exercise," Remus explains.

"I can see that," Sirius croaks, sounding like he might start crying at any moment. He *feels* like he is. Have you ever seen someone so beautiful that you want to cry? Well, Sirius officially has. "Remus, you're—fucking hell, you're—"

"Oh, I'm not this flawless all over," Remus mutters. "Have a look at my scars. It's only fair, I suppose."

Sirius blinks as Remus turns around, and then he sucks in a sharp breath, because fucking shit. Oh. Well, Remus has far more scars that Sirius does, that's for sure. The violence behind them is undeniable, and Sirius' stomach drops out from beneath him just imagining how Remus got them.

Remus' back is absolutely covered in thin, overlayed scars from what Sirius can only imagine was a whip. They span from the backs of his shoulders all the way down to the very bottom of his back. A few overlap to his sides, but not very much. It's all central to here, and Sirius knows what this is. It can only be one thing. Remus has been whipped *a lot.* This isn't just scars from one time; some of them are older than the others, more faded, while some criss-cross across his skin.

"The Hallows did this to you?" Sirius breathes out.

"Actually, no," Remus says quietly. "I got these long before I ever came to the Hallow. They still whipped people as a punishment in my district."

"Shit, Remus," Sirius mumbles, his tone heavy. He shakes his head and leans forward to press a kiss over one of the scars. Remus releases a soft sigh, so Sirius does it again and again, as much as he can reach while standing up behind him. When he pulls away, he says, "Well, you have more stars than me."

"I wouldn't say these are stars," Remus murmurs as he turns back around. "The way they're torn into my skin. It's—I don't know, sort of like craters."

"If we're sticking to a space theme here, then I'd remind you that the moon has craters. That makes you the moon. My moon," Sirius says lightly, leaning in to kiss his jaw.

Remus huffs a weak laugh. "Your moon? Is that right?"

"Well, you know, Sirius is one of the brightest stars in the sky. I'll be your star if you'll be my moon," Sirius muses, speaking softly in between mouthing at Remus' jaw, heading for the side of his throat. "We're already something, so we may as well give it a name. Can't steal the moon, can't keep the stars, but we're fortunate enough to know them anyway. Isn't that us?"

"Yeah," Remus whispers. "Yeah, that's us."

In the next second, Remus is tilting Sirius' face up to kiss him *hard,* and Sirius muffles a moan into his mouth. Yet again, Remus begins walking him backwards, and this time he doesn't stop. He keeps right on going until they're falling, until they hit the bed.

They land with a little bounce, and Sirius' head spins as Remus turns them, scooting down a bit to break the kiss and go for his throat. Sirius can't stop himself from making that needy noise yet again, because Remus is no doubt leaving marks, just like this morning. And people noticed. People looked. People assumed, and Sirius could only find secret pleasure in the fact that it was *Remus* who had left them there. He's doing that again, all while turning them so they're on their sides, drawing their bodies closer together, all heat and desperation.

In doing so, in getting closer, Remus' leg slots between Sirius', which is—okay, that sure is something. For one thing, it's mildly concerning, because Sirius is *not* dressed appropriately for this occasion. His pants are loose and soft and have enough room to make it embarrassingly easy to rock his hips so he gets *a lot* from that simple motion. Sirius' mouth falls slack, his chest heaving as Remus just—carries on.

"Okay, okay, that's—Remus," Sirius chokes out, his free hand falling to the bed, fingers twisting in the sheets. Again, his hips rock of their own accord, his body *very* clear on what it wants, even if his mind is in an uproar at the moment. Another high noise leaves his mouth, a soft whimper. This feels good. Very good. *Too* good. "Remus, I—I, um, can't—I'm not going to—this is really—"

Remus presses kisses up his throat, making a quiet noise like he's listening, but Sirius isn't entirely sure he is. Not in a malicious way, just more like he's very, *very* distracted at the moment. That becomes increasingly obvious when he finds a new spot on Sirius' throat to latch onto, a searing pressure of heat as he *sucks,* and Sirius' hips jerk again, sending yet another spike of pleasure through his every nerve-ending. Sirius doesn't mean to, but he releases a low curse and bangs his hand down on the bed. That makes Remus jolt, his mouth detaching as he pulls back and looks at him.

"Are you alright?" Remus asks, blinking rapidly like he's coming out of a daze.

"Yes. No. I mean—" Sirius tries to take a steadying breath, but it's hard when his hips are still just doing whatever they like. He attempts to stop them, but they've really got it all figured out by now, knowing what feels good and how precisely to get to it. Another roll of his hips, and Sirius whimpers again, his hand coming down from Remus' hair to brace against his shoulder, clinging for dear life.

"Sirius?" Remus murmurs, his hand carding through Sirius' hair like he's trying to soothe him, as if he's finally picking up on the fact that Sirius is struggling right now. Sirius is so glad that he's done that, and also struggling all that much more for it, because Remus' hand in his hair feels good, too.

"I'm—this feels really good," Sirius blurts out like an idiot, as if that's not been made painfully obvious by now. His other hand drops from Remus' hair, back to the bed, and he

holds on tight as he yanks a little frantically at the sheets.

Remus hums. "Well, yes, it's meant to. That's—that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Remus, *Remus,"* Sirius says, the name punching out of his mouth, and he's just legitimately squirming against Remus at this point. He can hear how distressed he sounds, mingled with the contradicting approval, because it's good, but—

"Sirius," Remus declares firmly, one hand falling down to clamp on Sirius' hip, stopping him. Sirius gasps for air like he's desperate for it, flexing his fingers into Remus' shoulder and curling his nails against the bed. Somehow, stopping is almost worse than doing it, but also a relief at the same time.

Sirius tries to calm down, but it's not really working, if he's honest. He stares at Remus like he's a god, and also possibly a terrifying eldritch horror come to ruin his life. His face burns as he admits, "I have a problem. I think—I mean, I'm fairly sure I was about to get off with you."

Remus hesitates, then calmly asks, "Why is that a problem?"

"Because I—" Sirius struggles, trying to put it into words, still pent up and desperate to just continue. He's a mess of contradictions at the moment, at war with himself, and he sort of hates it. "I've never wanted to, alright? I've never—I didn't know it would feel—I mean—"

"Sirius," Remus says gently, *"breathe."*

"I'm *trying,"* Sirius hisses, and Remus looks shockingly fond, his face softening. "It's a problem, because it's like I'm what they think I am. Being made into a sex symbol doesn't matter as much when I'm not getting off, and *liking it.* Look at me. I'm fucking gagging for it, and it's—it's—"

"Alright, hey, just…" Remus lifts one hand and does something that Sirius isn't expecting to be so comforting. He brushes his palm over Sirius' forehead, pushing his hair back. "It's okay. I think I understand now. Your relationship to desire is complicated, and that's not your fault. You're—are you ashamed? Is that it?"

Sirius swallows harshly. "Yes."

"You don't need to be," Remus tells him quietly. "Sirius, really, there's nothing wrong with feeling good. You're *allowed* to feel good and do what you want. And if you *don't* want to, then there's nothing wrong with that either. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Your desire is your own, not anyone else's."

"I was really loud," Sirius mumbles, which is probably stupid, but he's genuinely embarrassed about it.

Remus opens his mouth, then closes it, then clears his throat and nods. "Yes, you were." Sirius groans, squeezing his eyes shut, but Remus waits for Sirius to look at him, then smiles. "There's nothing wrong with that. I—well, if it helps, I liked that you were. You don't need to be quiet, Sirius."

"It's like I'm proving them right," Sirius whispers, twisting his fingers in the sheets. "I don't want to prove them right, Remus, but it—it felt so good."

"This isn't about them," Remus says softly. "Sirius, this has nothing to do with anyone but me and you. It's between us, *just* us, and you can like it. In fact, I'm really grateful that you like it, because it would be upsetting that I just did all of that if you hadn't. But we also don't have to do anything."

"But I *want* to," Sirius tells him, frustrated. "I *really* want to. Do you—I mean, do you want to?"

"I—well, yes, but it's fine if you can't, or you're not ready and want to wait," Remus murmurs.

"Wait," Sirius repeats. "We can—we can wait."

"We can," Remus confirms. "Until you're ready, Sirius, if you ever are. And if you're not, that's okay."

Sirius licks his lips, nodding slowly. "Alright, we'll wait. I just think I need to get used to feeling like this. I never have before, you know, and that was sort of...something that helped make my position in the Hallow easier. They all think I'm a whore, but I've never even gotten off before."

"You—wait," Remus says, rearing back a little. "You mean you haven't even...when you were alone? *Never?"*

"Like I said, being a sex symbol for these bastards sort of put me off the whole thing," Sirius admits with a bitter smile. He shakes his head. "I was sixteen when I went into the games, Remus. For years, I never even got aroused after that. I didn't even think I could. The first time that I did, I was—I don't know, sort of disgusted? I didn't do anything about it. I never do anything about it. They've made me feel like…I can't, or else I'll just be what they believe I am."

Remus looks stricken, then—angry? His jaw firms, and he slides his hand down to cup Sirius' chin firmly between his fingers, holding him in place as he stares at him with startling intensity. "They took your acceptance of pleasure away from you."

At those words, Sirius feels his heart clench. Hoarsely, he confesses, "Yeah, they did."

"Do you want it back?" Remus asks.

"Yes," Sirius whispers.

"You can have it. You can take it. That's *yours,* Sirius, and no one gets to decide how you feel about it," Remus declares. "We don't have to do anything, ever, but if you want to, when you're ready, you're allowed to let yourself feel good."

"Okay," Sirius breathes out, his mouth dry. He drops his gaze back to Remus' mouth. "We can —I mean, can we still kiss? I liked the kissing. Very much."

Remus chuckles, his gaze warm. "Yes, you made that abundantly clear. I just so happen to like it, too. Very much. So, that's what we'll do. That's all we'll do."

That's what they do, just that, and Sirius clenches the sheets between his hands and lets Remus slowly, oh so slowly, coax him away from his shame, leaving him in shambles from kiss after kiss after kiss—and all he can think about is the moon and the stars, how they can't steal them or keep them, but it's worth it to love them anyway.

That's this, he thinks.

That's this.

That's us.

Chapter End Notes

see, wasn't that...nicer, for the most part?

i saw a lot of comments coming for sirius thinking he was gonna do something majorly stupid, but yall gotta give my love more credit than that. to be fair, he did make it clear he WOULD do something stupid, and in the long-run, the rule change is...technically stupid, as far as the trouble it will cause. but it's a win for the good guys, for now. everyone say thank you, sirius <3

anyway, sirius playing slughorn like a fiddle!!! an icon!!! he's so smart, i love him. ten years he's spent learning how to perfectly manipulate people—Hallows, specifically—and he instantly did what he had to do. can't blame him there. of course, it will have consequences, but we see those later.

dorcas and marlene... the fact that dorcas ran FOUR MILES to go to marlene as soon as her tributes died. like, she cares so, so much—all the lies and secrecy comes from a place of her trying to protect people and do the right thing, while still trying to balance her responsibilities in a brewing war. and after all of that, just for them to mutually friendzone each other... it's a rough day for the dorlene girlies 😔 REST ASSURED, this is not the end of them, i promise! just friends, my ass. not on MY watch.

the grief and banners playing in the night sky was depressing, admittedly. even worse because james was passed out, so he didn't even get to see vanity one last time :/ oh, and he also missed the rule change, so he doesn't even get to be excited about that, at least. poor babe. i do love him, really.

next: one of my favorite moments in the books is when the rule change happens and katniss, in the middle of a death arena with danger surrounding her at all sides, just literally starts shouting peeta's name at the top of her lungs 😭😭😭 like, don't get me wrong, i love her to pieces, but that was so STUPID lmaooo. i only adored her more for it, though, and i couldn't blame her for it either.

i was so, so excited to give regulus his own version of that Endearing Idiot Moment. this man really thought he could walk on water for five seconds 💀 he can't even SWIM and he was just like: james! and then he immediately started running. look at that little idiot in love go. im so incredibly fond of him.

then sirius returning to the suite and being fucking ECSTATIC. i don't wanna see one soul shaming him for daring to be happy while regulus and james are still having it rough. leave him alone, he's earned the reprieve, dammit 😭😭😭 this man has been SUFFERING nonstop, let him be happy for once, i say, as if did not write the suffering.

i love wolfstar being flirty, sue me. they're so cute, i wanna put them in my pocket. the whole talk about the scars was very revealing—for one, we got more hints to remus' past (being punished A LOT in his district before he was ever even captured, but the question remains: why?) and we also got sirius calling remus his moon, which im admittedly weak for, ngl. i knew id find some way to slip that in there eventually.

sirius' relationship to sex/desire is complex due to a mixture of the issues the Hallow gave him and his sexuality—he's demisexual in this, which gets expanded on more later—so this was a Very Important discussion for remus and sirius to have. im not gonna praise remus for not pushing and reassuring sirius, because that's quite literally the bare minimum and what EVERYONE should do, but it does further implement trust in between them—specifically sirius, in this case. idk, i just love how healthy they are.

really, objectively, sirius and remus are the healthiest relationship in this so far, and they're not even technically together. can't steal the moon, can't keep the stars—it's fucking tragic, isn't it?

nonetheless, they got to make out and flirt and be happy and it's WHAT THEY DESERVE!!!

right, let me do numbers. since they're so low now (😬), ill just do the remaining tributes (aka i don't wanna write them all out and seeing vanity's name in the list makes me feel immense guilt):

tributes remaining: 5
james
regulus
bernice
peter
axus

(side note: i just want to think everyone again for the comments/feedback/support. i haven't replied to all, especially on the rougher chapters, because i usually hide from massive amounts of anxiety, BUT i do read them all, and i can't thank everyone enough for how kind and lovely you've all been <3)

The Search

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-references to past child death
-references to past graphic depictions of violence
-suicidal thoughts/idolization (not outright stated, but very heavily themed/implied, just from a place of grief, and it's not acted on at all)
-unspecified drugs/someone being high (it's medicinal)
-depictions of injury/pain
EDIT: mentions descriptions of needles shown/being used

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James wakes up.

For the first time in his life, he experiences what it's like to wish he hadn't.

There was a time when James understood that feeling from an outsider's perspective only, and it had made him ache then, seeing Sirius wake up and face instant regret that he had to. Sometimes, Sirius would cry himself awake, and just cry, and keep crying, and there was nothing James could do but sit with him and wait for the tears to pass. Hold him. Rub his back. Murmur soft words of encouragement and reassurance that James is quite sure Sirius never actually heard anyway. But he still said them. He always said them.

Maybe it's selfish and irrational, but James is angry, because Sirius isn't here to do that for him. Right now, at this moment, the only person James wants is his best friend, no one else.

It's infuriating that Sirius isn't close by when James needs him, because James is always, *always* there when Sirius needs him. He knows, logically, that this isn't Sirius' fault, and yet he's still upset with him anyway. James wants to yell at him, and shove him, and yank on him

until they collapse together so that James can curl up against him and weep. James misses him so much that it feels like being ripped in half.

James has never known waking up to be a painful process, and now he doesn't think he'll ever forget. He can't even imagine a time when it won't hurt anymore. If one suffers consistently enough, that's all they know.

Happiness only leaves behind memories, and those can fade away; pain leaves behind scars, and those never really do.

It doesn't help that he's waking up in *physical* pain as well. His leg fucking hurts. It's the first physical thing he becomes aware of, the fire and ache throbbing in his thigh. Looking down at where he's wrapped it with a torn-off portion of his shirt, he can see it brown, black, and red with dirt and blood.

James averts his gaze, because he doesn't even want to look at it. He knows it's bad. Really fucking bad, in fact. He also knows it's a bigger problem than he's equipped to deal with.

People know their bodies, and they know when something is wrong. James? Well, he can tell that this injury is bad. Not only does it hurt, but it's affecting him in other ways besides the site of the wound. He's running hot, and he feels tired, and his head is fucking pounding something awful. The cold night alone with no fire or blanket surely didn't help, and now he's still trembling and sweating at the same time, which is a very bad sign. He knows that. He knows something is wrong.

The thing is, he doesn't really…care.

That's the thing about waking up and wishing you hadn't; you don't really care about the possibility that you might fall asleep and never wake up again. James almost welcomes the thought, and when it was Sirius dealing with that, nothing terrified him more. When it's him, it hardly seems to matter.

Waking up comes with remembrance. Despite the nightmares that plagued him through the night, giving him no reprieve even in sleep, being awake is somehow worse. All of the events

from the previous day seem more real when he's awake.

Hodge.

Vanity.

Irene.

Mathias.

The weight of loss is nearly unbearable. It hurts more than his leg. It hurts more than the loneliness. It hurts more than anything he's ever felt in his life.

There's so much guilt, so much anger, and he doesn't know what to do with it all. He can't rewind time and go back to stop it all from happening; he can't save them, any of them. What was the point of it all? They went to that cave, and for what? James made Vanity upset with him, and why? Regulus promised Vanity a blanket to survive the night, and she didn't even live to use it. So, what was the point?

If the arena has taught James anything, it's the reality of one pointless death right after the next. That's all it is here, really. Plans that don't work. Choices that lead to loss. Every move they make is senseless, because they were always going in one direction anyway, even from the start.

James is furious with himself, because what did he think was going to happen? The goal was to get Regulus home, wasn't it? He always knew everyone else was going to die, so what right does he have to be upset about it now? He avoided looking at it directly, unable to face it fully, and it ended with him here.

It's the sixth day, there are five people remaining, and James does not care. He's awake, and he wishes he wasn't. He has the vial of Vespa's venom in hand, and he refuses to let it go. He's in pain, and he can't remember what it was like not to be.

"Happy birthday, Hodge," James whispers, and he closes his eyes, letting himself drift off back to feverish, fitful sleep.

~•~

Regulus jerks awake at the sound of a bush rustling in the distance. His eyes snap open as he grips his dagger tight and flings himself up, heart racing, on edge in seconds.

It's just a fox dashing out of the undergrowth.

Exhaling, Regulus slowly lowers his dagger and waits for his heart to calm. He reaches out to shake James awake, unsure how he even managed to sleep through Regulus waking in a panic, and then his hand hits the earth—because James isn't there. Regulus swivels his head and stares at the empty ground beside him, where James isn't.

Oh.

Right.

In seconds, Regulus is on his feet, rolling up his blanket to put back in his bag. He wastes no time in getting a move on, more clear-headed today than he was the one prior. He curses himself internally for being so rash in trying to find James last night, because now he has to backtrack.

The rule change flickers through his mind, and the mere memory makes his heart jump, just like he did when he heard it. At that moment, a part of him dared to believe that James was alive, because that rule—well, he has no doubts that the people watching would love nothing more than to see James and Regulus make it home. Most people prefer happy endings to their love stories. Personally, Regulus doesn't believe in such things, but he's more than willing to use everyone else's naivety to his advantage.

As for the others, Regulus isn't allowing himself to think about it. He wasn't as close to Vanity, Irene, and Mathias as James was, but that doesn't mean he's entirely unaffected by their deaths. But, if losing Evan has taught him one thing, it's that giving into your grief inside this arena will either kill you, or make you wish you were dead—both of which are recipes for disaster in a place where death is a real possibility.

He'll deal with everything when they've won. When they've made it. When the arena is nothing but a memory. He can't do it now, can't sit down and let the weight of it all settle on him, because he fears that it might crush him and make it nearly impossible to get back up. But here? They can't do that, not if they want to survive, and Regulus is *determined* to survive.

He always has been from the very beginning, but now that feeling is much more potent. Maybe that's because he's going to be fighting for more than just himself.

First, he has to fucking *find James.*

Regulus is tired. He's running on very little sleep, and he's also dealing with his bruises and soreness from the fight with Bernice yesterday, but he doesn't let that stop him. He keeps going, heading back in the direction he knows Axus dragged James into the forest.

When it was dark, Regulus really just picked a direction and went on blind hope that he would simply come across James, but of course it wouldn't be so simple. Now, in the daylight, when he reaches the part of the woods Axus was pulling James through, he can see he went the wrong way.

See, when pulling a grown man through the forest, that tends to leave a trail. An obvious one.

Taking a deep breath, Regulus begins to follow it.

~•~

The next time James wakes up, he's thirsty. He can't remember the last time he had something to drink. Yesterday? When they all shared a meal together, right?

James wishes they all stayed in that cave. Maybe they could have done something else. Maybe they could have built traps instead of a bridge, and when the death eaters got too close, they would have been dealt with. They could have gone back to get the bear trap, if it was still there. They could have built nets and just released Vespa to deal with whoever was caught. They could have—well, they could have done so many other things than what they actually did.

What is it they say about hindsight?

And then what? Regulus asks in his head.

Right, that. *That* little niggling problem. No more death eaters, so what would come next in this dreadful scenario? Like Regulus said, they couldn't all play pacifists forever. Couldn't just settle in the cave and live out the rest of their days in perfect harmony. The gamemakers wouldn't have stood for it. They would have found a way to encourage violence and more death. Again, Regulus asks *and then what?*

"I don't know," James rasps. "I didn't know then and I still don't know now. I don't have the answers. I'm sorry, but I never had the answers. All I was sure about was you."

And now? Regulus asks. *What now, James?*

Closing his eyes again, James whispers, "I don't know that either. I don't know anything."

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Regulus comes across a caved-in hole in the ground, like a tunnel. There's a dried puddle of blood around it and mounds of dirt with claw marks like someone was trying desperately to

climb out of the hole. There are patches of hair as well, and when Regulus picks it up, he realizes it's Axus'.

He blinks. Who the fuck tore out some of Axus' hair? All he can think is that Axus fell in this hole and got into a fight—a brutal one, by the looks of things. Was it James? That doesn't make much sense, honestly, because he's not entirely sure James would have been *able* to fight and get back out of the hole, especially if Axus survived. Then again, people do nearly impossible things when they're trying to survive, so…maybe?

After further investigation, Regulus can make out the signs of a fight as well as a trail leading away. He *thinks* there's three sets of footprints, which means someone else was here.

It comes to him suddenly, the memory of Juniper absolutely *wrecking* a fucking dummy in the training room every day. His eyebrows shoot up as he looks around slowly, and he can't help but be impressed and mildly disturbed. From the looks of things, Juniper absolutely beat the fuck out of Axus.

She still lost, though. Axus had a weapon as soon as James freed himself and got away, so they had the advantage in the end. Juniper was only sixteen and quite a small girl, while Axus had at least five years on her and was more developed. Even with their small frame and stature, they managed to drag James this far into the forest with seemingly no issue.

"Went out fighting, didn't you?" Regulus murmurs, swiveling his dagger through his fingers with a muted sigh. He looks at the dried spot of blood and grimaces. "Axus has a lot to answer for. They'll answer, I promise you that."

That's really the only solace Regulus can offer, at this point. To all those that are gone, to all the families suffering loss, that's the only thing left they have to hope for. Vengeance.

Regulus doesn't think he killed Quinn to avenge Evan. It was just—instinct. An immediate reaction. She attacked him, so he responded, and he killed her. He wonders if her family would like to see him dead for killing her. What about Avery's? What about Irene's? Do they blame him? He can't shake the guilt of Irene's death, even though she asked for it.

Swallowing, Regulus forces the thoughts aside. No thinking about Irene, or Quinn, or Avery. No thinking about Evan, because that hurts the worst, even now. The most important thing is getting to James, so he stands up.

There's a clear path off to the side that Regulus is quite sure was James. For one thing, the trail is uneven like whoever made it couldn't move steadily. For another, there's smears of blood on leaves and trees, as well little trails of it that no doubt dribbled down his leg. Surely Axus could have followed this.

Well, they might not have been able to if Juniper was keeping them busy in a hole. James, in his panic, probably didn't even know that Juniper was in there, because even dazed and injured, he would have tried to help her, no doubt. No, he must have wrenched the hook from his leg as soon as Axus fell in the hole, then scrambled to his feet and ran as much as he could on his bad leg. Regulus is assuming that, at some point, he found somewhere to hide where Axus couldn't find him.

Regulus will. He'll search every nook and cranny of this forest if he has to, and so he starts doing just that, following the trail. Along the way, even though James likely wouldn't have been able to climb, Regulus never fails to look up.

Evan would be proud of him for that, he thinks.

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The next time James comes to, he feels significantly worse than he did before. His leg hurts so bad that even *breathing* makes it worse, and he groans through clenched teeth the one and only time he makes the mistake of gently prodding above where the hook went through his leg. Just a tiny push from his fingers makes his eyes sting with tears.

"Sirius," James whispers, breathing hard as he tilts his head back, blinking blearily at the roof of the cave. *"Please."*

He can't figure out why Sirius hasn't helped him yet. The only option that James can think of is that he can't afford the medicine, or the sponsors aren't willing to send it, but James is in so

much pain that he can only shamefully resort to begging. He's so confused, because he *knows* Sirius would do anything necessary to help him right now.

Still, there's nothing. James can only sit there, in a cold sweat, shivering and whimpering every other breath. It's agony. The sort of agony that makes him think he'd rather just cut his leg off than deal with this fucking pain. Shit, it *hurts*.

Due to the discomfort, James can't get back to sleep. He's left with no choice but to feel it. There's also his thirst to deal with as well; his mouth is so dry. He's not hungry, at least. In fact, he doesn't think he could stomach anything at all. His appetite has completely vanished, despite the fact that he *knows* his body is showing signs of needing food for fuel, yet the idea of eating makes him feel more nauseous than he already does.

If James had a nightmare scenario, it would be exactly this. Between the loneliness, the grief, and the pain, he can't imagine anything worse to suffer.

No, that's not true.

James' brain is fucking awful, because it comes up with worse things easily. Regulus dead. His parents dead. Sirius dead. There's nothing in this world that could be worse than that, and James would suffer this for eternity if it was what it took to keep them alive and safe.

Desperate not to think about that anymore, because he can feel an anxiety attack coming on just from the mere thought, he attempts to think about literally anything else. Of course, this sends him into a spiral about Vanity, Hodge, Irene, and Mathias. Even Willa and Juniper. Evan. Mulciber. Avery. Dylan. There are nineteen people dead. James himself has killed three of them. How did he get here?

What about Peter? He's still alive out there somewhere, isn't he? James remembers seeing him beaten and passed out on the ground, but after what happened with Vanity, he completely checked out of his surroundings and all that happened. James didn't come back to himself until he heard Regulus screaming his name. He doesn't even know what happened to Irene and Mathias. He can only hope they didn't suffer.

So, where is Peter? Is he alright? James hasn't heard a cannon, so he's still alive, but is he hurt? What happened to him? He never set the third fire, so James is sure the death eaters found him before he managed to. Did they just figure out the plan and drag Peter, beaten and bloody, along with them? Why didn't they kill him? James is so grateful they didn't kill him.

He still has to die, the Regulus in his head reminds him.

For the first time in James' life, he wishes Regulus would shut up. Yes, obviously he knows that Peter has to fucking die, because the goal is still the same. Even now, the most important thing is getting Regulus home, which means twenty-three other people have to die, including Peter.

Including James himself.

It's a wild, freeing feeling to realize it, but it hits James that, at some point, he won't be dealing with all of this anymore. One way or another, he's going to be free of this fucking arena, even in death. Due to his pain, his suffering, his grief, and this heavy depression he can't shake off, James is so relieved by the thought that he nearly weeps.

The sound of a soft chime makes James turn his head, drawn out of his admittedly morbid thoughts. He blinks, not entirely sure if he's hallucinating or if what he's seeing is actually real.

A silver box comes floating through the mouth of the cave, drifting in with a tiny parachute holding it up. It bobs and weaves through the air, rocking further down, and James swallows as he watches it land gently next to him. It settles on the ground with a dull clatter.

Carefully, James reaches over with a wince to snag the string of the parachute, dragging the box over to him. It's not too big, but it's not small either. The lid opens easily, and James blinks down at what's inside in surprise. There's a bottle of water and a syringe that has a small dosage of something in it.

Okay, that's…not what James was expecting, if he's honest, but alright. He shakes his head slightly and pulls the water out first, taking a few careful sips and letting his eyes flutter shut

at the relief of it. Fuck, that's good. Clean and refreshing. He wants to guzzle it, but he doesn't know how long he'll be stuck here, so he plans to savor it.

Hesitantly, James goes for the syringe next, eyebrows furrowed as he lifts it out. It's a very small dosage in a large syringe, just at the twenty milligram mark, and the needle is uncomfortably long. Whatever medicine is in there, it's clear.

With a frown, James peeks in the box again to find a white card at the bottom, and his hands tremble a bit when he lifts it out, because it's *Sirius.* A message from Sirius. Undeniable confirmation that he's watching, that he's close by, in his own way. James feels his heart jump as he reads it.

In the vein in your arm. For the pain. I'm here.

That's it. That's all it says, and James still starts crying anyway. He nearly drops the syringe, but fumbles to catch and sit it aside carefully, and then he covers his face with both hands and just fucking *weeps.* He can't help it.

"I miss you," James chokes out, dropping his hands, because more than the pain, that's what gets to him the most. Sirius can fix the pain, and he can't *really* fix that he's not here for James to reach out and touch, to talk to, but those two words at the end mend something in him, at least a little. *I'm here.* He's not, actually, but James knows what he means. He's watching; he's listening; he's here for James as much as he can be from where he really is. "I —I miss you so much, Sirius."

Of course there's no reply, but James can close his eyes and picture Sirius in his mind. All their shared looks and their inside jokes; the way they can practically read each other's minds just from meeting one another's eyes; how they can have entire discussions through a simple touch. He can still hear the last things Sirius ever said to him, a steady source of comfort, even now.

"Thank you," James breathes out, his hands shaking as he reaches out to grab the syringe again.

James has absolutely no idea how to do this, really, but he's gotten blood drawn before, so he tries to copy how that went. He eases one arm out of his coat and squints down at the bend of his elbow. Well, either it works, or it doesn't.

With care, James makes a fist and lines up the needle with his vein, then pushes in until he feels like it's enough, and *then* slowly presses the plunger down. There's a small dot of blood when he pulls the needle out and sits the syringe aside, which he wipes away. He blinks, but doesn't feel different.

Okay, so maybe he fucked that up. That's on him. At least Sirius tried, and really, James is just grateful to have heard from him. And bonus—there's water.

James eases his way back into his coat, zipping it back up and slipping the vial in his pocket, then reaches for the water. He sips on that slowly, dropping the syringe in the box and sitting it aside, keeping the card in hand as he runs his thumb over it with reverence. He touches it like it's treasure.

He's still looking at it, lost in doing that for several minutes, when he suddenly becomes aware of the lack of pain. It makes him blink and lift his head, mildly startled by the sensation, because *fuck,* he didn't realize how desperately he needed that until he got it. Oh, that's… That's really good.

"Oh, shit," James whispers, his lips parting on a soft sigh as the medicine *really* kicks in, and he goes from not only having no pain to feeling absurdly amazing.

Like he's floating.

Like he's weightless.

Like he's made of light.

James opens his eyes and tips his head back, watching the ceiling of the cave swirl above him, quite literally seeing stars. Oh, Sirius. James loves Sirius. That's his best friend. The *best* fucking friend anyone could ask for.

"The best. You're the best. Oh, I love you so much," James mumbles breathlessly, his head lolling from side-to-side as he giggles and lets his eyes slip shut.

Sirius isn't here to reply, but James easily knows what his response would be. Sirius loves him, too. There's no doubt in James' mind, *especially* now. When James falls asleep again, he does so feeling very loved.

Also *very* high.

~•~

Regulus is starting to get worried. It's past mid-day now, starting to creep closer to evening, and he refuses not to find James before nightfall. He's out here somewhere, no way to make a fire, no blanket, no food and no water.

Well, no, maybe that's not true. Maybe Sirius has sent him something, because Regulus knows deep down in his bones that Sirius will *not* let James die, no matter what it takes, especially not with the rule change. Still, Regulus would feel better actually *seeing* that James is well for himself.

Following the trail only got him so far. James, at some point, must have stopped to wrap his leg or something, because the blood trail eventually ended, even when the less obvious signs of someone passing through didn't. The broken twigs, the random footprint, things such as that.

Unfortunately, the trail eventually broke out into a clearing, and that's no doubt where Axus lost James, because that's where Regulus does, too. He can't pick a trail back up, so now he's just wandering around the area, looking for any place James could have hid. So far, he's found nothing.

Regulus keeps an eye out for Axus, in case they've decided to come looking for James again, but he sincerely doubts that's going to be the first thing on their mind. No, he'd bet a lot on the chances that Axus is out there looking to meet up with Bernice again. Safety in numbers, of course. The last two remaining death eaters; yeah, they'll be together, no doubt.

Peter is a wild card. Regulus wouldn't have assumed that Peter would work with the death eaters *before* the announcement, but Bernice is from his district. If they survive, they can go home; no different from James and Regulus, and Regulus knows just how enticing the idea of that is. Without that rule change, Regulus wouldn't even consider the possibility that Peter might be a future problem. In fact, he would dare to think that Peter would be helping him and James, in the end.

Now? He's not so sure.

Heaving a sigh, Regulus carefully skids down an incline and mutters under his breath, "James, where *are* you?"

Of course, there's no reply, so Regulus can only continue to make his way in circles, carefully pushing the perimeter as he looks—everywhere, basically. He loses more daylight to this and grows frustrated, genuinely worrying he's not going to find James before tonight, at least until he finds a footprint.

Regulus has been careful, literally observing everything with keen eyes, so he doesn't miss the tread in the dirt. The sight of it makes his heart jump, because there's a one-in-four chance of that being James, and he's quite sure James is in this area.

Slowly, he looks up and swivels his head, taking everything in around him as he goes in the direction the footprint was pointing towards. Less than five minutes later, Regulus sees a mound off to the side that looks promising, and he climbs his way up the incline. When he reaches the peak, he doesn't see much at all, not at first.

But there. Barely even noticeable. Tucked behind a cluster of trees, there's just the tiniest sliver of a cave that he can only just make out, even with how hard he's looking.

Regulus drops down over the side of the mound and moves forward, dagger in hand. It's quiet outside, excluding the creak of the trees and the gentle sounds of wildlife, particularly songbirds that whistle at one another. When he was young, he used to wonder what they talked about.

No sound comes from the cave, and the entrance is so small that he has to duck down and slowly ease his way inside, grateful when the roof immediately lifts as he goes further in and lets himself straighten up. It's dim inside, but the sunlight pours in from behind him, and it feels like an electric shock runs through him the moment he sees James.

He's there.

He's actually there.

"James," Regulus blurts out, moving forward immediately, gripped with mild panic when James doesn't respond, even though he's visibly breathing. He looks rough, and the wrap around his leg has bloodstains. There's a white card held in his limp grip, and Regulus can see a sponsor box on the other side of him, by his hip. Regulus sits his dagger down and reaches out to cup James' cheeks, turning his head and lightly tapping one of them. "James. Hey, James, wake up. *James."*

It takes another minute and a rougher smack, but James' eyes do eventually flutter open. He's hot to the touch, a bit sweaty, and his eyes are glazed where they're held only half-open. He breaks out into a smile and mumbles, "Sirius. You're here. You said you were, you said…"

Regulus blinks. James has never, not once in his life under *any* circumstances, mistaken Regulus for Sirius. "What? Hey, look at me, James. It's Regulus."

"Regulus," James whispers, his eyebrows tugging together, but the lucidity in his eyes are nonexistent. "Sirius, I promised. I'm still—I'm gonna do it. I'll get him home, okay? I'll make sure Regulus gets home. Whatever it takes."

It feels like Regulus' entire body goes cold. His hands slip off James' face, and he rocks back, staring at him as his ears ring. Regulus doesn't breathe for a long moment, can't manage it. He just stares at James, who blinks slowly and looks so sincere that it's painful. No. Not—no. That's not. No.

No.

It's not true.

That's not possible.

Regulus refuses to—no. He shakes his head, because there's no fucking way. James said—he *said* he would make it home. He said that, didn't he? He said…

All he ever said was that he would do what he needed to do. Regulus assumed that meant fighting to get home, because that's the *logical conclusion,* for fuck's sake. The idea that James meant—the chance that, this whole time, he's been—

No.

No fucking chance.

No, Regulus doesn't believe that. He *refuses* to even entertain that thought, because it is the single most ridiculous display of stupidity that he could think of—and he legitimately *never* even thought of it, because it's *that* foolish. Regulus knows James is a fucking idiot, but there's no way he would be *this* devastatingly obtuse and brainless. Absolutely not.

Clenching his jaw, Regulus reaches out to grab the white card from James' slack fingers. James makes a fussy sound and tries to grab it back, but Regulus snatches it away and swats James on the back of his hand, which makes him let out a soft, sad sound like a whirring machine slowly losing power. He looks at Regulus with big eyes full of betrayal.

"Sirius, that's mine," James murmurs petulantly.

Regulus ignores him and glances at the card, reading it, and then he frowns and leans over James' lap to peer into the box. He wrenches back and scowls up at the ceiling. "You fucking *drugged him?* Are you *insane?* He's already vulnerable as it is, and now he's high as a kite. You sent him something for the pain, but nothing to actually *heal him?"*

"Who are you yelling at?" James asks, trying to stealthily snag the card from Regulus' fingers. "I don't think anyone is here."

"Oh, just—" Regulus huffs and flicks the card at James, who beams as soon as he has it in his hands again. Shaking his head, Regulus once again leans over James' lap to grab the water bottle, then takes his bag off, digging through it to find the cloth. Once he has it, he focuses on James, who has his eyes closed as he smiles dopily and drags the edge of the card over his cheek. "James."

"Hm?"

"I'm going to take a look at your leg, alright?"

"Mhm."

"It might hurt."

James cracks open one eye and says, "You'll never hurt me, Sirius."

"Right," Regulus replies flatly, taking a deep breath before slowly letting it out. He huffs out a bitter laugh, shaking his head as he scoots down to James' leg. "Brilliant. I wasn't aware this entire experience could get worse, and yet here we are. James, do me a favor and just—don't talk to me."

"But I miss you," James tells him.

Regulus sighs.

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James is going to have to reevaluate his ironclad certainty that Sirius would never hurt him, because Sirius is hurting him. He's doing something to James' leg that hurts *a lot,* and also, Sirius is suddenly being so mean to him?

He's never done that before.

"You're being really mean," James announces, just in case he doesn't realize he's doing it.

Sirius just rolls his eyes, but like, in a mean way. Not like him at all. It's really attractive. "Well, if you'd *hold still…"*

"I'm trying, but it hurts."

"I did tell you that it would. Stop whining."

"When did you start being so *rude?"* James sputters, flinching when Sirius does another painful thing to his leg. Oh, what is he doing? James really hopes he stops soon.

"When did you turn into a big baby?" Sirius shoots back.

James huffs a weak laugh and leans his head back, gazing at Sirius with a lopsided smile. "Regulus says that to me, you know. He called me *baby* once, in a cute way. Isn't that cute? Well, you might not think so, but it was really cute. *He's* really cute. I—oh, you have to—you need to be here so he can see you. Don't leave until he's seen you. He probably won't show it, but he misses you as much as you miss him."

"Shut up, I do not," Sirius grumbles.

"Sirius, it's *me,"* James reminds him, exasperated. "I know you miss him. Nothing wrong with that, you know. He's your little brother; it only makes sense. I miss him, too. I mean, in a very different way, but you get my point."

"I'm literally begging you to stop opening your mouth and letting out relentless stupidity," Sirius says, his voice strained.

"That was really mean," James mumbles.

Sirius sighs. "Yes, you've mentioned."

"You know who else is really mean to me? Speaking of your brother," James says with a wistful sigh. Sirius huffs a soft laugh, and James briefly wonders when he started being so quiet. "But, you know, it's okay when he does it. Actually, I really enjoy when he does it, because then at least he's paying attention to me. Not ignoring me. That's pathetic, isn't it?"

"Yes," Sirius confirms bluntly.

"He is nice, though. Sometimes. Like, he gave me a parting gift—not here in the arena, I mean, and it was—" James cuts off with a sputter, because Sirius clamps a firm hand over his mouth, making it impossible to continue.

"Why don't you keep that to yourself, yeah?" Sirius asks, then coughs and slowly drags his hand away. James blinks at him, confused, and Sirius shakes his head. "That's really no one's

business but those involved, James."

James stares at him incredulously. "But I tell you everything."

"Seriously?" Sirius breathes out, as if disgusted. "He's my brother. You have to draw the line somewhere."

"Well, I didn't tell you. I wasn't going to, because I was coming here, and now I'm guilty about it." James pauses, then purses his lips. "Actually, not guilty about *doing it,* just guilty about not telling you, or just actively choosing not to tell you. It wasn't—we didn't do anything, really. Well—"

"Okay, James," Sirius cuts in sharply, and James blinks at him, shutting his mouth slowly. "That's enough. Let's never talk about it, yeah? I *really* don't want to talk about it."

"You do have a point about him being your brother. You're not even going to want the details," James says, giving Sirius a significant look. "Just as long as you get the point that there are details to give, because *something* happened."

Sirius scoffs and mutters, "Barely anything happened, but okay." He heaves a sigh and shakes his head when he looks up and finds James frowning at him. "No more talking about Regulus, alright?"

"But I miss him, too," James mumbles.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Sirius declares in exasperation, then he does another painful thing that makes James whine and try to squirm away from it.

"Fuck!" James gasps out. "Sirius, if you do that again, I swear I'll just—I'll—"

"You'll what?" Sirius asks sarcastically. "What exactly can you do at the moment, James? Nothing. So, shut up and stop moving. I'm almost through with cleaning this. It's—I mean, it's really bad. It's infected, which is…"

"Sirius?" James murmurs, his anger evaporating as he watches Sirius swallow, his face grim. He looks upset, and James can't stand by and do nothing about that. "Hey, it's fine."

"It's really not," Sirius rasps, then tips his head back. "Do you see this? *I* can't do anything about it. He needs help. Drugging him doesn't fucking *fix* him. Can you just—I mean, fucking hell, what are you waiting for?"

James looks up, but he only sees the top of his cave. He leans in and murmurs, "Sirius, who are you talking to? It's—I promise it's just a hallucination. It's not real."

"What?" Sirius shoots him a strange look, but he seems ultimately distracted as he leans back and unzips his coat. He takes his dagger—wait, is that—

"How did you get Regulus' dagger?" James asks.

Sirius ignores him, which is unlike him and extremely upsetting in every way, but he *is* busy, to be fair. He's slicing off the bottom part of his shirt all the way around, big enough that the scar on his side shows. Wait, when did he get a scar on his side? He has a scar on his stomach (and many others elsewhere), but not on his side.

James snaps his hand out and snatches Sirius' shirt up further, looking for the scar he *knows* is there, but it's gone. Confused, he lifts his gaze to find Sirius looking annoyed as he swats James' hand away and pushes his shirt back down. It doesn't fall all the way, due to the portion he cut all the way around.

It takes a moment, but James realizes that Sirius' hair is shorter than it's supposed to be. It's—he's not…right. There's something—off. James blinks, then blinks harder, reaching out again to gently pat the side of Sirius' head, his hair, and he flicks his gaze up to meet James' eyes, and oh.

Oh, that's not Sirius.

Those aren't Sirius' eyes. Despite the similarities—nearly the same exact shape and eye-color—those eyes belong to only one person. The whole world warps in and out of focus, but there he is, coming through clear as a bell. Regulus.

"Oh, hey," James murmurs. "You're not—you were never Sirius. He was never here."

Regulus shakes his head, and for a moment, he almost looks apologetic, which may have something to do with the fact that James is utterly heartbroken that his best friend isn't here right now. "No, James."

"I'm—I think I'm really high," James says solemnly.

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure you're coming down—or starting to, at least," Regulus murmurs. "Try to hold still for me, would you? I'm wrapping your leg again."

"M'kay," James mumbles.

Sirius isn't here. He was never here. Oh, James misses him. But Regulus is here, isn't he? Unless *he's* a hallucination of some sort. At this point, James wouldn't put anything out of the realm of possibility; these are some very, very good drugs. They even help make it hurt *a lot* less than it would without them when Regulus wraps his leg again firmly. It does hurt, but it's not excruciating, unbearable agony that makes him scream. At most, it makes him groan and curl forward, grinding his teeth through the pain, and then it passes like a wave breaking along the shore, receding out again when the magical medicine finally takes over once more.

"There, I'm done torturing you for now. You're fine. You'll be fine," Regulus tells him gently. "Just—just rest, for now. Sleep it off, alright?"

"You came and found me," James whispers, gazing at him through a haze, so tired and still confused, but the idea that Regulus would come for him makes him inordinately happy.

"Of course I did," Regulus whispers back.

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What was Sirius thinking? *Drugging* James? In the middle of the fucking hunger games? That might be the most idiotic thing Regulus has ever known his brother to do, and this is *Sirius* he's talking about, so that's saying a lot. Sirius once flipped a cigarette in the air and tried to catch it with his mouth *while it was lit,* and kept doing it until he could actually consistently manage it, no matter how much it burned him.

Though, in fairness, he can still do that trick to this day.

And, in fairness to this, Sirius *does* come with the knowledge of everyone's position in the arena, which reassures Regulus a bit, because he knows Sirius would never put James at such risk under the influence while others are nearby. In any case, James' injury is really bad, so Regulus doesn't doubt that James was in a lot of pain. There's no way Sirius could ignore that and do nothing about it.

The only thing Regulus doesn't understand is why Sirius hasn't sent medicine to *heal* him. Not just take his pain away, but properly fix him. Some of the salve they had before would go a long way right now, surely. Regulus knows it has to be very fucking expensive, but Sirius is *Sirius.* If anyone can get it done, it's him, so why hasn't he yet?

James isn't doing well. He's been sleeping fitfully for hours now, the medicine slowly wearing off over time. He still hasn't woken up, thankfully, but he's been mumbling and groaning in his sleep, his brow furrowed and his face twisted with pain. Despite how sweaty he is, he's trembling like he's cold, and he clearly has a fever. The infection has set in.

Frankly, Regulus isn't entirely sure what to do. He has nothing to heal James, and from what he learned in the training room, James could easily die in as little as three days if sepsis sets

in, depending on the severity of his wound. It's been twenty-four hours since he got the injury by this point, so it's a real issue.

Regulus considers his options. He'll do what it takes to get James home with him, because if he dies from infection when they're *this* close to the finish line, Regulus will tear his fucking hair out and probably never forgive himself, or James, or even Sirius. That's not an option. Regulus refuses to let that happen, which means he either has to find some way to heal James, or he has to figure out some way to get James home so he can be healed within the next two days.

Honestly, Regulus was already prepared to go out and kill everyone before, so if that's what it comes to… Yeah, he can do that. It's just Bernice, Axus, and Peter. They all could be in one group, or all separate, or it could be two of them with one alone. Either way, Regulus is pretty sure he can do it. He has his dagger and James' hatchet. If he's quick about it and catches them off-guard, maybe fights through the fear and climbs trees to attack from up high…

It's getting late now, though. Not dark just yet, but the sun is starting to set. Regulus will have to wait until tomorrow. For now, he has to stay here and make sure James doesn't die through the night. But after *that,* Regulus will handle it.

Regulus goes out with James' water bottle and his own water canister to go back to the closest stream he passed on his way here. It's a small one, and it's about twenty minutes away, so it's nearly an hour roundtrip. He stops to gather wood and kindling to start a small fire in the cave along the way, though he's admittedly antsy about being this far from James when he's so vulnerable. Even without the drugs, he's at risk. He can't move, or *fight.*

When Regulus makes it back, James is fine. In fact, he's finally awake, and he's clearly lucid, because he sucks in a sharp breath as soon as Regulus walks in with his hands full.

"Regulus," James breathes out.

Regulus ignores him and crouches down in front of his legs where they stick straight out, slowly setting up the fire for them, which he has no matches to light it with. He'll have to do it by hand. Okay, so now he regrets tossing all the supplies in a fit of dramatics and murderous rage. He could have at least replaced his matches, but in his defense, he wasn't really in the best place at the time, mentally speaking.

After he sits the water down and sets up the fire to burn later, Regulus finally looks up and stares at James, who is watching him closely. There's something different about him that wasn't there under the influence of drugs; sure, there's pain in his expression from his wound, but what really comes through is the sorrow in his eyes and the grief that carves into every angle of his face. What's more worrying than all of that is the complete lack of spark that James Potter has always, *always* carried with him for as long as Regulus has known him.

Nothing has ever managed to smother that spark, because James is never afraid to be the one who has hope. James won't hesitate to try and find the silver lining. James believes in purpose, and finding meaning in everything, and he does *not* give up. So, seeing him like this makes Regulus' heart *drop.*

"James," Regulus murmurs, shifting to the side to scoot closer to James and scan his face with a frown.

"You're here," James says, and his voice cracks.

It's the voice crack that gets to Regulus, really. He can't help it. Just hearing it causes something to crack within him, and it's immediately obvious that James is very fragile right now. He needs to be handled with caution. "Yes, I'm here."

James swallows thickly and reaches for him, so Regulus goes without complaint, closing the distance so James doesn't have to fold forward too far just to wrap his arms around him and bury his face into Regulus' shoulder. Regulus hugs him back, squeezing his eyes shut the moment he hears James choke out a muffled sob against him. He's shaking.

It's very hard, suddenly, not to break down and weep right along with him. There's so much to cry about. Blood behind his eyelids, stained on his hands, in his mouth. Screams. The sound of cannons. Death, death, so much death.

Regulus blinks harshly and rolls his jaw, releasing a deep, shuddering breath. James is clinging to him tight like he doesn't want to let go, but his leg also doesn't really give him much of a choice in the matter. He makes a low, pained noise and draws back with tear-tracks on his face.

"I've been here for a while now," Regulus murmurs, his fingers quite literally itching with the need to wipe the tears away until he gives in and just—does it. James lets him, leaning forward into his palms. "Do you remember?"

"No," James says, eyebrows furrowed. "Sirius sent me drugs. It gave me weird dreams about him and you. Like—like you were him, but he was really hazy around the edges so I couldn't tell, and then you transformed back into yourself. It was *really* strange, Reg. Very confusing. I can't remember it all, but I can safely say I wasn't in as much pain, so there's that."

Regulus decides now isn't the best time to mention that those weren't exactly dreams, because James was very awake and doing all of that in real time. He clears his throat. "And now? How much pain are you in now? I cleaned and redressed the wound, but it's—it's not looking good, James."

"Doesn't feel good either," James mumbles wearily, glancing down at his leg, then immediately looking away from it. "I'll be fine. Probably. Maybe not. Doesn't really matter, does it?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Regulus asks sharply, a frisson of alarm surging through him. "Of course it matters. It could fucking kill you."

James just stares at him, then huffs a humorless laugh and nods like he's so very exhausted. "Right, well, don't act like that's not helpful for you in the long-run. One less person between you and home, yeah?"

"What?" Regulus snaps. "Fuck you, James. If you think I'm not going to do everything to get you home with me, then you—"

"What?" James cuts in, blinking at him.

Regulus pauses, then frowns. "The announcement. Did you hear the announcement?"

"What announcement?" James asks, visibly confused.

"Oh," Regulus breathes out, deflating a little as he stares at James in horror. He'd wondered, really, why James didn't have that spark, especially with the rule change, even despite the grief and pain he's suffering. Because if James knew he could get home and see his parents again, see Sirius again, *and* bring Regulus home with him—he *wouldn't* give up. Wouldn't even dream of it. "There's been a rule change. You must have missed it, but two people of the same district can be Victors. We can go home, James. Both of us."

James head tips to the side as his face crumbles, tears *instantly* filling his eyes as he rasps, "No. Is that—are you—please don't be joking, Regulus. If—if you're just—"

"No, no, I swear I'm not. It's real. I promise," Regulus says quickly, hushed, and he reaches out to grab James' hands and squeeze them like maybe that will get the point across better. James' lip is trembling, and he chokes out a harsh breath as he grips Regulus' hands tight. "We can make it. Me and you."

"Oh, fuck. Shit," James whispers, his head ducking forward as he starts crying all over again. Big, deep gasping sobs. He laughs, too, like a man discovering hope for the very first time. Like someone lost in the desert stumbling across a source of water. Like that first flicker of a flame in the deep-dark of the freezing arctic finally, *finally* catching to provide warmth.

"I know," Regulus murmurs, breathless, and he can't stop himself from leaning in to press his face against James' shoulder, feeling the same relief as him.

"We can go home?" James croaks, lifting his head.

Regulus lifts his, too, and their faces are really close together, so he can see in perfect clarity that James' spark is back. It's there, in his eyes, and Regulus' heart flutters at the sight. He swallows and leans away. "Yes, James, we can go home."

~•~

Sirius heaves a sigh, reaching up to rub at his temple, the headache really setting in. *Regulus, you emotionally-constipated little shit,* he thinks. He can't believe he's even upset about this right now, but what the fuck was *that?*

Not only did Regulus completely bypass any intimacy or hint of *past* intimacy with James—yeah, Sirius can take a wild guess of what *something* James was talking about happening between them, though he doesn't really want to—but Regulus also just made that the least romantic reunion in history. A hug? That's all he could do? Not even another stupid forehead kiss or something? Come the fuck on, Regulus is smarter than this; he should be able to work out what the people want.

'The people', as it were, are not very happy at the moment. In fact, everyone is very disappointed that Regulus didn't collapse into James' arms and immediately confess his undying love. Of course *Sirius* knows that Regulus would literally never do that, but *the people* don't. They want what they want, and there won't be any help given to James until they get it.

Frankly, Sirius is very fucking tired and officially at the end of his rope. He told Slughorn that the push Regulus needed was hope, and he honestly thought that would work. Not because Regulus actually hopes for a future with James, but because he's smart enough to work out that everyone really, *really* wants to see their romance enough that they care about a happy ending, which he could use to his advantage. He could be using it to his advantage *right now.*

And, look, Sirius doesn't particularly *want* Regulus to be in this position where he's forced into doing these things that he doesn't want to. In fact, Sirius fucking hates this. It makes him want to tuck Regulus behind him and keep him safe and out of sight as he shouts at anyone who dares to demand anything from him. The last thing Sirius wants is for Regulus to end up like *him.* But, in the same breath, James' survival depends on it.

In situations as dire as this, there's no room to be unwilling to do something it takes to survive. If Regulus doesn't give them what they want, he'll be punished for it. Not only him, but James, too. The worst part is, Sirius doesn't think that Regulus isn't willing to do this. He's pretty sure Regulus would just suck it up and do what it takes, if only he *knew.*

So, as much as Sirius hates it, he's going to have to figure out a way to tell him. Because Regulus needs to know. Because Regulus has to do this if he wants them both to survive.

Sighing, Sirius swivels on the spot, slaps on a broad smile, and crosses the room while cooing, "Joffrey, darling, I think it's time I take you up on your offer."

Chapter End Notes

welp, we're in the home-stretch now, folks and friends! so let me get into it, i guess.

"I didn't know then and I still don't know now. I don't have the answers. I'm sorry, but I never had the answers. All I was sure about was you." — james potter, the man that you are.... he's so in love, im SICK

no, because seeing james so defeated by grief/pain is such a horrible thing. like, at the beginning of all this, he always had a smile and was happily flirting with regulus, stress beat-boxing, just generally all-around trying to stay positive. so, to see him like this is fucking devastating. rest assured, he's still james, we'll still see him being himself, but he's just really struggling right now. considering everything, can't really blame him for that.

also: "you came and found me" "of course i did" — regulus black, the man that YOU are... oh, im SICK. they make me sick. i wanna hug them so bad 😭 the fact that regulus really planned to search that entire arena if he had to, if that's what it took to find james... babe, who are you fooling at this point??? 🤨

oh, and high james!!! lmaoooo, he just wanted to hold onto the card from the sponsor box and talk to his bestie, that was literally it. enter regulus black, stage left, coming to be a total bitch to him purely because he's WORRIED. nice to see sirius in the arena tho <3

and the confession. james letting slip that the plan was to get regulus home. you know what's hilarious? the fact that regulus literally just went: well, that's stupid and i Don't Like It, so im choosing to believe it's simply not true 😭😭😭 king behavior, honestly. yall are lying if you said you've never had that reaction to something before. regulus went right to denial, and i can't even blame him lmaooo. just: hm, Don't Like That, ive decided its fake because i make the rules.

it will come up again later, though, don't doubt that.

also², JAMES TRYING TO CONFESS THAT REGULUS GOT HIM OFF TO SIRIUS 😭😭😭 HE'S SO DUMB I LOVE HIM. HE REALLY TRIED GOODBYE. listen, james was just trying to be a good bestie, okay? and him talking about how cute regulus

is and how much he likes him TO regulus, because he thinks he's talking to sirius. please know that sirius was face-palming while watching that entire interaction

deeply sad that james just wants his best friend, though 😕 like, the fact that james is always there for sirius—has always been there—but sirius COULDN'T be there for james... that shit is devastating to me, because you just KNOW that sirius was also so upset about it.

also³, "regulus, you emotionally-constipated little shit" IM YELLING! GET HIS ASS SIRIUS 😭😭😭 he's so tired. give this man a break. he's literally the epitome of "i have to do everything around here" because he literally does. his back is hurt carrying this team, pretty much.

anyway, that's about it, i think. let me do numbers:

remaining tributes as of this chapter: 5
regulus
james
axus
bernice
peter

i love the theories and feedback; you have no idea what they mean to me. i know it can sometimes feel like yelling into a void, but please know that im one person, and this void is echoing all the love back <3

EDIT: i realize belatedly that the "offer" sirius is taking this joffrey fellow up on comes off a certain way and can be genuinely distressing/worrying for some people, so let me reassure everyone!!! back in the earlier chapters (it was chapter 6, which was a while ago), sirius was at a party charming sponsors and basically getting them to promise future donations/support to his tributes. there was one man there named joffrey that sirius basically manipulated into promising an offer of a large sum of money if he ever needed it (yes, sirius is an icon, we been knew), so "taking joffrey up on his offer" is literally just him coming to collect the donation/support that joffrey promised him before, as a sponsor. that's it. sirius will not be coerced into sexual favors EVER in this fic, simply because i don't have the desire/willingness to write that, even if it may seem fitting for this world. my excuse for this is that sirius is literally That Bitch that can make people do what he want without having to do anything other than play into rumors, because i said so. hope that clears it up and sets your minds at ease!

Performance

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-references to past child death
-vague hints/undercurrents of suicidal feelings? thoughts? implications? (idk how to explain this one because it's not like, an active thing, if that makes sense? it's very light/vague overall, and it comes from a place of guilt, basically, as well as grief. and no, it's not something that will lead into future problems dealing with suicide/attempted suicide, i promise. it's just a grief/guilt thing and will eventually pass/get better)
-depictions of injury/pain
-angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus holds up the vial of venom he helped Vanity extract from Vespa, a lump forming in his throat as he turns it between his fingers. James sits next to him in silence, fiddling with the white card, tracing the edge of it with his thumb.

"Do you remember when you said you didn't want me to be changed?" James asks softly.

"Yes," Regulus murmurs.

James nods his head towards the vial. "That changed me."

"Losing Vanity?" Regulus checks.

"Yeah," James confirms.

"What about—" Regulus swallows and meets his gaze, his heart clenching. "You said that who you are, all that you're made of, couldn't be changed. What about that?"

"I'm still me," James whispers. "Just a little less, is all."

Regulus looks away, finding it very difficult to swallow all of a sudden. He genuinely can't think of anything more tragic than that. He can hate James Potter with everything in him, hate all there is of him, but he's never once wished for *less* of James.

James is too much of so many things to ever shrink. He's been this bright, this momentous, since Regulus met him; it's the one consistent thing that never changed, even when Sirius and Regulus himself did. Even when Regulus grew to hate it, he could always count on it. James doesn't deserve this. What Regulus hates more than James is his suffering.

"I killed Irene," Regulus confesses abruptly, reaching out to put the vial back in James' pocket.

"No," James replies immediately, and when Regulus glances at him, he's shaking his head. He instantly doesn't believe it. The sight makes Regulus feel like he could cry.

"Yes, I did," Regulus rasps, and James stares at him, looking right into his eyes. It takes a moment, but James' face falls slack, and Regulus knows he's seen the truth in his eyes. "It was—well, it was a joint effort between me, Mathias, and Axus, I suppose. I had the killing blow, though. Mathias—they didn't mean to, they were aiming for Axus, but they shot Irene in the chest with their crossbow. Axus was fighting Irene, and they turned her into the shot. We, um, took her across the bridge, and that's why I was over there instead of with you. I should have been with you, but I was too busy killing her."

James shakes his head slightly. "I don't understand. You… Regulus, you would never—"

"She asked me to. She was in a lot of pain, James, and there was no chance of her surviving, so she wanted it to be quick so she didn't have to suffer," Regulus explains, and the skin around James' eyes go tight. "I don't know if that was fair of her to ask of me, because I'm—I still feel guilty."

"You quite literally put her out of her misery, Regulus," James says softly, reaching out to cover Regulus' hand. He hooks his pinky through Regulus' and strokes the back of Regulus' thumb with his own. "It was a kindness. If it was you in her situation, wouldn't you be grateful?"

"Maybe," is all Regulus can say, because it's hard to see it that way when he still viscerally recalls the resistance of Irene's body when he slipped his dagger in between her ribs.

"And Mathias?" James asks.

Regulus presses his lips in a thin line. "Consumed by the need for revenge. They blamed Axus, no doubt, so as soon as they heard the cannon that meant Irene was gone, they went running after Axus to—well, I'm quite sure they planned to kill them. Axus snatched the bridge right out from under them while they were crossing it. I was too late to stop it."

"If I had been paying more attention, I could have stopped it," James announces, tipping his head back against the cave wall. The column of his throat rises and falls on a harsh swallow, and he closes his eyes. "I killed Hodge."

Regulus' first instinct is to deny it, because James wouldn't just murder a child, but then he remembers how he'd simply responded to Quinn attacking Evan. It was reflexive. He killed her without thinking. Bernice had been yelling for Hodge to kill Vanity, and if he actually did… Well.

"What happened?" Regulus asks quietly.

James' eyes flutter open. "He slit Vanity's throat. I was too late to stop it, too, but when I reached them… I didn't even mean to do it. Isn't that fucked up? Even though he just killed Vanity, I never intended for it to happen the way it did. I just—I pushed him. Shoved him away from her. We were so close to the river, right there by the water, and he…"

"He fell in," Regulus finishes.

"He was pushed in," James corrects. "By me."

"James," Regulus says gently, "it was an *accident.* You didn't intentionally kill him. You were trying to protect Vanity."

"Fat lot of good that did," James croaks with a bitter laugh, rolling his head forward. He winces when the movement leads to him jostling his leg a bit. "It's his birthday, you know."

"Hodge's?" Regulus asks. "Today?"

"Yeah." James nods. "Vanity told me. He would have been fifteen today, and because of me —"

"Don't do that. Stop it, James," Regulus whispers fervently, reaching out to grip his chin and turn his head. "The horrible reality is that it was a shit situation, and now he's dead. You didn't mean to do it. You're not—listen to me, you're not a bad person. You can't keep bad things from happening, and I'm sorry for that, but you said—you said once that we're here, and we're still trying, and that counts for a lot of things. It does. It still does."

James takes in a shaky breath, blinking hard, and he chokes out, "I don't know how I'm supposed to live with it."

"You just do," Regulus murmurs, because that's all he's got. He doesn't think there's some secret that makes things such as this any easier. It'll never get easier. You just learn how to keep going, despite how hard it is.

"A part of me doesn't want to," James confesses, and the words are softer than a breath, but they're as devastating as nuclear explosives locked on target. It leaves a wasteland behind inside Regulus.

Carefully, Regulus slips his hand from James' chin to his cheek, holding his gaze. His other hand is still under James', and he squeezes James' pinky with his own. Deadly serious, he looks James right in the eye and says, "Too bad."

"I—" James blinks, clearly startled out of his surge of emotion, because he obviously wasn't expecting that. He looks at Regulus for a beat, then huffs out a weak laugh. *"Too bad?"*

"Yes," Regulus says simply. "This isn't up for debate, James. I don't give a toss what some part of you may or may not want. I know this is all shit, but we *are* going home, even if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you there myself."

James' mouth twitches slightly. "Well, now I'll be very disappointed if you don't."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Regulus muses lightly, practically goading James into flirting, at this point, because he's genuinely concerned about him. He can't believe he's thinking this, but he actually wishes James would be talking nonstop and flirting with him incessantly, compared to *this*.

"Yeah," is all James says, and he leaves it there. He teases no further, and he doesn't seem to have the energy or the inner joy to muster up a smile, or a wink, or a flirty comment.

Regulus' stomach churns, and he sits there in silence for a long time, not entirely sure what to say. He has no fucking clue how to be comforting, *especially* to James. It's not like he's *Sirius,* for fuck's sake. Literally, Regulus is the most awkward, stilted person on the planet when it comes to emotions of any kind, but particularly those of which he labels as vulnerable or uncomfortable.

It's strange how bad Regulus feels for that. He—well, it's not the first time in his life that he's put in a situation where he has to come to terms with the fact that he's not like most people. Usually, Regulus doesn't really care, but this time he wishes he knew how to be what he's never been, just so he could do something, *anything,* to help James right now.

In the end, Regulus can't figure out what to say, but if there's one thing he knows about James, it's that he's a very tactile person. Touch—he loves it, any kind, any place, any form.

He's greedy for it, whether that's giving it to others or getting it; just a point of contact pleases him.

So, Regulus pulls away and, because it's getting darker, he grabs his blanket from his bag and stands up to step over James and settle on his other side. James blinks at him, clearly not understanding what the fuck he's doing, but he makes no complaints when Regulus carefully tucks the blanket under his bad leg, pulling it up over his arm. He then stands up and steps back over before settling in up against James as carefully as possible, trying not to jostle him too much.

"Sit up a bit," Regulus murmurs, and James does, though he still looks confused.

The expression of bewilderment melts into brief delight when Regulus slips his arm around him from where he leans up and gently pulls him back. James is essentially tucked up against his side, scooted down a little due to his leg, and he has the space to lean his head over on Regulus' shoulder. Regulus encourages him to do so wordlessly by raising the arm around him and sinking his fingers into James' hair, pushing his head over as he kneads at his scalp. James pretty much melts.

"Oh," James breathes out. "That's—that's really nice."

Regulus doesn't respond. He just uses his free hand to tug the blanket up over them both, tucking it in under him so they're as snug as they're going to get. He keeps running his fingers through James' hair and looks off to the side, like he can ignore what's happening if he's not looking. Not once has Regulus held James, not like this. He's allowed James to hold him, and that's it, because that's different somehow.

But, if this is all he can do, if this is all he can offer as a form of comfort, then do it he shall. He doesn't know what to say, but maybe he doesn't have to say anything at all.

It's clearly a comfort, because it doesn't take long for James to slump against him, falling asleep. He's still not doing well, so he's sweaty and shivery, but he seems to be in optimal positioning for the least amount of pain. Regulus takes it as a win and drags his hand from James' hair to gently brush his fingers over the side of James' neck instead, closing his eyes and leaning his cheek on top of James' head. He keeps caressing his skin, lulled into a sense of calm he hasn't felt in who knows how long at this point, and even though he's no doubt

going to get a horrible crick in his neck and his arm will for sure fall asleep, he doesn't plan to move.

Regulus is going to stay just like this for as long as he can.

It makes something within him settle.

It gives him heart flutters.

He's not sure how long he sits there before he hears a light jingle like windchimes that makes his eyes snap open. Lifting his head, he follows the sound to watch a sponsor box float down at the entrance of the cave. Fucking *finally.*

Regulus exhales in relief as he carefully pulls his arm from around James, which causes him to grumble. He tries to cling tighter to Regulus, but eventually relinquishes his hold as he wakes up, mumbling questions and groaning in pain. Regulus mostly ignores him and tumbles out of the blanket, shivering in the cold but continuing on nonetheless.

It's too dark inside the cave to really see the contents, so Regulus crouches down and opens it right there at the mouth of the cave where there's at least light from the artificial moon and stars. He's fully expecting to find salve for James' leg.

He doesn't.

Regulus finds what he assumes will be the salve but is instead a canister of warm broth, which does admittedly smell so good that his mouth waters. There's one plastic spoon and a tiny box of matches. Regulus stares at it all, feeling oddly hollow. Like, okay, thanks, but that's not what they *need.* The most imperative thing is medicine to heal James, and there's no way Sirius doesn't know that, so *what the fuck?*

Frustrated beyond measure now, Regulus pulls out the white card at the bottom and turns it towards the mouth of the cave, hunched over it and squinting to make out the words. There

are only two. The card reads:

Thank him.

Regulus slowly lowers the card, keeping it face down, and he stares off into space while he tries to decode what the fuck that means. Thank him. Thank *who?* The only person Regulus is with right now is James.

Frowning, Regulus glances over at James, who's squinting one eye as he rubs the heel of his palm into the other one. He makes a groggy noise of confusion, clearly trying to wake up enough to ask what Sirius sent. Regulus just stares at him, trying to figure out what he's supposed to be thanking James for. What has James ever done for—

It hits him like a fucking train. The memory of Sirius grabbing him by his arm and telling him he should have been *thanking* James for making him desirable. A very recent memory, in fact, even though it feels like a lifetime ago. The day that James Potter announced to the whole world that he had feelings for Regulus Black, and the day the whole world decided they liked that.

Oh.

Ha. Well, fuck. For a moment, Regulus got so caught up in the fact that he and James would be able to go home that he forgot what made that possible in the first place. Their little love story. What everyone comes to see. Right. *That.*

Regulus abruptly realizes precisely why Sirius hasn't sent the medicine for James. He fucking *can't,* because everyone is chomping at the bits for a show. You don't get handouts in the arena; you have to earn every fucking thing you get, whether that's through the work your mentor puts in or through the performance you put on. Sirius has apparently done all that he can, and it's up to Regulus—and James—from here.

"Regulus?" James mumbles. "What does the card say?"

"Nothing for you," Regulus replies stiffly, crumbling the card in his fist and picking up the box before moving over to the place for the fire. He strikes a match and gets the fire going, where he immediately drops the card.

"He sent matches?" James asks, eyebrows furrowed, an orange glow dancing with shadows over his face.

"Yes, and also broth for us to share. It's warm," Regulus says, trying to soften his voice. He isn't sure if it works. Carefully, he lifts the blanket and sits underneath the edge of it, putting the broth in his lap.

James stares at it, seeming to come to terms with the fact that Sirius has not sent medicine. He swallows and gives Regulus a tight smile. "I'm not really hungry."

"I don't care. You're going to eat. You need it, and it'll warm you up," Regulus declares.

"But—"

"James, don't argue with me."

"Oh, fine," James grumbles, grimacing as he pushes himself up to sit up straighter. He starts to reach for the broth.

Regulus pulls it away and coughs, then meets James' gaze as he says, "No, let me do it."

James blinks, then raises both eyebrows. "Let you…feed me?"

"Yes," Regulus says, wanting to gouge his own eyeball out with the fucking spoon. His skin is crawling.

"Um, sure?" James' face twitches, visibly baffled, but he drops his hands and immediately starts fiddling with them. Regulus notices he does this when he's restless, nervous, or confused, or all three—and he especially does it when he's anxious.

Taking a deep breath, Regulus dips the spoon and scoots closer to carefully lift it to James' mouth. James' eyebrows are furrowed, but he dutifully sips it, eyeing Regulus over the top like he's finally lost it. Yeah, Regulus relates.

They're utterly silent as Regulus quite literally feeds James the broth and occasionally steals bites for himself in between. On the bright side, the broth warms him and sits well on his stomach, so that's nice. Everything else? Fucking awful.

This feels distinctly lacking in romance. Regulus is really, *really* bad at this. He doesn't know where to start, because he knows it's going to take something major to get James his medicine, and Regulus' mind is utterly blank. He could really use James' help right now, but bluntly asking him out loud to lean into a fake romantic moment sort of defeats the purpose. But maybe James can sort of…take the wheel on this one?

"I think we should talk about us," Regulus announces.

"Us," James repeats, blinking.

Regulus clears his throat. "Our relationship."

"Our—" James rears back a little. "Sorry, what? We have one of those?"

"Obviously," Regulus grinds out, agitated that James isn't immediately jumping on this opportunity as usual. Yes, he's been through a lot, but this is crucial. Regulus is going to need James to get it together. "Everyone has relationships, even if it's just two strangers. Being strangers defines the relationship between them. And the relationship between us is…"

James' eyebrows are throwing a fucking party at the top of his forehead. "It is…?"

"Complicated," Regulus settles on, finally.

"Yeah, that's a word for it," James mutters.

"Just—I think we should…talk about it," Regulus insists, struggling not to grimace. He would literally rather rip his fingernails off. "Because we're going home…"

"Oh!" James nods, like that makes sense. "Right, well, obviously we'll be working together to get home. You don't have to worry about that. I'll be with you the whole way."

Regulus nearly groans, but swallows it at the last moment. Oh, why is James doing this to him? "No, that's not what I meant. I know *that.* I'm talking about…us."

"Us," James repeats yet again, confused once more.

"You know, *feelings,"* Regulus clarifies. James stares at him like he's speaking an entirely different language. "Like—like how I had very big, very embarrassing feelings for you."

James' lips twitch. "You want to talk about that?"

I would rather die, but it's your life on the line, not mine, so here we are, Regulus thinks. He forces himself to mumble, "Well, we're sort of stuck here for the night, so why not?"

"I mean…if you want," James says slowly. "I already know about your feelings for me back then, though."

"Not really," Regulus tells him, taking a deep breath as he lifts up to feed James more broth. He buys time by taking a bite after, then drops his gaze to the spoon. "You only really know that it was from the age of ten to fifteen."

"Five years," James murmurs, sounding wistful. "Only half of how long I've had feelings for you. We're the definition of *right person, wrong time."*

Regulus glances up to find a sad smile on James' face, and it makes his heart flutter and clench at the same time. "You've had feelings for ten years? All of them?"

"It was always you," James says softly, his gaze meeting Regulus', warm with sincerity. "It's always going to be you."

"Right," Regulus croaks, looking away because he's not sure how to look at James when he's saying things like—that. He swallows. "Well, what you *don't* know is that I…"

"You…?" James prompts.

"I, um—I was—" Regulus takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out and forces himself to make eye-contact. James is just watching him patiently, looking ridiculously fond. "I mean, I was a goner from the moment I saw you. Literally the first time I laid eyes on you, I—I was enamored, pretty much. I remember that, when Sirius dragged me outside to meet you, and I wasn't—at first, I wasn't looking forward to it at all—"

James frowns. "What? Why?"

"Because I didn't want Sirius to have a best friend. I was worried he'd—" Regulus cuts himself off and shakes his head, watching James' face soften. "But then, the door opened and there you were. I remember thinking even then, even at ten, that you had the prettiest eyes I'd ever seen. Behind your glasses and everything. Just like that, I was *very* happy that Sirius had made a best friend."

"You blushed the moment I smiled at you," James says, smiling affectionately now. Despite his injury and the pain he's surely still in, his eyes are sparkling. Huffing out a soft laugh, he whispers, "You were so *shy."*

"I couldn't help it," Regulus replies quietly.

"I know," James tells him, his voice gentle like he's trying to be kind to that small boy with helpless feelings now, as if he can make up for the fact that he wasn't then.

Regulus chokes out a harsh laugh and spoons out another bite for James, and then himself. "You also don't know that I used to collect brown rocks if they reminded me of your eyes. I would watch out my window every day after school to wait for you to come up the sidewalk so I could meet you at the door before Sirius did. I think I filled at least two journals about you before I even turned eleven. You don't even want to know how many I ended up burning at fifteen. I—James, I thought about you literally all the time. You were—I was—"

"Regulus," James says, and his eyes are so unbearably soft. So pretty, even to this day. "You said—you told me that what you liked about me, what you grew to hate, was that I made you feel, but feel *what?* What comes after that?"

"Nothing," Regulus admits helplessly. "That's where it ended. You made me feel. You only had to be close to me, and I felt."

"Oh." James swallows. "I—oh."

"You weren't my first crush, James," Regulus whispers. "You were my first love."

James' eyes inexplicably fill with sadness, so much sorrow in his gaze that it's like he's mourning. "From love to hate. A great, big tragedy."

"James," Regulus rasps, his hands shaking so much that he has to sit the canister of broth aside.

"I wish I could be happy hearing that," James tells him, looking completely, utterly defeated. "How can I, though? You still hate me, don't you? Even now. Even after all this."

"I—James, I—" Regulus falters, because he knows what it will take. He knows what everyone wants to hear, but he can't say it, because he—because the words fail him, and he *can't.*

Regulus can't do this. Not here, not like this, maybe never. It's the equivalent of cracking open his chest and bearing his soul to the entire world, which is only slightly less terrifying than bearing it to James. Regulus can't do it, and he also can't afford to fail in getting James his medicine.

This whole time, Regulus has been steady on the fact that he wouldn't kiss James to save his own life, but he's apparently willing to do it to save James'.

That's exactly what he does. He can't speak, so he acts instead. Regulus doesn't realize he's going to do it until he's rocking forward on his knees and leaning in to press a closed-mouth kiss to James' lips. It's quick, over in a blink, almost awkward because James doesn't see it coming at all. It's barely a kiss, and Regulus knows as soon as he pulls back that it's not going to be enough. He desperately wishes it would be, because his heart is already slamming against his chest, just from that.

James stares at him with wide eyes, visibly startled, his mouth parted. He looks so, so confused—and it's wrong. It's *wrong* that Regulus is doing this to him. Regulus has no choice.

"Regulus?" James croaks, and there's so much hope in his voice that it's fucking heart wrenching.

"I want you to come home with me, James. I'll do *anything,"* Regulus whispers, leaning in again close enough that James can see his eyes and face in detail. He needs James to get it. He needs James to understand what's happening.

James' eyebrows furrow as he scans Regulus' face, and slowly, his gaze drops to the broth and then the fire. Regulus can pinpoint the exact moment that it clicks what's going on, because it's in that split second that Regulus can almost *hear* James' heart shatter. His eyes visibly dim, and for one second—only one—he looks absolutely *heartbroken.*

Regulus knows what it is to hate himself—he's done it for years—but he's never hated himself as much as he does at this moment, and the worst part is, it's not even his fault. It's not James' fault. None of this pain is something they have control over, all the way from death to a kiss. There was a time that Regulus would have liked nothing more than to break James' heart, just so he could know what it felt like, but that time has long since passed. Regulus wouldn't, if he didn't have to.

"Of course you will," James says, and his voice cracks, which Regulus feels directly in his chest. A soft, sad smile curls James' lips, and he nods. He understands. Just like that, Regulus knows that he understands. "We'll be home really soon, love. Together, we'll get there."

"I know," Regulus murmurs, reaching out to grab James' hand, squeezing it. He waits for James to squeeze back before leaning in to close the last bit of distance between their lips.

This time, Regulus kisses James like he means it. Like he can't help it. Like he's never wanted anything more. He lifts both hands and cradles James' face, curling forward into him to kiss him slow and sweet, savoring the way his lips part around a soft sigh. When Regulus feels the tear roll down James' cheek, hitting his finger, he gently brushes it away. It's their secret. No one will ever know but them.

It's devastating that a tear shed in heartbreak is the only thing that they get to have for themselves, but Regulus isn't sure what else he was expecting. This is what they are.

A great, big tragedy.

And, despite that, the kiss is so fucking good that Regulus' head spins in mere seconds, even before he dares to deepen it. But he does deepen it, slowly and tentatively, his heart crashing against his ribs like it's trying to take flight. Suddenly, Regulus *does* mean it. He *can't* help it. He *hasn't* wanted anything more than this. Oh, this.

James reaches up to grip the back of his neck, making a quiet, needy sound into Regulus' mouth, and Regulus is so desperate to taste it that he's shaking. The inside of James' mouth tastes like broth and warmth, but mostly him, and the slide of his tongue against Regulus' own draws a helpless, broken noise out of him. If Regulus knew at the age of fourteen that he would be doing this, he would have thought every moment of pain leading to this point was worth it. Regulus, at this age, is finding it difficult to disagree.

A hand Regulus has memorized slides up into his hair, and James is the one kissing him now, *really* kissing him. It doesn't matter where they are, what they've been through, or even the state of themselves at the moment. The arena could collapse down on them, and Regulus doubts he would care.

James pulls away just enough to suck in a sharp breath, and then he's chasing Regulus' mouth like a man possessed, one hand in his hair and the other gripping his side to pull him closer. Regulus is so agreeable to that, actually. He presses forward, wanting more, wanting all of it, anything. He feels—oh, he *feels*—

"Fuck," James hisses, ripping away to turn his head with a grimace, glaring down at his leg like he's debating cutting it off for daring to interrupt them.

Regulus splays his hand against the cave wall by James' head, tucking his face down against James' shoulder. He tries to discreetly catch his breath, unwilling to let anyone in the world see how much of a mess that just made him.

A beat passes. Two. Three. Regulus and James just breathe, not moving or speaking for a long time. Finally, once Regulus is mostly sure that he's gotten his shit together, he lifts his head and clears his throat. His voice is a little wooden, like he's reading lines from a script when he mutters, "Well, that was a bit stupid to do when you're hurt. We can't do that, or anything else, until you're healed, James."

"Yeah," James says softly, dropping his gaze. "That's for the best. But it was—" He hesitates, then lifts his eyes to look at Regulus, and Regulus knows this is real. Whatever he's about to say, he's going to mean it. "That was one of the happiest moments of my life, despite the pain."

I'm sorry, Regulus wants to say.

"That was the best kiss I've ever had," is what Regulus says instead, because if he can't apologize, he can at least tell the truth about that.

James' lips tug up into a crooked smile, and though it doesn't quite reach his eyes, it's real, too. "Good to know."

"We should finish the broth and sleep," Regulus whispers, and he reaches out to grab the canister to do just that. Feeding James isn't awkward or uncomfortable anymore.

For some reason, it's much more intimate now.

~•~

James' medicine comes only a bit after they've finished the broth, less than an hour later. He knows he should be happy about that, but it mostly just leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

What it took to get it…

James doesn't even want to think about it. He never imagined a scenario in which he could get something he's wanted for so long without even coming *close* to actually having it at all. It's not Regulus' fault, James knows that, but it still fucking hurts.

Well, now James knows that Regulus would kiss him in the pursuit of saving his life, if there literally was no other option. How fucking romantic.

It's fucked up, mostly. James doesn't want to be resentful, but he can't help the anger and hurt that festers in him. He's in pain, he feels like death warmed over, and he's had the best kiss of his life from the man he wants so badly he can't move on, *but* only to save his life. He would have never, never gotten that kiss under any other circumstances, and knowing that stings.

Their first kiss, and it's not even one he can be truly happy about. He almost wishes it didn't even happen.

Almost.

Regulus is more cheered by the medicine than James is, but it's hard for James to be happy when it feels like flames are licking up and down his leg.

Sirius has sent more of that magical salve that heals wounds at a rapid rate and also neutralizes infection; how well it will do when the injury is *this* bad, they don't know, but there's only one way to find out, right? It's not very much, just enough for James' leg, which makes sense because Regulus doesn't have any open wounds. He has a few bruises on his face and probably in other places James can't see, but that's it.

The card just says: *I'm sorry.* The sight of it makes a lump form in James' throat, and everything in him wants to reassure Sirius, but he finds that he can't. Right now, sorry doesn't feel good enough, and it's not even Sirius' fault in the first place. Regulus also doesn't respond to it; he just drops the card into the fire and looks away as it burns.

Regulus folds up the cloth and gives it to James for him to bite down on, which James does, and then he spreads the salve on the entry and exit point where the hook went into one side of his thigh and came all the way back out on the other. It's excruciating, quite frankly. James clamps down on the cloth and muffles his scream, pounding one fist to the cave floor like some other form of pain can distract him.

"I'm sorry. I know, I know, I'm sorry," Regulus chants in genuine distress, sounding strained and distracted. James knows, even in his agony, that Regulus is just rambling, which somehow makes it simultaneously so much better and so much worse when Regulus rasps, "It's okay. I promise it's okay. Almost done, baby. It'll be over soon. Shh, it's okay."

So, Regulus can't stop hating him, but he can call him *baby* and panic every time he's in high spikes of pain?

Lovely. Just fucking *lovely.*

Speaking of high spikes of pain, this one is so bad that James quite literally passes out. He doesn't know it's going to happen until the dark edges creep in, and then he's just relieved, because at least he doesn't have to feel this way anymore. He slips under while Regulus is still working on his leg.

James sleeps all the way through until morning, which he becomes aware of when he wakes up again. The first thing he makes note of is that he and Regulus are snuggled up under the blanket just like they were before the broth came. Regulus is holding James, even in his sleep, his fingers slack in James' hair like he was stroking it before he drifted off.

The next thing James becomes aware of the distinct lack of pain in his leg. He holds his breath as he lifts his head and looks at it, heart thumping hard when he sees how much better it is. Each puncture wound is significantly smaller, and his leg is no longer swollen and inflamed. It's not completely healed, *but* he should be able to walk on it, and James himself is feeling much better as well.

James exhales and tips his head back, taking a moment to bask in it, feeling the ridiculous urge to laugh hysterically, though he refrains because Regulus is still asleep. Carefully, James turns his head and looks at him. Like this, Regulus' face is slack and innocent, unbearably sweet like the angel he can pretend to be but most certainly isn't.

Slowly, James lifts his hand and gently pushes some of Regulus' hair back from his face. It's a little limp and greasy from a week without showers, but James knows he's equally as filthy at the moment. They're both a mess of sweat, dirt, and dried blood. And yet, as always, Regulus is still beautiful.

For a moment, James feels like he's drowning in the realization that they're both alive and they *both* can make it home. It's almost too hard to believe, but James can feel the hope winding its way around his bones, refusing to let him go. They're so close. James can see his parents again. James can see Sirius again. They can do this.

The determination and pure *purpose* that grips James leaves him breathless. All the grief and pain has to wait until he gets home, because right now, James is fighting for more than just Regulus—for the first time, he grants himself the privilege of fighting for himself, too. Regulus is getting home no matter what it takes, but now James is lucky enough to join him.

"Regulus, come on, wake up," James murmurs, gently passing his fingers through Regulus' hair.

A quiet, unhappy noise leaves Regulus' mouth, and he presses closer to James. He's still asleep, clearly trying to cling to it *and* James at the same time. A soft exhale leaves him, and James' heart clenches violently when he realizes what Regulus is saying. Just the gentle, sleep-slurred sound of his name on Regulus' lips. It sounds so sweet James could cry.

Again, James cards his fingers through Regulus' hair and nudges him a little. Again, Regulus says, "James," and this time, he sounds slightly indignant as he snuggles closer.

"I know, love, I know," James mumbles, heaving a sigh as he leans his head forward to press his cheek to Regulus' shoulder. He's exhausted, too. He's so, so tired. He wants to go home.

James gives Regulus just a bit more time, closing his eyes and taking a quick break himself. Just breathing. Not thinking. It's one moment he steals for both of them, and then he opens his eyes and takes a deep breath, because they still have a ways to go. He starts prodding Regulus awake more insistently.

When Regulus finally does wake up, he's grumpy in that way James can't help but be fond of. The affection he feels for Regulus is enough to strangle him, and after their kiss, the sensation just hurts. He finds it hard to look at Regulus, but really, that's all he wants to do.

Nonetheless, they have to get started. They can't stay here for much longer, because Bernice and Axus are no doubt out on the prowl, practically *tasting* victory at this point, much the same way James and Regulus are. Regulus is pleased to see that James can stand and walk, at least, though there is a little pain—nothing compared to what it was before, so James can absolutely tolerate it without complaint.

Regulus once again removes his coat briefly to cut off another section all the way around his shirt, bringing it a little above his belly-button and showing off how slim his waist is. The sight of it and the small of his back makes James' mouth go dry; he can't stop himself from looking, and when Regulus catches him doing it, he doesn't say a word. He just puts his coat back on—but doesn't zip it—and kneels down in front of James to wrap his leg again. It's as

healed as it's going to get for now, but wrapping it keeps it from being exposed to anything as they move through the woods.

They don't speak much as they prepare to leave, and James wishes with everything in him that there wasn't this stifling tension between them. It puts him on edge. He doesn't *want* to feel angry, or upset, but he can't help it.

However, they can't just—set out with no plan, so they do eventually start talking about what comes next. It's somehow easier to talk about their next moves and their survival than anything else, so that's what they do. It's day seven, and only three people stand between them and getting home, so what exactly is their plan? Well, they barely get five minutes into the discussion before they're bickering.

"No," James snaps. "I don't believe that."

"James," Regulus grits out, "I know he's your ally—"

"Peter is my *friend,"* James cuts in harshly. "He's my friend, Regulus. I promise you, he's not going to fucking team up with Bernice, alright? He wouldn't do that."

"Why?" Regulus challenges, stopping at the mouth of the cave to glare at him, his jaw set. "The chance to go home, to work with someone to get home—that's too good of an opportunity to pass up, James. If they're working together—"

"They're *not,"* James argues. "Peter isn't a fucking death eater."

"So, where is he?" Regulus demands.

James clenches his jaw. "I don't know, but he's not with her. She wants us dead, and so does Axus. Peter wouldn't betray me like that."

"If he's prioritizing his survival, he might," Regulus counters, frowning at him. "Riddle me this, James. What happens when we come across him if he's *not* a death eater, hm?"

To that, James has no answer.

"He stands between us and home, too," Regulus reminds him, holding his gaze. "Say he is alone and wants to help us handle Bernice and Axus, *then what?"*

"I'm getting really tired of you asking me that," James grits out. "I don't fucking know, alright?! I don't know!"

"James," Regulus says, his voice softening, "you have to—"

"Shut up!" James bursts out. "For fuck's sake, just *shut up."*

Regulus jerks back a little bit, his mouth snapping shut so hard that his teeth clack together. He stares at James, and James stares back, breathing hard. He's so angry. So furious and frustrated about so many things.

James waits for the regret he knows he should feel, but it never comes. He's not sorry. He doesn't want to apologize or take it back. He *wants* Regulus to shut up, to stop shoving it in James' face how fucking awful everything is all the damn time. It's silent between them, and James is too angry to care.

Regulus drops his gaze and looks away, then starts walking out of the cave without another word. James follows, his hatchet in hand. Regulus brought it to him, and he holds it now, fingers gripping the handle tight.

Neither of them speak or look at one another as Regulus leads them to a stream so they can refill their water. James keeps waiting to feel bad for hurting Regulus' feelings, because he knows that he did; he saw it in Regulus' eyes the moment it happened. James keeps waiting, and the remorse never rises within him. Even when his anger simmers, he's not guilty.

At the stream, they both take the time to actually wet their hair and have bird-baths, using the cloth to wipe away dirt and grime that's been building for days. It's not even close to a shower, but James does admittedly feel better just to be even slightly more clean than before. He's even treated to the sight of Regulus' waist and hips gleaming in the sunlight with water droplets, and it's ridiculous how he wants to walk over and just fucking *bite.* Not a playful bite, no, James wants to sink his teeth into Regulus and leave the deep imprints of his teeth from one jutting hip bone to the other.

In the end, James has to look away to fight the impulse.

They leave the stream more hydrated and mildly cleaner, but no less tense. Still, even now, they're not speaking. James can see that Regulus is peeking over at him cautiously every few minutes, but he keeps walking and staring straight ahead.

James doesn't know where they're going. They never got past the discussion on Peter, so he's just walking in the same direction as Regulus. At this point, he refuses to even ask.

His leg still hurts, and the background pain slowly makes itself more known the longer he walks on it. Rather against his will, James slows a little bit. Regulus matches his pace immediately, not saying a word. The silence is so loud, and usually, James would absolutely hate it—but still, he's too angry to care.

They've only been walking for a little over an hour when James has no choice but to take a break. He's started limping, and he needs to rest for a moment, so he goes over to lean against a tree. He doesn't explain himself to Regulus, doesn't even call out to him, but Regulus stops the instant he does anyway.

"Your leg?" Regulus asks quietly, finally breaking the silence.

James just grunts an affirmative.

Regulus swallows, then turns away and walks off in between the trees. James watches him go, not even speaking when he loses sight of him. It takes a few beats of silence and the echo of Regulus' presence that he left behind, and then James feels the unease set in along with his weariness, agitation, and pain.

James doesn't like not being able to see Regulus. It makes a knot of stress form at the top of his spine; it puts him on edge. Make no mistake, James is still angry for some fucking reason he can't really figure out—perhaps angry at everything—but that doesn't mean he wants Regulus to leave.

As much as he needs this break, James starts to push himself back up to follow Regulus wherever he's gone, because that's him, isn't it? That's what he always does. It's pathetic. Yet, he can't stop himself, so that's exactly what he begins to do, only to stop when Regulus comes back into view again.

Regulus has a large stick, longer than it is wide, and he brings it right to James. He holds it out and mumbles, "For you to take some of your weight off your leg."

James doesn't say anything as he reaches out and takes it. He just looks away and rests against the tree. The pain in his leg is dulling slowly but surely.

"James," Regulus says softly, and he's not quite able to meet James' eyes when he looks at him. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," James replies shortly, his tone making it very clear that it's *not* fine, though he honestly doesn't know what it is he's actually upset about.

"Right," Regulus whispers. "Okay. Sorry."

They fall silent again, not looking at each other, and then they start walking a few minutes later when James thinks he's ready. The stick helps a lot, so much so that James almost wants to thank Regulus for the idea, but the words are blocked by the thick knot of frustration in his throat.

Another hour passes in suffocating silence.

"Alright?" Regulus asks, eventually. "Your leg, I mean."

"Fine," is James' clipped response.

Regulus comes to an abrupt halt, making James walk past him. James doesn't stop or look back, just keeps right on going, and then Regulus rasps, *"James."*

At that, the way Regulus says his name, James stops. He sounds so upset. Genuinely hurt. Maybe even a bit scared. Despite everything, hearing Regulus sound like that tugs on something deep in James, like it hooks right into his soul and drags him out of his own feelings. Slowly, he turns around.

For a moment, James is gripped with such blind fury and bubbling resentment that he almost can't breathe from it, and he can't figure out the source. It's all of it, he thinks. It's coming from all different directions, everything building up too high and starting to tip over. It's the loss, it's this arena, it's the memory of a kiss that wasn't real.

And how *dare* Regulus look at him like that? Like he's hurt, too. Like James' sharp edges are cutting into him, as if he's not made of stone. Like he's more afraid of James' anger than he is when someone is threatening his life.

"You know, you can't handle even a tiny portion of what you give," James tells him, his voice sharp.

"I know," Regulus murmurs, his shoulders slumping. "I'm aware that it's a flaw."

"So, how does it feel?" James challenges. "Hm? Does it feel good, Regulus?"

"No," Regulus says softly, "it doesn't."

James nods sharply. "Maybe think about that next time you forget to care about other people's feelings. I have them, you know. Has it ever crossed your mind that I'm struggling, too? Don't you think this is getting to me as well? All of it? I *hate* it, Regulus. I—" His swallows, his chest tight as the tangle of emotions inside clump together within him and bang around against the hollow of his ribs. "I need something good, and I can't find it. You won't even help me look."

"James," Regulus croaks, his face sagging with regret.

"I *need* to believe in something good," James chokes out, desperate for Regulus to understand. "Peter can't be a death eater, because I—I need him not to be. Why would you try to take that away from me?"

Regulus curls his arms around his stomach, hands coming up to grip the sleeves of his coat, fingers holding the fabric tight, twisting it. "I just—I wanted you to be prepared. I don't want you to get hurt, James."

"It's too fucking late for that!" James explodes. "Don't you get it? You can't protect me from this, because I'm already here! I'm right fucking here; I'm in this with you, and you can't just expect me to be what you need me to be for your own comfort, then turn around and tear me down when I'm doing everything I can not to lose myself!"

"I'm—I swear I'm not trying to tear you down," Regulus starts, but James cuts him off.

"You treat me like I'm stupid for daring to see good in people, but if there's no good in anyone, then what's the fucking *point?"* James snaps. "I don't know about you, but I have to believe that there's good in this world, or otherwise what are we even fighting for? What's the point in living if we're not letting ourselves have reasons to? Not everyone in this world will let us down, and I'm not a fool for expecting the best out of someone, because we're all here, and we're all trying, and that *has* to mean something. I *need* it to mean something."

"Okay, James," Regulus whispers. He swallows thickly and nods, a deep sorrow in his eyes. "Okay."

James scoffs. "You don't agree."

"I'm sorry," Regulus rasps. "I wish I could."

"Why don't you?" James asks, frustrated. "I don't understand. At least I'm trying. You don't—you won't even try, do you know that? Why not?"

"The only good in this world I've ever known was you and Sirius," Regulus confesses, "and you both let me down."

"Fuck you, Regulus," James hisses, his hands shaking as anger surges within him. "Even then, even at fifteen years old, I was just like this. Trying, and trying, and trying. I really fucking tried, but you made that difficult. But did it ever, even *once,* cross your mind that maybe—" His breath hitches, and his throat feels swollen all of a sudden. "Maybe I needed—"

"James," Regulus says.

"Maybe I needed someone to care, too," James croaks. "Did that ever occur to you? I mean, I—I got it, you know? I really did understand that things were hard for you, but it was like… I don't know. It was like you forgot that, in all of that, you weren't the only one who lost something. I was fifteen, Regulus. Fifteen years old and trying as hard as I could, and you pushed me away."

Regulus looks away. "I know. I—wanted to."

"You wanted to," James repeats, his voice hollow.

"I think I forgot how to let anyone be close," Regulus says. "Maybe that makes me selfish, maybe that makes me cruel—"

"No, that's—I'm not—" James takes a deep, steadying breath as he shakes his head. "You were fifteen, too. Only just. We were *children,* Reg. Neither of us knew what we we're doing, and to be honest with you, I can't say we know now. But I'm not blaming you, alright? I'm not—I don't blame any of us. None of it was our fault. Not mine, yours, or Sirius'."

"And yet, you're angry with me for it," Regulus murmurs.

James clenches his jaw, then stiffly says, "Yes, I am. I wasn't just trying because that's who I am, Regulus. I was trying because I needed you. I needed you, and you didn't care. So, yes, I'm angry. I'm angry, because sometimes it feels like all I do is try, only to fail every time, and I don't know how to give up, so I'm just stuck in this same fucking cycle with no way out. And here we are—I'm still trying, I still won't give up, and it infuriates me that I still need you, and you still don't care."

"That's not fair," Regulus says quietly. "I can't give you what you need if you won't at least tell me what it is. You didn't then either, James, do you know that? You tried so hard, tried to do something when there was nothing you *could* do, and you just wouldn't *quit,* even when I told you over and over I didn't need or want you to take care of me. But you never once said you needed me, not until now."

"I didn't know how to say it," James admits hoarsely. "I didn't even know until it was too late. Isn't that fucked up? I wasn't even *aware* that I was hurting, because I was fucking busy trying to ignore it because it—it was easier to focus on your pain than let myself feel my own. I'm—I take care of everyone else because it makes me feel good, but it's also so that I don't have to face that sometimes I need to be taken care of, too."

The skin around Regulus' eyes are tight, and James can see his own regrets reflected in Regulus' gaze. So much history, so much pain between them, and maybe that's all they know. Maybe that's how they've survived this long in the arena. This isn't new. They've been suffering for years now.

"What do you need from me?" Regulus asks.

"You, mostly," James says with a bitter laugh, because he knows he won't be getting that, not really. "But I'll settle for you letting me keep trying. I don't want to prepare for the worst, but hope for the best; I want to believe that there's good in this world and the people in it, even if you don't agree."

Regulus takes a deep breath, then nods. "Alright."

"Alright," James rasps, the knot unfurling in his chest as he exhales shakily. "I just—I need this, Regulus. I really do. I have to believe there's still a point, because I—I can't—"

"There is," Regulus cuts in. "There's always a point, James, and wherever you find it—well, it doesn't matter who agrees or doesn't. We all have the things that keep us going. Yours is beautiful, you know. It's really beautiful."

James feels himself deflate as his eyes prick with tears. "Is it?"

"Yes," Regulus murmurs.

"What's yours?" James mumbles.

Regulus sighs, giving him a resigned smile. "Pure spite, mostly, but also… Fear. Fear keeps me going, because I'm afraid of what happens if I stop. I don't know if that makes me a coward, but I do know that your determination to keep going because you refuse to give up or stop trying… Well, it's not stupid, not at all. You're brave, James. Beautifully brave."

James feels like that cracks him open a bit. It hits him then how frightened he is, how desperately he needs his hope and his persistence in always trying, no matter his failures, because he's going to live. Because he can go home, and that means he has to live with what he's gone through.

And that's why he's so angry. He's upset because he won't get to just—escape the horrors of what's happened here, and he has to bear the weight of it after bearing so much already. It's infuriating. It's devastating.

But this—what Regulus has said to him—eases that fury, that fear, that failure. It crawls up from something innocent and soft in his center, in his very soul, and curls up around his heart, warm and snug. It makes him feel like he's going to be okay. It makes him feel safe.

"Thank you," James breathes out.

"We should go," Regulus says softly, turning to walk again, but he abruptly stops and looks back. "And James?"

"Yeah?" James whispers.

"If there's one thing all of this has taught me," Regulus tells him, "it's that I've always cared."

James sucks in a sharp breath, holding it as a balloon expands in his chest, his heart starting back to life with a harsh kick. He looks into Regulus' eyes, those eyes that he knows so well, and it's true. Regulus is telling the truth. That's real.

He's always cared.

Oh.

James breaks out into a helpless smile, feeling more like himself than ever, and Regulus' lips curl up at the sight before he turns and walks away.

Feeling much better, James happily follows.

Chapter End Notes

everyone: WHEN WILL THEY KISS???
me: be careful what you wish for

so, that one was kinda heavy/angsty, huh? let's get into it, i guess.

it was really important to me to show that regulus was trying to comfort james and be there for him out of care (*cough* and repressed love *cough*) even before he was reminded of the love story the hallows are expecting from him. it was also really important for me to show just how much he struggles with that, because it doesn't come easily to him. it's not something that he knows how to do naturally, but the fact that he makes the effort for james is so, so important, and it is, in fact, a love language, honestly.

him being Completely Clueless about how to be romantic 😭😭😭 like poor babe, why did it have to fall on him? james would have THRIVED in that role, it would have been his time to shine lmaoooo

but no, it was on regulus to lead the charge, as it were, and he ended up panicking and kissing his not-boyfriend. great job, reg, you're doing amazing sweetie 👍 (oh and honorable mention to regulus accidentally calling james "baby" again!!! the next time he does it, it's on purpose!!!)

i want all of you who were grinning, cheering, kicking your feet, and squealing to know that the hallows were doing the exact same things 🤨 no, you're no better than a hallow. it's okay, im no better than a gamemaker for essentially Making It Happen. yes, im becoming self-aware.

i make jokes, but really, that whole "performance" was so sad. like it wasn't james or regulus' fault, or even sirius', for that matter. im really putting james through the wringer in this one, aren't i? he's gotten caught in a bear trap, lost all of his allies/friends in one go, had a hook buried in his thigh, got dragged through the woods, suffered the pain of that and his grief, and THEN the man he's in love with kissed him out of necessity and for no other reason. like. the poor man can't catch a break 😔

which is why he was so pissed off. it was about time he snapped. like, he's been going THROUGH IT, so of course he finally reached the end of his unbelievably long rope. he had ENOUGH. hurt regulus' feelings though 😭😭😭 no, because regulus is a big baby when james gets mad at him. he's like: I Don't Like This Please Stop Please Don't Be Mean To Me. as much as i love regulus, he's absolutely the person who can dish it out but Cannot Take It. james snaps at him ONCE and he's like: 🥺 wait no love me again pls

james insisting that peter can't be a death eater and won't betray him; please know that this comes from a place of him literally just trying to cling to Something Good. like, he needs that, because he is who he is. it's not necessarily because he actually believes it, he

just really, really fucking hopes. and he's so valid, actually, for how he tries to find purpose and meaning. it's not weak to hope, to believe that there is good in this world. i actually think that's really strong, and brave.

regulus is a bit too jaded for that, though, and he's just a different type of person, which is okay. he's right to say that however someone finds a point to things is okay, and it doesn't matter who agrees or doesn't, because we all need that, ya know?

this got unexpectedly deep for a hunger games au fanfic... ANYWAY, the real main character of this chapter!!! regulus admitting that he's always cared about james. GOODBYE. the way that literally jolted james back to life 😭😭😭 they're so in love...

next chapter is a Big One. very, very close to the end. so, you know, prepare for that!

let me do numbers i guess.

tributes remaining: 5
regulus
james
axus
bernice
peter

Hesitation

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-references to past child death
-depictions of a nightmare and a panicked/defensive response to it
-graphic depictions of violence
-mentions of blood
-murder/death
-angst

(i will be putting a more in-depth warning in the end notes, as i always tend to on the heavier chapters, so don't hesitate to check if you need to!!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Er, where exactly are we going?" James finally gets around to asking, after they've been walking for ages, at this point. The mood has settled between them, so they've had a few light discussions about meaningless things, especially while James is taking his much-needed breaks.

"The crimson river. If the others aren't already there, then they'll end up there at some point to look for supplies they won't find. Also, if we can beat them there, it's a good place to be, because it's surrounded by open space, so we'll see them coming when they do," Regulus explains.

"Why won't they find supplies?"

"I threw them away. All of them."

"So, wait, why did you throw away all the supplies?" James asks in confusion, not quite grasping the point of that.

Regulus' face does this odd twitching thing. "Well, I was stuck, and frustrated, so I…"

"Had a tantrum?" James says, amused by the thought.

"Something like that," Regulus mutters. "In any case, it was for the best. It ensures that the others can't use it, at the very least. Peter doesn't have weapons or supplies. Axus only has their hook, and Bernice has her sword, and that's it. They can survive out there, sure, but they're going to want the ease of supplies eventually. It'll draw them in, if it hasn't already."

James hums thoughtfully. "And what are we going to do if we get there and find Bernice and Axus already waiting?"

"They are going to try to kill us, and instead, we will kill them," Regulus responds without missing a beat.

"Just like that, huh?" James murmurs.

"I don't like it any more than you do, James," Regulus replies quietly, swiveling his dagger between his fingers, lips tipped down at the corners.

"I'm tired of all the death," James admits, looking down at his hatchet, not entirely sure when he became so familiar with it that his hand sometimes feels wrong without the weight of it.

Regulus takes a deep breath. "I know, me too, but it'll all be over soon. Maybe as soon as tonight. We could—James, we could be home by tomorrow. That's what we need to focus on."

"And then what?" James asks, admittedly smug that he gets to turn Regulus' words back on him.

"What?" Regulus blurts out, glancing over at him. As soon as their eyes meet, his face turns bright red. He looks away quickly, clearing his throat. "Sorry, what? I mean—what? What do you mean *and then what?"*

James' eyebrows shoot up in surprise, because Regulus is blatantly flustered at the moment—from the question, maybe? James isn't sure. "I meant what I said. We get home, yeah? And then what? What's next, Reg?"

"Oh. Well, first on my list, I want a long, hot shower," Regulus says, sounding wistful.

"That sounds really good, yeah," James admits, because it does. His lips curl up. "You know, in the interest of conserving water, we could have a long, hot shower *together."*

"Do I look like I care about conserving water, James?"

"Alright, fair enough, but you should care. Water is a limited resource, so it's important not to waste it."

Regulus shoots him a *look.* "Oh, yes, *that's* the reason you're interested in taking a shower with me. No other reason at all."

"Of course," James says with an innocent smile, because he's in a much better mood now after their earlier talk, after letting out some of his frustration. He'd forgotten how good it feels just to be—happy.

"I'd also like to sleep for, like, three days *at least,"* Regulus declares, sounding genuinely serious.

James snorts. "Oh, yeah, that's high on my list, too."

"You're not going to suggest we sleep together in the name of sharing body heat, or… something?" Regulus asks.

"Actually, no," James says with a chuckle. "Don't take this the wrong way, but if there's anyone I'm sleeping with when I get back, it's absolutely Sirius."

"You two are so codependent that it's borderline worrisome," Regulus muses. "Do you *ever* get tired of each other?"

"Literally never," James admits.

"That's impossible," Regulus mutters.

"I know it's hard for you to grasp, Reg, but sometimes people actually just *like* other people," James teases. For some reason, this makes Regulus flinch a little bit, and James' smile fades. "What? What is it? What did I say?"

Regulus clears his throat. "Not you. It's just—it's something Evan said before he—before he died, is all."

"Oh," James says softly, immediately solemn. Carefully, he sways closer to Regulus to bump their arms together. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," Regulus replies.

James wants so badly to comfort him, but he knows now what he didn't at fifteen—pushing too hard with Regulus won't get him anywhere. So, he just says, "Okay."

Some of the tension leaves Regulus' shoulders, and they fall silent. It's a comfortable silence, though, both of them just left to their own thoughts. Just existing in each other's spaces.

They keep walking, taking a break nearly every hour because of James' leg, and the sun is starting to set. They gather berries and eat them; they stay hydrated and refill their water when they come across a stream; they keep going.

It takes all day to make it to the field twenty-four people started in a week ago, with only five remaining now. James' leg is mostly to blame for the length of the trip, because even though he can walk on it, he can only really go at a slower pace and there *is* still some pain, so the breaks are necessary. Regulus doesn't complain, for which James is grateful.

But, eventually, they do break through the treeline, the crimson river and the cave it surrounds coming into view. They stop on the edge of the forest, and they stare at it in complete silence, neither of them saying a word.

It's completely deserted.

~•~

Regulus and James have to wait a bit for the crimson river to ice over before they can cross it; his unease does admittedly rise even more when they bypass the scattered poles to step into the cave. It's empty in an eerie, cavernous way that screams of gutted, hollow things, a reflection of what last took place here. Regulus' skin crawls.

"You really cleaned this place out," James mumbles, looking around at—nothing, because Regulus quite literally dumped every single thing other than the tables and racks.

"Yes," is all Regulus can bring himself to say, taking his bag off and plopping gracelessly down on the floor with a sigh.

He's tired. Today has been especially taxing. Nothing even really *happened;* it's just how emotionally draining it was to have James actually, legitimately angry with him. Properly furious, and not just bickering or mild frustration. James has never before gotten angry with

him—with everything all at once—like that. Regulus has decided he would like to never go through that again, because it had…

Well, honestly, it had actually really hurt his feelings, which was startling. He learned *very* quickly that he genuinely does care about how James feels towards him. It's a bit alarming, but Regulus does *not* like James being upset with him.

Regulus thinks he's handling this whole *'caring about James Potter'* business really well, actually. He sort of knew, seeing as it's fairly obvious by this point, but he was *clinging* to the exact opposite before the announcement. He doesn't have to cling anymore, because now he *and* James can go home, both of them, so what's the harm in *letting* himself care? It's not the worst thing that's ever happened to him, like it would be if James *couldn't* come home with him.

So, sure, Regulus cares about James. Regulus cares about whether or not James is upset with him. Regulus cares about James' happiness and sense of purpose. That's fine. Regulus can handle this. Definitely. It's all under control.

At the moment, James looks as weary as Regulus feels about being back here. Neither of them have good memories here, and this is where nearly all of James' friends died. He hadn't been able to look in the direction where he cradled Vanity's body in his arms, and he hadn't been able to look down at the river when they were crossing the ice. Regulus hadn't been able to look away from the pale hands, and then he couldn't rip his gaze away from the pole Irene died against.

"What do we do if the others don't come?" James murmurs as he joins Regulus in sitting on the ground, groaning in relief as he takes his weight off his leg.

"If they don't…" Regulus presses his lips into a thin line and moves over to sit by James' leg, reaching out to untie the strip of shirt he put around the wound. "Well, one way or another, we'll all find each other at some point. The gamemakers will ensure that. It's best for your leg if we stay here anyway. Maybe they'll just…deal with each other so we don't have to."

"If I had to guess, Peter is probably back in the cave where we all were together," James says, his eyebrows furrowed. "It's a good place to hide from Bernice and Axus. I hope he's safe."

Regulus doesn't point out how contradicting that hope is; he leaves James to his heart wrenching kindness. Deep down, Regulus knows it's only going to end badly. He's quite sure that Peter is with Bernice, at the very least, and the thing is… Regulus can't even blame him, if he is. This is about survival, and if Peter has turned to the death eaters to make it out alive, then… Well, truthfully, not everyone is like James.

Not everyone puts their morals and what they believe is right over their survival. Regulus doesn't. Regulus *wouldn't.* If it was him, if it came down to survival, he would be a death eater, too. Fear and survival are strong motivators, and when they just so happen to intersect, it can lead to horrible choices. Regulus doesn't know if that makes him a bad person.

He thinks the arena makes everyone a bad person while they're here. The only exception to the rule is James. He's the only person who could drag himself through all of this filth and cruelty and still hold onto his shine.

Regulus hopes James never loses his shine.

"Well, it doesn't look worse," James says quietly when Regulus reveals his leg and they're both just staring at it.

He's right, it *doesn't* look worse. It also doesn't look better. The open punctures are still there, and though they're not bleeding or inflamed, they also haven't scabbed over. It looks like it's in a stasis, frankly. Like it would finish healing if they had a bit more salve, only a bit more, and then the wounds would close.

Regulus doesn't know if Sirius will be able to send more, and he really doesn't think James wants a repeat performance of the previous night. Regulus isn't even sure if he can do it, not again, not when it hurt James so much.

Another thing Regulus has learned, he absolutely *despises* it when James is in pain of any kind.

"It should be fine until we make it out of here. They'll be able to heal you up, no doubt," Regulus declares, folding up the strip of the shirt to the clean side and rewrapping the injury.

"It'll be an interesting scar, at least," James muses, and when Regulus shoots him a look, he snorts weakly. "What? Scars are sexy. Aren't I just so sexy, love? Tell me how sexy I am."

Regulus rolls his eyes, but his lips twitch, because honestly? He's so grateful James seems a bit better—not fully alright, but trying to be. "You are unfortunately…not horrible to look at. Does that suffice?"

"I'll take it," James announces decisively, clearly pleased. "I do recall you telling me that I'm…what was it? *Unholy."*

"The devil," Regulus says dryly.

James grins at him. "Well, you know what they say. The devil doesn't come to you with horns and a pitchfork, but rather in the form of everything you want. So, if that's what I am to you, I am *not* complaining."

"I take it back immediately," Regulus tells him.

"Too late," James teases. He leans forward slightly, his eyes sparkling. "Do I tempt you, Regulus?"

"To kill you? Absolutely," Regulus shoots back.

"Well, we both know that's a lie," James says, waving a hand lazily as he leans back. He tilts his head slightly, looking curious. "I feel like I can ask now, since we can both go home, but…would you really have killed me, if it came to it?"

Regulus says what he always says, what he's been saying from the beginning, and it's much easier to say now that he knows he won't have to put it to the test. "Without hesitation."

James just smiles.

~•~

They settle in for the night with the usual routine. Water, blanket, very small fire (both to avoid detection and also because they didn't find much in the way of supplies for a fire around the cave), and what James has come to associate as a treat in the form of their bodies pressed close.

Regulus isn't holding him tonight, going back to being the little spoon again. James lays on his side—not on his bad leg, of course—and drapes his arm over Regulus' waist under the blanket, feeling his (warm) bare skin against his own.

"Reg?" James murmurs to the back of his head, listening to the distant sound of creaking trees and whistling wind, almost drowned out by the closer sound of the crackling fire.

"Hm?" Regulus replies.

"You know that other life?" James asks quietly. "The one where we could have been happy together? Where we're not a great, big tragedy?"

Regulus is silent for a long beat, then he says, "Yes."

"Tell me something about it," James whispers. "It can be anything. Anything at all. Just… Will you—"

"We have a bookshelf," Regulus cuts in, sounding absolutely certain, and James closes his eyes. "Sirius built us a bookshelf, and you have the top shelves because you're taller, and I

have the lower shelves because I keep all my journals on the very bottom. You never read them because I don't want you to, and you respect that, but you replace the flowers between the pages when they crumble, even when I don't ask you to."

"You'd never have to ask," James murmurs. "I'd just do it."

"I know," Regulus says softly.

James dips his head forward and presses his face to the back of Regulus' neck. "What else?"

"I write little notes and sneak them in your pocket when you're going somewhere, to work or just into the market or even to visit friends, and you find them later. It's not—well, it's short and usually just things I can't bring myself to say out loud. Sometimes it's reminders for something you need to do, because you'd probably forget otherwise," Regulus tells him.

"I'd keep them. All of them. Every single one, even just the reminders," James says, a lump in his throat.

"I profusely deny that I write them, even though I sign them all the same way—R.A.B.—and you just laugh and say you must have a secret admirer."

"You would absolutely do that."

Regulus hums, his fingers moving gently over the back of James' hand under the blanket, tracing the tendons and the hills of his knuckles. "Yes, I would."

"What else?" James prompts again.

"It's a modest life. Comforting in its simplicity. Mundane, almost, but never completely. Quiet and safe. Our home is warm and never absolutely spotless, showing signs of life, breathable because we exist there without worrying if we're doing it too loudly or not. We

don't mute ourselves, and we laugh. Every day, we laugh," Regulus rasps. His voice is small and tight, strained like he's feeling too much. "Sometimes, before bed, you force me to my feet and pull me in, even when I complain. We dance by the firelight."

"You'd let me do that?" James asks, his heart clenching with how deeply the yearning hooks into him.

"In that life, I do," Regulus whispers. "I let you do whatever you want, and when you want to dance, we dance."

"Slow-dancing?" James checks, trying to imagine it, picturing their bodies flush together as they go in circles and press playful smiles to each other's cheeks; whispering in Regulus' ear, close and intimate; simply content with one another.

"Slow and swaying. Just holding on because we can, because there's some other life out there where we can't, where we don't, where we're a great, big tragedy—and we're so thankful it's not that one," Regulus croaks.

Because it's this one, James doesn't say, because he knows that to say it out loud would only put them in danger, but he's aware that it's true, more than anything else here.

It doesn't matter if they're going home. James is aware that what has happened here in the arena doesn't extend out to who they are when they get back. He would never expect anything out of Regulus because of what's taken place here, and Regulus has made his feelings very clear. He can care about James, and he can fight with everything in him to get James home, but that doesn't mean their love story is real.

James would like to try. Of course he would. He's all about trying, and maybe they could find solace and comfort with each other after this. It's one of those things that could bring them closer together or rip them further apart, and James won't know either way until they're no longer under the microscopic pressure of the demands they have to meet in order to survive. It can't be real, not here.

But maybe it could be real at home. Maybe, with time, if they actually tried, if they took it slow and turned *what could have been* into *what could still be,* then maybe—just maybe—they could have something real. James would treat Regulus right. He would be so good to him, given the chance.

Regulus said James was his first love, didn't he?

James would give anything to be his last.

~•~

Of course he's in the tree. Fuck, Regulus hates the trees. How he ended up here, he doesn't know, but for fuck's sake, let him *down.* He hates being up so high; he can't even see the ground. This is bullshit, because the trees—oh, how he *hates* trees—

"Why the long face, lover boy?"

"Why do you *think,* Evan?" Regulus snaps, lifting his head to glare at Evan, who sits further down the branch and swings his legs with a grin. "Because I'm in a fucking tree, I can't even see the ground, and *some* of us aren't lunatics like you, so we're not exactly happy about situations such as these."

"Ah, poor lamb," Evan says, clicking his tongue, though humor dances in his eyes. "Unfortunately, there's nowhere to go but up. Go on, keep climbing. Almost there."

"Where?" Regulus asks, tilting his head up and freezing as soon as he sees James and Sirius sitting on a branch so high they're basically perched on a cloud. They're laughing as they talk to each other and swing their legs, focused entirely on one another without bothering to glance down. When he calls out to them, they don't acknowledge him at all.

"Almost there, Regulus," Evan tells him.

"I can't reach them," Regulus croaks. "I'm too scared to climb. As much as I want to go, I think I'll just stay here. I think I'm just stuck here, Evan."

"Oh, you can make it to them; you just have to be willing to. You're not stuck, Regulus, not at all. You're just not ready to climb yet," Evan says. "You'll wish you had, though."

"What?" Regulus mumbles, eyebrows furrowing as he rips his gaze from Sirius and James to focus on Evan instead, and his breath punches out of him as soon as he sees the spear impaled through him. Evan seems unperturbed by it, still kicking his legs and resting one arm over the handle of the spear like it's a prop, like he's not bleeding out. "Evan…"

"You're so close," Evan murmurs with a sad sigh. "That's you, isn't it, lover boy? Perpetually close, but never close enough. If only you'd keep climbing…" He shakes his head and gives Regulus a sorrowful smile. "You can't stay here forever. I think you'd know this by now, but eventually branches break."

With a snap, the branch they're on cracks right in the middle between them, and Evan tips backwards, hand outstretched. Regulus remembers flinging himself up as Evan surged forward to catch his hand to pull him up on the branch on the very first day of the games, and he jerks forward thoughtlessly to return the favor. Evan managed to catch him, but now that it's Regulus' turn, he fails. Their hands just graze each other ever so slightly.

Evan falls, and Regulus chokes out his name in immediate horror, starting to tip himself forward, only to be snatched back by his collar. Regulus kicks out and swivels his head, letting loose a helpless, instinctive shriek of pure terror when he sees the spider with Avery's face yanking him further along the branch. Regulus can't get free, and all he can think to do is call out for Sirius, for James, begging them to help him, to help Evan. He screams their names over and over, desperate and loud. James and Sirius never stop laughing together; they never look down to where he is at all.

The spider drags him further, making him shake, and shake, and—and he's being shaken. He's—

The ground rises up to meet him, causing Regulus to roll into the bracing cold, pinning down the give of warmth beneath him. It's moving. It's a threat, shaking him and holding him. Regulus has his dagger to it before he even registers what it is, still hazy and disoriented.

"—gulus," says the warmth as the ringing in Regulus' ears start to fade, the world slowly shifting into focus. It takes a second, but that—it's James. It's James that Regulus is pinning to the floor, a dagger to his throat. James is watching him very carefully, holding very still. "It's me. I promise it's just me."

Regulus doesn't move, eyes darting around as he breathes hard, trying to puzzle reality back together. It takes him a long moment to regulate his breathing and make sense of what's going on; it was a nightmare, not his first and most certainly not his last. Glancing back down, James is still pliant beneath him, finally relaxing completely the moment Regulus meets his eyes. He must see some clarity in them, because the tension drains out of his body, and he gazes up at Regulus with his eyebrows furrowed in obvious concern.

"You were calling out for me and Sirius," James whispers, his eyes full of sorrow.

"Sorry," Regulus says gruffly, carefully pulling his dagger away from James' neck. He's really exhausted and barely has the energy to slip off James' lap where he's straddling him, but he's sure his weight is bothering James' leg, and as much as he jokes, Regulus is almost certain he doesn't *actually* like the fact that he came very close to having his throat sliced open just now.

"Hey, you're fine, stop," James murmurs, reaching out to grip Regulus' hips before carefully sliding his hands to his lower back under the blanket, pressing in and gently encouraging him to fold forward. "Come here, it's okay."

Regulus collapses down into James and buries his face into the crook of his neck, hunched in on himself and making his back into a shell-curve as he does his absolute best to fit his whole body into the circle of James' arms as they come up around him. Usually, the nightmares are something they don't talk about. They both have them, and they both have the decency to wake the other up if they see them afraid in their sleep, but they generally don't acknowledge them. Most of the time, it just leaves them sweaty and resigned and so, so tired.

This time, Regulus can't stop the words that fall out of his mouth in a hushed rush. "Evan was stupid. He was—" Regulus sucks in deep, stuttering breath, blinking rapidly. His voice drops down to a rasp. "He was just so stupid, James. That's why he died. Because he—he wasn't quiet in his tree. People don't look up, not unless they hear a sound that makes them, and he laughed." He swallows harshly, his body held tense as he croaks, "I made him laugh, and that's how he died. How fucking stupid is that? Isn't that just so stupid?"

"Regulus," James says, his voice soft as he rubs his hand up and down Regulus' back.

"I'm not even *funny,"* Regulus chokes out, his face twisting, and then he's clapping his hand over his mouth to muffle the sound that seems to wrench out of him, but it's no use, really.

Things like this can only exist in the dark, in the dead of night where the whole world seems to be in a slumber, that way it's easier to pretend no one can see how he unravels. Regulus tries his best, he really does, but there's genuinely nothing he can do. It just comes pouring out of him, and he wonders why now? Because of the dream? There were so many layers to the dream that Regulus doesn't even bother trying to make sense of them. So, why is he losing it over Evan *now?* Again? He thought he already did this. He can't keep doing this.

That's the thing about grief, Regulus is learning. It doesn't just go away. He doesn't just get to be upset when it happens; he has to go on and be upset for the rest of his life. It's not fair.

He thinks he should have known. After all, he's been familiar with grief since he was fifteen —just not like this. Not death. It's a different grief, a hopeless one. Regulus can still climb to James and Sirius, but Evan? The branch broke, and he's gone.

Why does this always happen to him? Every time, this is what happens to him. Like it's his curse. Regulus gets so close to something he wants, and then it's gone. Never close enough.

Maybe it's stupid, because realistically, Regulus only knew Evan for a handful of days, at most. He didn't know his middle name. He didn't know anything about his family, or his childhood, or what hopes he had for his future. They barely spent more than a day together, all-in-all, and yet it *still* fucking hurts like losing a best friend, even more so because they never got to be. Lost potential is another thing to grieve, and Regulus knows that well by now.

Regulus doesn't need to know more than he already did about Evan to know he trusted him, to know it was easy with him, even in this bottomless abyss of *shit.*

James is murmuring to him. Gentle words. Kind words. All the words that are meant to be soothing. Regulus doesn't listen to them, mostly because he can't hear them over the sound of his own sobs. It's nice of him to do, nonetheless. Of course it is. That's James. He's always so ruthlessly kind.

Regulus lets the background sound of James' voice wash over him, feeling it seep into his skin and go deeper, resonating in his bones until they're strong enough to stop shaking. His tears slowly drift to a stop until he's just breathing into the curve of James' throat, his eyes shut, eyelashes clumped and wet. James has fallen silent, just rubbing his back.

Regulus lifts his head with minimal effort and rasps, "Am I hurting your leg?"

"No, love, you're fine right where you are," James assures him, and Regulus instantly collapses back into him once more, all the fight gone out of him. "I've got you, Regulus. I promise."

"Will you—" Regulus cuts himself off and squeezes his eyes shut, because this, with James, is no different from climbing a tree so tall it scrapes the sky. He gets it. He gets the metaphor now, okay? He understands how it's similar—the fear of falling, the strain of pulling himself up from the safety of the ground he's used to, the sensation of being stuck, the threat of a broken branch that can't hold the weight of what they were, what they are, and all that they could be.

"Anything," James murmurs, and it's like he's leaning down and begging Regulus just to take his hand. James would pull him up; James would never, never drop him. Regulus knows that, and still, that doesn't make the fear go away. "All you have to do is ask, Reg. Whatever you want or need—"

"Your hand—will you—can I have—" Regulus can't figure out how to make his request, because it feels oddly juvenile, and it somehow feels like it's not allowed.

"You want?" James asks, not quite finishing with words, and instead he nearly whacks himself in the face in his haste to literally offer Regulus his hand, so earnest about it.

Regulus can't explain why, but he starts crying again, feeling as fragile as a butterfly's wing. He chokes out a sob and nods helplessly to make it clear that *yes,* he does want, he really does, and then he reaches out to grab James' hand to twine their fingers together. It's awkward and a bit clunky, but Regulus doesn't care. He just ducks his head and starts pressing desperate kisses over their fingers, crying so hard that he's hyperventilating a little bit.

"Is—is that better or worse? I genuinely can't tell," James admits, very blatantly distressed.

Regulus doesn't respond. He isn't sure if he has the words to make it make sense how important James' hand is to him right now. Hands can be tethers that stop you from floating away, pulling you from where you're drifting up into the sky; just the same, they can be the pull you need when you're falling, when you're sinking, when gravity is dragging you down. Regulus was fifteen the first time he held James' hand, and it kept him grounded. Now, it's James' hand that could help him climb, if he'd just let it.

Still weeping, Regulus tucks their joined hands under his chin and curls around them like he's trying to keep them safe in between their bodies. James lets him, keeping his other arm around him, still stroking his back.

In one hand, Regulus clings to James' fingers. In the other, he clings to his dagger. Isn't it sad how they both comfort him? Isn't it sad how he can't fathom letting either go?

Isn't it sad how neither can stop him from being afraid?

~•~

James doesn't go back to sleep, even when Regulus eventually stops crying and drifts off. The way Regulus had been calling out for him, and for Sirius, had scared him so much that he's

actually a little terrified to close his eyes. He thinks he's going to have a nightmare about it, and he's already woken up from awful dreams about Vanity and Hodge tonight.

So, he just stays awake. He may have lied to Regulus about his leg, but the ache from the weight of Regulus sitting astride his pelvis—making the injury in his thigh throb—is a small price to pay to be able to hold him, and comfort him, and be held and comforted by him. Regulus' mere presence is soothing James, helping him with his own grief.

Even when asleep, Regulus doesn't let James' hand go. He keeps their hands trapped between them like someone might come and try to steal them or break them up. James would sooner chew off his own hand to give to Regulus than let anyone take it away from him, at this point.

James isn't entirely sure what Regulus' whole…breakdown was about, really. The nightmare, he's assuming, but he'd also been upset about Evan? He'd also seemed quite desperate to hold hands, then even more upset when they did? Frankly, James doesn't think there needs to be answers or reasons for this sort of thing. Grief manifests in strange ways, and they both have a lot of things to carry grief for. It's not something they just get to put down, not ever. James knows that from his own mother, and from Sirius. If all they can do to help each other is hold on, then James is grateful that they get to.

It was late when Regulus had his nightmare, so it's not long before the temperature starts to change and the night slowly begins to give way to morning. It's still cold, still dark out, but James can see the sky lightening outside the cave. Soon, the river will thaw, which means they need to get up if they want to make it across. They don't know when exactly the ice will melt, but they did agree they didn't want to be trapped here all day with no food or sources of water.

"Reg," James says gently, nudging him a little. This earns little more than a grumpy, displeased grunt that, despite everything, brings a small smile to his lips. He huffs a quiet laugh and squeezes Regulus' hand while using his other hand to nudge him again. "I know you hate it, love, but it's time to get up."

"No," Regulus mumbles and just—snuggles in closer.

"Regulus," James declares, biting back a laugh.

"Don't do this to me, James, please," Regulus whispers-groans, sort of nuzzling into James' shoulder that he's been using as a pillow since he ended up on top of him.

Admittedly, James is so stupidly delighted by the way Regulus wants to lay all over him that he would be willing to let him literally do it forever. However, Regulus would kill him if they got trapped over here when James could have kept it from happening. "We don't know when the river thaws, remember? It's best if we cross it now, so we don't get st—"

A scream splits the air, drowning out the rest of James' words and it has Regulus immediately jerking awake, his head snapping up as he rolls right out of James' lap and to his feet, dagger at the ready. James is right behind him, snatching up his hatchet and bracing the top of it to the ground to help him stumble to his feet. His leg protests, but it hardly even registers as Regulus yanks up his bag to put on, and then they're both heading for the cave entrance.

They make it there at the same time, just about, so James hears Regulus suck in a sharp breath of pure horror even before he fully processes what he's so horrified *by.* James' brain can hardly make sense of it.

Like, he *knows* that it's a huge spider, but where the eyes would usually be, there's a protruding torso that leads into Irene's face, which is framed by sharp, clicking pinchers. The Irene-spider is scuttling behind Peter, Bernice, and Axus, chasing them at frankly *terrifying* speeds while they all shout and run.

All James can think about is how Irene hated spiders. The fact that the gamemakers did this to her—to *anyone,* really—makes him feel fucking sick. All the color has drained from Regulus' face, and he looks like he might vomit as well.

"James!" Peter shrieks, garbling out a desperate screech as he sprints at full-tilt through the field, arms flailing.

"Help! Fucking *help* us!" Bernice screams at them, sounding so terrified that James instinctively *does* want to help her, despite everything that's happened thus far.

"James," Regulus croaks, "the river hasn't thawed. The—fuck, *fuck,* they're leading it right to us!"

"Can we even kill that thing?" James asks incredulously.

Regulus sends him an indignant look. "I don't know!"

"Well," James mutters with a grimace, lifting his hatchet with a deep breath, "only one way to find out."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Regulus groans, flipping his dagger into his palm as James proceeds to run out of the cave.

"Axus, your *hook!"* James bellows as the others draw closer.

"Are you fucking mental?!" Axus shrieks back, nearly slipping on the ice as they come barreling over.

Bernice actually *does* slip, landing on her knees and fully just gliding all the way across like a rockstar or something equally cool, then she uses her sword to brace against the ground and stumble to her feet. "Don't be a bitch, Axus! We have to fight this fucking thing *anyway!* Use your damn hook!"

"Everyone *scatter!"* James roars, and they all instantly split off in multiple different directions, which does seem to confuse the spider for just a split second. The empty poles make it harder for the spider to move. It selects a target, going right for Bernice, who is steadily backing up. "Okay, get behind it!"

"Not yet! Not *yet!"* Bernice orders through clenched teeth, holding one hand out to hold off Axus, who is running along beside the spider, a little behind it, swinging their hook. Bernice's other hand grips her sword, doing that cool swivel thing that Mulciber also knew how to do.

In his brief moment of delirious disbelief and panic, James wonders why all the mean people know how to do cool stuff. Even Regulus—

"Now!" Peter shouts.

Axus immediately lets their hook fly, catching the spider all the way across to the other side, embedding in the dip between the torso and the body. Regulus dives forward to grip the rope with Axus, and they both pull, actually managing to throw the spider off course at first, then losing momentum when Axus lashes out and punches Regulus in the face.

"Really?! Is now the time?!" Regulus roars in what James knows is a mixture of disbelief and rage.

To their credit, Axus does wince as they call out, "Sorry! It was a reflex! You're right, that can wait!"

"Fucking *pull,"* Regulus snarls, and then they both do.

"Pete! Help me tackle it!" James bursts out, which spurs him and Peter forward as they essentially just throw themselves at the side to the spider while Axus and Regulus yank it over from the other side. Bernice, from the front, is slashing wildly with her sword, keeping herself from being eaten.

The spider wobbles with a hiss, then tilts over, crumbling on its side. James immediately raises his hatchet and slams it down into one of the spider's legs, the grotesque crunch and snap ringing in his ears. The spider writhes, trying to get up, but Axus and Regulus continue to yank it over every time. Peter stoops down and grips the twitching leg James is chopping off, gagging even as he does it, but he doesn't let how disgusting it is stop him from tugging on the leg with all his might until James breaks through and it pulls apart.

This doesn't go over well with the spider, predictably. It hisses shrilly and flails on the ground, striking out wildly at Bernice. It's getting harder to keep it down, and James knows it's not going to stay put much longer.

"I have an insane idea," James gasps out to Peter, whipping towards him with his chest heaving. Peter is staring down at the spider leg in his hands in pure disgust. "Peter!"

"Oh, oh, that is *nasty,"* Peter chokes out, dropping the leg and shuddering in revulsion. He looks up with wide eyes. "What? Wait, what idea? James—"

"Give me a boost," James declares, reaching out to brace his hand on Peter's shoulder.

Peter gapes at him. "You are *mental."*

Nonetheless, he threads his fingers together and makes a platform between his palms, holding steady as James puts his foot in it and does three little bounces before pushing himself up and throwing himself up onto the body of the spider. He nearly goes right over the side, and for a second, the only thing he can see is Regulus' face red from exertion, his eyes wide and his mouth dropped open as he realizes James is *on* the spider at the moment. James manages a quick, lopsided grin.

"James, you fucking idiot, *get down!"* Regulus shouts.

"One second, love!" James shouts back with a cackle that sounds more like Sirius than him, actually. Weirdly, he hasn't felt this alive and exhilarated in *days*.

With a grunt, he shifts to wriggle up to where he can see his feet under him. Don't spiders have hair? Some of them do, right? Vanity would know, and the passing thought steals the smile right off James' face. Either way, *this* spider has no hair; it's body and legs are made of something that feels like leather or rubber, or both, and there's no easy way to grip it.

Still, James gets his balance enough to crawl forward and bury his hatchet in the back of the spider's torso. The discomfort from the fact that it's *Irene's* torso is overshadowed by the horrible hiss the spider releases, the sound of the pinchers clicking rapidly in distress. The arms flail, trying to reach back and snatch the hatchet out. James beats it there, yanking it free

and standing to full height to grip the spider by the back of its hair—Irene's hair—to hold it in place as he swings his hatchet with all his might at the side of its neck.

That only really distracts it, honestly, but Bernice provides assistance by darting forward to shove her sword right through its torso. James snatches the hatchet back out while it's held in place, then brings it back down.

He does it again.

And again.

And again.

And once more for good measure, which finally slices all the way through to the other side, making the spider's head quite literally roll off its shoulders. Irene's head, except not, which becomes apparent when the head hits the ground by Bernice's feet with a dull thud, black eyes glazed over and pinchers still.

The spider slumps all at once, still twitching, and James goes stumbling right over the side with a grunt, not at all prepared to be displaced so abruptly. He hits the ground with a groan, his hatchet skittering from his hand, across the grass. As luck would have it, he has fortunately not fallen at Regulus' feet, which means he won't have to see Regulus glaring at him for doing something so reckless. James is taking his wins.

"James?" Regulus calls.

"I'm okay," James wheezes. "Ow."

"Ow? That doesn't *sound* okay, James," Regulus snaps.

"No, no, I'm completely fine," James insists weakly, breathing hard. "Just, ya know, taking a moment to really appreciate the authenticity of this artificial grass. Honestly, I'm grand."

Regulus releases a huff. "You are so fucking *stupid.* That was incredibly reckless! You could have—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," James mutters, pushing up to his hands and knees with a grunt. Oh, his leg is *not* happy with him right now. "Have a go at me. Don't thank me or anything. It's always *you're so stupid, James;* it's never *you looked so sexy and heroic while saving everyone from the murderous spider, James."*

Usually, Regulus would have a bitchy comment lined up for him, but he's suspiciously quiet all of a sudden. James reaches forward for his hatchet, only to freeze when a boot comes down to step on the handle before he can grab it. Slowly, James tilts his head up to see who it is and feels his heart sink right to the pit of his stomach.

"Peter?" James whispers, a lump forming in his throat, a horrible dread turning his veins to ice.

Peter sighs and slips his foot back, crouching down to pick up the hatchet. He looks at James for a long moment, then swallows and murmurs, "I'm sorry, James."

"No," James croaks. "No, Pete, tell me you're not—tell me you aren't working with—"

"Us?" Bernice whispers in his ear, swinging her head around to grin at him, eyes sparkling. He jerks a little bit, and she laughs at him. "Ol' Petey fits right in, he does. He's a smart biscuit, if you really give him a chance. Shame he never got to prove himself while spending all his time with perfect, pure, principled *Potter.* That's alright, *we* appreciate him."

"Make that mistake, I *dare* you," Regulus hisses from behind him, and Axus chuckles. "When I get that back—"

"Shut up, Black, you're the one who threw the dagger at me to start with," Axus cuts in. "Got me in the arm good, you prick."

"Like I said, wait until I get my other one back," Regulus snaps, then makes a quiet, displeased sound.

"Yeah, there you go," Axus declares, and then they say nothing else, and neither does Regulus.

Peter once again swallows harshly and there's true remorse in his eyes. "James, you—you have to understand. I want to go home, too. I want to—"

"That doesn't make it *right,"* James chokes out.

"Oh, yeah?" Peter challenges, nostrils flaring. "I *told* you, James. This is the hunger games! It's—it's *war,* and you do what you have to do to survive a war. We can't always do the right thing, and you're a fucking hypocrite, you know that? What would *you* have done to get home? I would have had to die for that to be possible, and you know it. So, what was your solution? Kill me? Betray me? Go on, then."

James doesn't have anything to say, because he doesn't know. He still doesn't know. He never did, and he doesn't think he would have ever figured it out. That, James imagines, would have been something Regulus would have needed to handle. Things were so much easier back when he believed he wouldn't have to live with his own choices.

"Yeah," Peter says sharply. "That's what I thought. You can think I'm a bad person all you want, and you can hate me, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm only the one in the wrong because I beat you to it first."

All James can think to say is, "I never would have done this to you, Peter."

"So, you would have died for me, then?" Peter asks.

"I would have at least wanted to," James rasps, his eyes stinging, because it's true. In another world where Regulus' name was never called but James' still was, he doesn't think he would have made it home anyway. He would have died for someone. Vanity or Peter, most likely. "A part of me still wants to. Will you even mourn me?"

Peter flinches slightly, and again, his eyes fill with remorse, shiny in the rising sun. They stare at each other, and James wasn't aware that heartbreak took this form as well. He's never been through anything like this, where he realized that his life didn't matter to someone else the way he thought it did, the way their life matters to him.

"Oh, enough of all the melodrama," Bernice mutters, sounding bored. She grips James by the back of his hair and yanks him to his feet, putting her sword to his throat. He can feel the curl of her smile against his ear. "Peter's going to kill you, and I've been looking forward to your death for a long time, Potter."

"You know, I sort of got that impression," James admits, wincing as she snatches him around, turning him to face—oh. Shit. "Oh, *fuck no.* Regulus—"

"I'm fine," Regulus grits out, the words barely intelligible with how hard he's clenching his teeth together. Axus has the dagger Regulus apparently threw at them pressed to his throat, their lips pulled up into a smirk. The one Regulus had is on the ground where he can't grab it.

"Let him go," James blurts out instinctively, ready and willing to fight, or plead, or do *anything* to get Regulus out of this situation. He swallows, careless to the sword at his own throat.

"Not sure you should be too worried about him, pumpkin," Bernice tells him, amused. "You two are just *so* sweet, do you know that? Really, it's very adorable. Don't worry, we'll make sure you can say goodbye and have a heart-to-heart and share a cute little kiss before we kill you. We're not *monsters."*

"I'd really like to know your definition of monster," James grumbles under his breath as Bernice drags him over to where Axus and Regulus are. Curiously, the spider is just—gone, as if it dissolved on the spot. The gamemakers' doing, no doubt.

"Listen, I have a heart, alright? I think you two make for a lovely couple," Bernice announces, sounding absurdly serious as she kicks the backs of his knees to get him to kneel down while Axus does the same to Regulus right across from him. "Now, make your goodbyes, give your speeches. Go on."

Always got to have a good show, giving the viewers what they want. Even they know how this goes, because they're in it, too, putting on their own performances. James isn't in the mood, so he doesn't look at Regulus. No, he looks at Peter.

"Peter," James whispers, looking up at him with this stupid ache in his chest. The worst part is, he's not even angry. More than anything, he's just *hurt.* He trusted Peter not to let him down; he *needed* Peter not to let him down. But that's not how the world works, is it? That's not how the story goes, right?

"Don't look at me like that, James," Peter chokes out. "Do you think this is how I wanted it to go? When—when they found me at the third fire, I brought them back because I thought we would be able to handle it. We outnumbered them, and all of you had weapons, so why didn't it work? What went *wrong?* Because it wasn't me. I did *everything* I was supposed to, and you still—you let her *die.* We were supposed to protect her!"

"I tried," James rasps, tears building in his eyes.

"You didn't try hard enough," Peter says, and his voice cracks. His face sags with regret. "I—I didn't either. It was my fault, James. I brought them there. I thought—I didn't mean for that to happen. I thought you would save me."

"I didn't know," James tells him softly, his chest feeling far too tight. He can barely breathe. "I would have, Pete, if I could have. I'm sorry that I couldn't."

"Now I have to save myself," Peter declares, his own eyes glittery and bright with tears. "I didn't even think I would make it this far. I just want to go home, and the worst part is, I don't even know where that is anymore, because it felt like it was with you, and Vanity, and Irene, and Mathias, and even your scary fucking boyfriend. So, where do I go from here?"

James swallows. "I don't know. I never knew the answer to that. It's on you to figure it out now. The truth is, I never could. That's your burden to bear."

Again, Peter flinches back, his eyes widening slightly, and he turns away as he sucks in a deep breath. James lets his gaze fall to Regulus, who is looking at him with genuine sadness. He knew. He *knew* this would happen, and he tried to save James from the pain of it, but James refused to listen.

"Can you two kiss and cry already?" Axus demands, waving their hand between Regulus and James.

"No," Regulus says shortly.

"No?" Bernice checks, keeping her sword right where it is, pressed under James' chin. "Potter, don't you have anything you want to say to him?"

"He knows," James murmurs, meeting Regulus' eyes, seeing them and knowing them as he always has. What Regulus knows is the same thing James knows, all of which have very little to do with their little love story and everything to do with how neither of them are planning to die like this. Not here, not now, not this close, not without a fucking fight.

"Well, that's…disappointing," Bernice mumbles.

"Yes, life generally is," Regulus replies blandly, and then he tosses his weight back against Axus enough to make them stumble, the both of them tumbling backwards. He fumbles to knock the dagger out of Axus' hand and actually manages it, the both of them rolling around on the ground.

"Shit!" Bernice bursts out, once again yanking James to his feet to drag him out of range. "Okay, no more playing around. Kill him, Axus! And you, Peter, kill Potter."

Peter is frozen in place, his eyes wide as Bernice jerks James by his hair, holding him still. Their eyes meet, and the whole world seems to shrink down to this one moment.

A thousand things seem to flash between them, all at once. Their first meeting, when Peter—scared and resigned—admitted that he didn't expect to live past the first day. And James was there to reach out and offer help, to offer friendship, as if there was no possibility that they'd end up right here. But here they are, and survival is about will. It's about reason. You have to want to survive to survive, and that means bearing all that comes with continuing on.

It could be seconds or years before Peter whispers, "I can't bear it," and flings the hatchet to the side, where it skitters out of range. Bernice releases a shout of anger, just as Peter comes barreling right at them both. They all go down in a tangle of limbs, knocked off their feet. James gets hit in the face with the hilt of the sword, but he's mercifully not cut.

There's a grunt, and then James is kicked *hard* in the back, making him roll away from where Bernice and Peter are fighting. Then, with no warning, there's a horrible shout from Peter that has James hastily jumping to his feet. Bernice's sword is stabbed through Peter's stomach where he's bent over her, and he chokes out a harsh breath as he pulls himself back, but he doesn't fall. Instead, he grabs Bernice by her hair, stumbling and coughing up blood as he hauls her up to her feet and gets both arms around her.

James feels it hit him only a second later what that means, and he tries to change course mid-stumble, frantically whipping around to see Peter lifting Bernice clear off her feet as she kicks and screeches and fights to get away, but his hold is unrelenting. Even when she slices at his forearms with her sword, he just keeps right on going.

"No! Peter, no! My baby! Please, you know about my baby! My baby!" Bernice shrieks. "Don't! Fuck you, you fucking traitor, you fucking *rat!"*

"Wait," James breathes out, shakily running forward as his mind races, because the sun is up and it's warm out, and not again, not again, please not again. "Peter! *Peter!"*

James tries to save him. Despite everything, he still tries to save him. Even though Peter did betray him, even though he would only be putting off the inevitable of the burden neither of them want to bear, James can't stop himself from trying. He tries, and just like with Vanity, he fails.

Peter quite literally body-slams Bernice right into the river, which has thawed some time recently. They go in with a splash, and hands raise up instantly to drag them beneath the surface. Bernice is screaming when she goes under. Peter is quiet. They disappear together, and James skids to a halt, breathing hard as he stares at the water with tears in his eyes.

Peter wanted to go home, but didn't know where that was.

He'll never find out.

~•~

As soon as Bernice starts screaming, Axus is thrown off their game, which means Axus is quite easy to get away from when the splash echoes over to them.

In other words, Regulus gets to punch Axus in the face, which is *very* satisfying, frankly. Axus is so distracted by everything that's going on—the possible deaths of their last remaining allies—that it's easy to push them off of him, both of them rolling apart. Axus stops close to the dagger they dropped, and Regulus stops next to James' hatchet. They both instantly dive for them at the same time, grabbing their weapons and launching to their feet.

Around two minutes after the initial splash, there's two cannons, one right after the other. Axus whips their head to the side, and so does Regulus to see James standing on the edge of the river, his hands limp by his sides.

"Two to one," Regulus murmurs, drawing Axus' gaze. They still have his dagger, but he still has the hatchet, and his last dagger is so close to him—

"Ha!" Axus grins at him. "More one to one, I'd say. Potter's no threat. I'll deal with him easily."

Clearly, they intend to prove this, because they whip around and start running right for James. Regulus panics as he shouts James' name like it's being ripped from his soul, raising the hatchet and flinging it through the air without missing a beat, scrambling to grab his last dagger in case he needs to throw that, too. He doesn't. The hatchet lands true, burying itself right in Axus' back and making them shout in pain as they stumble forward, unsteady on their feet.

At the shout, James whips around in enough time to brace himself as Axus trips into him. Regulus freezes, holding his breath, watching in what feels like slow motion as they collide. James releases a punched-out sound, hands bracing against Axus' arms, and then he twists to the side and shoves Axus right into the water.

A splash.

Pale hands rising.

Silence.

A minute.

Two minutes.

The cannon.

Regulus exhales, his eyes fluttering shut as he deflates all at once, choking out a harsh breath that's somewhere between a sob and a laugh. That's it. Oh, that's *it.* They did it. They fucking did it. It's just them, and they can *go home.* Regulus is shaking from head-to-toe, and his ears ring as he waits for the announcement that they're the Victors.

And waits.

And waits.

And waits.

Slowly, Regulus' eyes peel open. James is still facing the river, his head tilted up as he looks at the sky like there might be answers there. Regulus wants him to turn and look at him, face him with a reassuring smile that can stop the fear crawling through him right in its tracks.

Suddenly, Regulus would give anything for James' optimism. They made it, didn't they? Why are they still here? They did everything right. They played the stupid games and followed the rules. They—

"Attention tributes," comes Slughorn's voice, and Regulus goes very still, "the rule change allowing two Victors from the same district has now been…revoked. There can only be one Victor. May the odds be ever in your favor…"

The silence is deafening. Regulus can hear himself breathing, but he's not sure how he is. Oh, he's so stupid. How could he have let himself believe, even for a moment? Regulus Black, daring to trust anything that's too good to be true, just because he wanted to believe in it so much that he wouldn't even let himself doubt it. He let himself *care* about James, he let himself think—let himself *hope*—

This.

This is why Regulus is afraid to climb. This is why Regulus stays on the ground, because branches always break. Every time, he gets so close, so fucking close…

Never close enough.

Almost casually, James rolls his head to the side to look at him, a strain around his eyes. He doesn't turn away from the sunrise, doesn't do anything other than glance over at Regulus

with a small smile. It's a sad one. His eyes flick down to the dagger in Regulus' hand, then right back up to hold his gaze.

"You're hesitating, love," James says softly.

Regulus releases a rattling breath. He hasn't even raised his dagger. He's trembling. His vision is blurring. This is it, isn't it? The real test. Because it's just them now, the last two, and James is the only thing standing between him and home. He's always said he would do what he had to, always said he would kill James if that's what it came to. Without hesitation.

And yet.

The truth—the horrible, ugly, gut wrenching truth—is that Regulus can't. He thought—he *really* thought he would, he thought he *could,* if that's what it came down to; that's an easy thing to believe when he was so sure it wouldn't come down to that. But here they are, and Regulus was wrong.

"I—I can't," Regulus chokes out, and the dagger falls from his grip to land on the ground, never to be picked up again. He won't pick it up. "James, I *can't."*

James' face softens, and his gaze is so warm, despite the pain that tightens the corner of them. His lips curl up further, and he murmurs, "That's okay, Regulus."

"No, it's not," Regulus croaks. "Nothing about this is okay. I can't do it. I can't kill you. I—James, I—"

"Shh, don't worry about it. You don't have to," James whispers, slowly turning to face him.

Regulus' gaze trails down to where James is cupping his stomach, blood pouring through the crevices of his fingers, spilling over his hand. "James?"

"Axus got me on their way into the water. At least it was your dagger, I suppose," James says with a weary chuckle, his throat bobbing on a harsh swallow. His mouth quirks up a bit at the corner, gentle and lovely. "Maybe this makes me insane, but if I'm honest, I wish it had been you."

The world drops right out from under Regulus' feet, and there's nothing that could bring it back to him. He's unsteady, coming apart at the seams, everything crumbling around him until nothing makes sense. James holds his gaze, and then he falls to the ground, his legs giving out underneath him.

The sun is still rising. It goes up, even as James goes down. Regulus waits for it to explode. Regulus waits for it to go out, to dim and shrink and burn itself up, dying as James does.

It doesn't.

Chapter End Notes

more in-depth warning for those of you who need to be spoiled/prepared: james and regulus go back to the original cave, and they stay the night. the next morning, axus and peter and bernice are chased to the cave by yet another hallow-made spider (like avery, except this time it's irene), and the last five remaining have to come together to kill it. peter has joined the death eaters, but when it comes time to kill james, he can't do it. instead, he fights bernice—who stabs him with her sword—and then he throws both of them into the crimson river. meanwhile, regulus and axus are fighting. when bernice and peter die, axus decides to target james with the dagger that regulus threw at them, like, four chapters ago. regulus throws james' hatchet and hits them in the back, and they stumble into james, who turns and tosses them into the river. james and regulus are not announced victors; instead it's announced that the rule change is changed back and there can only be one. regulus admits he can't kill james, but james says he doesn't have to and turns to reveal that axus stabbed them on the way into the river.

for those who have finished the chapter...

Well, That Didn't Happen In The Books/Movies 😤 i just KNOW some of yall are like: zar, wtf do you think you're doing? but listen. hear me out, okay? im gonna need everyone to just trust the process.

that was one bitch of a cliffhanger, though, not gonna lie. you're so valid if you want to tear your hair out, actually. or mine. (just a reminder to those who need it, those who have had a POV will not die)

anyway, i led in with a false sense of security again, i think, because james and regulus seemed to be in better moods at the start. a little flirting, a little mutual daydreaming about A Happy Life Together. no, because i think it's important to note that regulus believes his "other life" with james is happy and safe, and they have a home together entirely different to the kind of home he grew up in. like okay, ill just go dunk my head in a bucket of acid, nbd. the bookshelf??? the flowers???? the secret love notes?????

and so we see evan again. well, "see" is a bit of a strong word, but you get my point. it was never going to be one of those things where someone dies, it's very sad, and then it's not really mentioned again. like no, this shit is going to Haunt Them. there's really no way around that. but trust evan to show up in regulus' dreams and talk in metaphors and shit before dramatically reenacting his own death lmaoooo

another thing i wanted to cover: peter. i have been very tight-lipped about peter this entire time for this very reason. because, in this setting, he is not and never was the Bad Guy. like, he never intended to betray his friends or get anyone killed; he thought that the others save him. just didn't quite work out for...anyone, basically. he cared about vanity and james just as much as the rest of them did, and he got fully immersed into the arena just as they all have.

however, peter DID intend to "betray" james after the rule change, by going to join the death eaters. i use the term "betray" lightly in the sense that He Is Valid For Doing That, from a survival standpoint. still, the parallels to canon is heartbreaking, which was The Point. i do think that if it came down to it, peter wouldn't have been able to look james in the eye and kill him—not unless you're characterizing him as Actually Evil, which is fair to do in a canon setting, honestly, if that's your interpretation. but in this setting, it's a little different. anyway, there's more about that later. it's one of those complex things where some people are gonna hate him, fullstop, and others are gonna feel bad for him, while some won't even care, and ya know what? all of it is valid.

"you're hesitating, love" now james potter, why would you say that? the way i can make even the seemingly most innocuous things sad... why am i the way that i am? no, because i know a lot of you were expecting the rule change to be changed back, but the way regulus was so fucking upset about it.

and then james getting stabbed and being like: hey babe don't even worry about it, ive just solved all your problems. like james??? honey, no, that's not how it works! forgive him, he was just stabbed, so he's likely in a bit of shock 😔

(oh, also, side note: i said last chapter that we're close to the end, and i meant that as in we're almost to the end of the 84th hunger games. no, there's...a lot of fic left)

anyway, let me do...numbers....i guess... 😬

tributes remaining: 2
james
regulus

(idk thats kinda redundant, but it felt like i had to do it, ya know? just a full circle kinda thing)

The Choice

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death/murder
-heavy descriptions of blood
-heavy mentions of pain/grief
-technically attempted suicide??? (it's a sacrificial thing, not out of a place of being suicidal, if that makes sense)
-descriptions of guns/threats of gun violence
-one reference to child death

i will, as always, be putting a spoiler-y, in-depth warning in the end notes for those of you who need it, which is so very valid. and ill also be putting reassurances there for anyone else who needs it.

(also, did you know that someone can survive stab wounds to the abdomen up to hours and even DAYS, depending on the placement?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James hadn't felt it when the dagger went in. Perhaps that's ironic, but between the adrenaline and everything else that had just happened, it genuinely didn't register to him at all at first. He was just standing there, reeling from the final cannon that meant he would get to go home, and then he felt the wet, sticky drag of heat that he's come to recognize as blood sliding down his skin. Because he recognizes it now. Because he's bled enough at this point to know.

As soon as he touched the blood, the pain broke through. It wasn't anything like he imagined it would feel like. A heavy, throbbing burn more so than a stinging sensation. But it was okay, in James' mind, because they had won. They had made it to the end, and they were going to go home.

James is tired of trying to hope. He thinks he'd like to stop now. He thinks it's best if he doesn't do it anymore, because it never seems to work out for him.

In a way, James is almost relieved. As much as he would have liked to go home, he's come to terms with the fact that he wouldn't be able to once, so it's easy to do again. He accepts it with no fuss, just as he did when he made his choice from the very beginning. It's okay, he thinks. It's going to be okay.

Because, see, James did it. James helped Regulus make it to the end. All that he set out to do at the start, and he's done it. He didn't fail. Regulus is alive, and he's going to go home.

On the bright side, at least Regulus won't have to kill him. At least James knows for sure now that Regulus can't, and even with that fact, it's not an issue. James is bleeding out, slowly but surely, and Regulus doesn't have to worry about a thing.

Though, honestly, James had meant it when he said that he wishes it had been Regulus. Maybe it's a strange, pyschosexual thing, but he feels like he's sort of been flirting with Regulus *and* his daggers this entire time, so to be stabbed by him would surely have been more satisfying. Regulus would have made sure James felt it, adrenaline or not. He isn't sure why that's so attractive to him, but it really is.

Maybe James is in shock. Maybe James actually does have a knife kink. Maybe James is just in love, and he wants anything he can get from Regulus, even if it's literal death.

Instead, what he gets is Regulus' hands hauling him up and dragging him to one of the poles closest to them, leaning James against it and causing him pain, because he's so fucking mean. Oh, he's so mean. James is madly in love with him.

"Let me see. James, let me see," Regulus chokes out, kneeling down beside him, bag thrown on the ground and tipped over so everything has fallen out, all the contents spilled in his haste to find something that will work. He's pale.

"Stop," James murmurs, reaching out to catch Regulus' hand with the one not cupping his stomach, keeping Regulus from touching his blood. "You don't need to see. There's nothing to look at because there's nothing to fix."

Regulus' eyes are clouded with a film of tears, his breathing wonky like it's a chore. "James —"

"Just sit with me," James says, sliding his hand up to thread their fingers together. A broken sound falls out of Regulus' mouth. "Shh, don't do that. It's fine, love."

"We were supposed to go home together," Regulus whimpers, shaking his head. "It's not fair."

"I know," James agrees, "but if it couldn't be both of us, it was always going to be you."

"You said—" Regulus swallows, reaching out with his free hand to cup James' cheek. It's such a kind thing for him to do, and it feels so nice. "You said something when you were high. James, you… You said something about getting me home, whatever it takes, and apparently you made a promise to Sirius to do that? You were high, so I figured it wasn't true."

James sighs quietly, leaning his face over into Regulus' palm, studying his eyes. Regulus was never supposed to know about that. Is it cruel to confirm it now? James' biggest fear is that Regulus will hate him for it, but he's dying. Perhaps it's underhanded, but he likes to think that gives him a free pass.

"It wasn't true, right, James?" Regulus whispers, holding his gaze. When James doesn't immediately respond, Regulus sucks in a sharp breath. "James?"

"The day our names were called, I made the choice," James admits. "I did promise Sirius, and I told my parents goodbye, but I made my decision the moment we locked eyes on that stage. Right then and there, I knew."

"This whole time, your plan was to get *me* home. That's what you were fighting for? Not yourself, James? Me?" Regulus asks, his voice cracking.

"Of course, love," James tells him, because anything else is unfathomable to him. It always was. "Of course."

"No." Regulus shakes his head again and drops his hand down from James' cheek to cover the back of James' hand over his stomach, uncaring of the blood. Yet, the moment he comes into contact with proof that James is bleeding out, that James is dying, his face twists as the tears in his eyes spill over.

"Don't cry," James whispers. "Really, it's—it's okay."

"No, no, no," Regulus moans pitifully, his shoulders heaving as he starts crying in earnest. He folds forward and buries his face into James' shoulder, but only for a few moments. A few breaths. He gasps out a sob, then seems to swallow it as he lifts his head and gazes at James from up close, blotchy and tear-streaked and absolutely beautiful. "I can't do it. Don't do this to me. Please don't do this to me."

"I'm sorry," James murmurs gently, because he really is. He can see that it's hurting Regulus, and he never wants that, but it can't be helped. He can only be sorry. "I really am, Reg."

"Then—then *try,"* Regulus demands. "Keep trying. I—I need you to—James, please just—"

"I'm tired," James says softly. "I'm just…really tired, and it's okay. I promise it's okay. I don't regret it. I never regretted it from the moment I made my choice. Not once."

"Why would you do that?" Regulus rasps, more tears filling his eyes as he holds James' gaze. "You—you have so much to live for, James. You have Sirius, and your parents, and your friends. So, why—why would you choose this? I don't understand."

"Because I love you," James whispers, like it's their little secret. "Because I'm in love with you. Because I am so pathetically in love with you that I can't ignore it. I can't ignore you. I can't escape it, and I'm willing to die for it. I'm happy to, because living without you would be worse. You don't understand because you don't feel the same, and that's okay. You don't have to. Just know that I love you, and that's why. I've loved you for so long, for ten years. Never forget how loved you are, Regulus, how loved you've always been."

Regulus hiccups out a shaky breath, his expression crumbling, and he curls forward to press his face into James' shoulder, weeping so deeply, so heartbreakingly *grief-stricken,* that it hurts more than dying does.

And James would know.

~•~

Remus knows how quickly things can fall apart, but he doesn't think he's seen such levels of destruction in such a short amount of time like he just witnessed when Sirius' hope was crushed. They'd only just had breakfast, and Sirius was just about to leave to go to the watch party like every other day, but Remus cut on the screen as he was heading to the door in just enough time to catch Peter, Bernice, and Axus running right for James and Regulus with a spider chasing them. Remus had called him back, and he'd stayed.

The moment James collapsed, Sirius did as well. At first, he'd been on his feet, fucking *ecstatic* because he thought they'd won, and then the rule change was revoked. And then James turned to reveal that he'd been stabbed. And then James fell.

Sirius fell with him.

He's there on the floor. Hands in his hair, gripping his skull. Watching his best friend bleed out. Rocking back and forth as he struggles to breathe.

Rocking.

Rocking.

Rocking.

Remus wants to take care of him, but he doesn't know how. This time, he doesn't think he can.

~•~

Have you ever had something become so much a part of you that you can't imagine your life without it? For some people, this could be something as simple as a habit—smoking, biting nails, a pattern of sock-shoe-sock-shoe instead of the correct sock-sock-shoe-shoe. For others, this could be a person—a best friend, a lover, or even a stranger you see every day.

For Regulus, this is a feeling. Hating James is so deeply ingrained within him that he's quite sure it's in his DNA, at this point. He doesn't know who he would be if he didn't.

James is dying, and Regulus doesn't know who he is.

James loves him.

James loves him.

James loves him.

Of course he does. Of course he would, because they're a great, big tragedy. Of course James spent ten years loving him just short of the time when Regulus would have been able to accept it. Of course they would have everything they ever wanted from each other, just too late, too soon, two hands reaching out for one another that never quite made it. The branch broke long ago, and James is about to hit the ground.

Regulus wants to catch him.

When Regulus was nine years old, he found an old book in the bin in his school library, discarded for the story between the pages. A revolution on paper. Contraband, really, because

no one was ever supposed to come into contact with anything that could promote rebellion. This included the Trojan War.

In particular, Regulus was fascinated by the Trojan Horse used to enter Troy. It struck him, the brilliance of hiding something within something else, because no one saw it coming, no one could have predicted it, and it was fool-proof. It influenced him so much that when life waged a war on him at fifteen, he thought to turn himself into that Trojan Horse.

When Regulus hid, he hid within himself. He folded himself down and retreated just like the Greeks, waiting and waiting for the cover of night to return, but it never seemed to come. He thought—he always thought he was stowed away, just awaiting the moment it was time to destroy Troy.

It's some kind of cruel irony to realize that, in truth, Regulus was never the Trojan Horse.

Regulus is Troy. He's always been Troy, because the real Trojan Horse, this whole time, was love.

Regulus, without even knowing it, hid his love within his hatred, and no different from the Trojans, he pulled the wooden horse of his hatred in like a trophy. After a fruitless ten-year long siege, night has fallen, and the time to destroy Troy has come.

Regulus can feel it. Just like the men escaping the Trojan Horse, Regulus' love comes pouring out to wreck him, to burn Troy to the ground.

From love to hate? No. They were always the same.

It was always the same thing, and he is fooled just as Troy was, a city burning into the morning light, the war-cry of victory more of a mournful croon. If he'd known—if only he'd known, he would have—what? Stopped it? That's the whole point to the Trojan Horse; you can't stop it, because you're too blinded by what you believe it is to look inside.

It was supposed to be hatred. Regulus thought it was hatred. It had to be hatred, because this —what it really is—would only lead to a fallen city, the destruction of Troy, of him. He never climbed, because branches break; he never looked inside his hatred, because he thought he was the wooden horse.

James is dying, and Regulus hates him.

James is dying, and Regulus loves him.

James is dying, and Regulus hates and loves him, because they were always one in the same. This whole time—not for five years, not for ten, but for fifteen—it's been the same. *I hate you,* he says. *I love you,* he means. *I love you,* he feels. *I hate you,* he knows. Ouroboros. Around and around, but the cycle is made of the same from beginning to end.

It's ripping him apart, and so it is love. He's burning, and so it is love. So it is love, and he should have known, because only love can hurt like this. Everything everywhere hurts, agony that resonates so deeply in him that it echoes through to the past, and is this why he once looked at James and felt so close to falling apart, because somehow, impossibly, something in him could feel that he would end up here?

"Hey," James murmurs, gently nudging Regulus' head on his shoulder with his cheek. "Reg, look at me."

Slowly, Regulus lifts his head. He looks at James, and he is a city burning to the ground, crumbling into ash. He is being torn down brick-by-brick, dismantled piece-by-piece, a place more than a person now, one suffering catastrophe.

"My fingers are going numb," James informs him, sounding ridiculously calm about this. "I think—I mean, I'm fairly certain that means I don't have much time, so I—"

"James," Regulus rasps, numb and cold all the way through, shaking like he's about to fall apart.

"Listen to me," James whispers, breaking their hands apart to reach up and frame Regulus' face, gently thumbing under his eye. His face feels puffy and raw, but James just gazes at him like he'd like to do that forever, until his last breath. "I know you're upset, but it's—look at it this way, yeah? You and Sirius will have each other."

"I'm not what Sirius needs," Regulus chokes out. "That was always you, James. He needs *you.* He—please don't do this to him. I can't—I don't know how to be enough for him. I need you to do it. He needs—"

"Stop it. I know you, and I know him," James tells him, holding his gaze. "You will mend. Together. You just need a bit more time, is all, and now you'll have it. Don't waste it."

Regulus shakes his head. "This isn't right. It's not—"

"My parents—" James pauses, then swallows, then gives him a wobbly smile. "My mum and dad cook dinner every night, and perhaps this is unfair of me to ask, but I'd hope that you would join them at least once or twice a week. They're used to feeding two, so it would be nice, I think, if you joined Sirius."

"Stop. Please stop," Regulus demands, his voice cracking. His eyes are itchy and swollen and abused.

"The hat," James continues anyway. "Your hat. I kept it for you. Remember where I said it was? In my—"

Regulus cuts him off by leaning forward to kiss him, squeezing his eyes shut as his relentless tears spill over again, burning, leaving trails of fire on the city-walls of his cheeks. James' lips are dry and warm, and he tilts forward into the kiss instantly, despite the fact that it's not a very deep one. It's firm and hard, but close-mouthed, more of a move made from desperation than a kiss born from desire.

James' eyes are shut when Regulus pulls away, lips parted like he's savoring it, like it's a gift. It wasn't. Regulus didn't do that to be kind; Regulus did it because he wanted James to shut

up, and because he needed time to think, and because he wanted to do it when it was real, at least once.

Exhaling, Regulus sets his shoulders, feeling his resolve harden within him like iron infusing with his bones. He studies James' face for a long, long moment and reaches the conclusion he was barreling towards at full speed anyway, the conclusion that's been building within him since they entered this fucking hopeless, hapless arena.

Regulus doesn't want to go home without James. He's not sure if home exists at all without James. Ironic, isn't it? He said he'd do anything to make it back home, and he's had home with him this entire time. Just failed to realize it, until it's too late for it to matter. Always so close, but never close enough.

What were Regulus' motivations? Not his parents; if he's honest, it would almost be a relief to never make it back to them. He has no friends; there's Barty, but he's one person, just one, and he has other people in his life. It wasn't for Sirius, because he didn't even *have* Sirius to go back to.

So, what were Regulus' motivations to make it home? What did it come down to? What was the driving force behind his desperate need to survive?

His hatred for James. The true reason behind it all was that he hated James and refused to lose to him, as he has so much loss in every capacity with James already. Except, as it turns out, Regulus' hatred for James has been nothing more than a wooden horse holding his love within, and that's manifested itself in the arena in countless ways. So obvious now. How did he miss it? He'd been so sure…

The Trojans were fools, too.

So, what are Regulus' motivations to get home now? Troy is burning, and he knows the truth. He doesn't have parents who will welcome him into a safe, loving home when he gets back. He doesn't have more than one friend who will be glad for his return. He doesn't know how he'll ever manage to be enough for his own brother, especially when they'll only look at one another and see the person they both weren't ready to lose.

What are his motivations? What are they? He doesn't have to ask himself to know the answer, but he hears Sirius' voice in his head anyway, just like the day his name was called. *Are you planning on coming home, Reggie?* That day, Regulus had said yes.

Today, now, he says, "No," because fear was always a motivator, too, but he's not afraid anymore.

"What?" James mumbles, eyes fluttering open as he blinks at Regulus. "Was that another parting g—"

Again, Regulus doesn't give him the chance to finish. He folds forward once more and kisses James hard, fiercely; like he really fucking wants to, because he really fucking wants to; like it means something, because it does. James makes a muffled noise into his mouth, leaning forward into the kiss, eager, always so eager. Regulus uses that to his advantage.

Carefully, he pats around on the ground as he dips in closer, his heart jumping the moment he comes into contact with what he's looking for. As soon as he has it, he practically climbs into James' lap, ignoring his grunt of pain—either from his leg or his stomach, or both—and kissing him harder and deeper until he's giving a breathless moan, despite his pain.

"What?" James wheezes against Regulus' mouth. "Reg? I—I don't know what's happening, love. Is this—"

"Shh, it's okay," Regulus whispers, pressing gentle, fleeting kisses against James' mouth. He slides his empty hand down James' arm, grabbing his wrist. "Lift your arm for me."

James responds to the words like a puppet on strings, his arm raising as his breath rattles in his chest. He's struggling to breathe, Regulus can hear it, and it's not just from some kiss. He's surely in pain, especially now that Regulus is straddling him, and yet he remains compliant, happy to participate. As a reward, Regulus dips in and kisses him again.

It is admittedly quite fucked up, because it's to distract him, too. James is so caught up in the kiss that he doesn't realize what's happening, so there's nothing he can do when there's a distinct *click* and clang of metal on metal. James' mouth goes still against his own, and

Regulus eases back with a shaky exhale, watching James blink rapidly and tilt his head up to stare at where Regulus has handcuffed him to the pole.

The pole has hooks that the supplies were hanging off of, which means James can't just stand and ride the handcuffs up and off the pole. He's stuck.

James gives a small tug in visible confusion, looking at where he's trapped with no understanding of what's happening. He pulls again, seemingly instinctively, then frowns and looks at Regulus. For a moment, neither of them speak, and Regulus feels his heart break a little bit, because he's about to shatter James' for the second time—and this time, he's choosing to.

"This is not how I expected myself to go, if I'm honest," James mumbles, eyebrows furrowed. "Reg, what are you doing?"

Regulus swallows and folds forward to press a gentle kiss to James' forehead, his hands coming up to frame James' face and hold his head still. When he pulls back, he meets James' gaze and gives him a wobbly smile. "Sirius needs you, James. Your parents need you. The world—the whole fucking world needs you. The only place you're going is home."

"Regulus," James says, an edge to his tone as Regulus shifts backwards and starts to ease out of his lap. He surges forward to fist the front of Regulus' shirt, holding it in a grip so desperate that the stitches and seams make ripping noises as James stretches them out trying to drag him back. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? Come here. What are you—"

"You chose me, and now I'm choosing you," Regulus murmurs, grimacing slightly as he grips his shirt and forcefully yanks it from James' grip. James trips forward on his knees with a groan, scrambling to swing himself around and grip his stomach—which is still bleeding—as he pushes himself out as far as he can go, reaching for Regulus.

"Wait, wait, Regulus, please," James chokes out, sounding genuinely distressed as he rocks onto his feet, half-bent over from where the handcuffs won't let him stand all the way. He must be in immense pain, but he just lets out a muffled noise and drops his hand from his wound to reach it out towards Regulus, his palm covered in blood. "Just—just please, okay? Come here. Will you come here please? Stop backing away, alright? We can—let's just—"

"I'm sorry I never worked out how to be alright enough to give us the chance we deserved," Regulus rasps, because that's what it all boils down to. "You, more so than me, deserve to be happy, and I wish I could have tried to help make you happy, but I couldn't. I have a lot of regrets about that."

James leans out as far as he can go, both arms spread wide as he tries to bring them closer. Regulus takes another step back, and James' breath goes even more erratic than it was prior. His eyes are wide. He looks terrified. "Just wait a fucking second, would you? Think about this, love, okay? Whatever you're doing, whatever you're trying to prove, just *don't.* Please. Please just come back here. Just stay with me."

"I can't do that," Regulus whispers.

"Regulus… *Regulus,"* James snaps, panic tinging his tone as he yanks fruitlessly on the handcuffs, straining forward. "Stop. Fucking stop it right now. Don't you dare do this to me. You don't get to do this to me, not after everything, not after you've spent years making me sure that you never would. *Please."*

Regulus takes a deep breath, then slowly releases it, feeling oddly calm. It's a strange sort of serenity that falls over him, something in him settling down. "That's the thing, James, I spent years doing everything I could to make sure *I* believed I never would, but the truth is—I understand. You said I didn't understand because I don't feel the same, but of course I understand; I've understood longer than you have what it is to love someone so much that you know you'd never recover from losing them. I never recovered. I lost you, and I lost Sirius, and I lost myself. But I understood then, and I understand now, and I've understood always. I never stopped understanding."

"Stop!" James bursts out, surging forward frantically as Regulus starts backing up with purpose. "Regulus, get back here. Don't—please don't. *Regulus.* Please just—just wait, alright? I'll—I'll never forgive you. *I'll* never recover, okay? So, please—I'm begging you, just please stop."

"Even if you hate me, you'll still love me," Regulus tells him, lips curling up sadly. "Trust me, I know all about that."

James releases a choked noise, folding over a little bit like the words are a physical blow. He stumbles against the ground from where he's trying desperately to yank his hand free from the handcuffs, to no avail. He groans through his pain and whines with his fear, and Regulus has no pain and feels no fear, because acceptance is easier when it's driven by love.

"Keep eating meals with your parents. Take care of Sirius, and let him take care of you. You've had my hat this long, so you may as well keep holding onto it for me," Regulus says, coming to a halt on the bank of the river. James seems to be holding his breath, like one move will be the push that sends Regulus over the edge. "If I'm lucky, James, maybe I'll have a slice of paradise waiting for me. If I do, then you know where I'm going. However long it takes, I'll be there when it's time for you to come; we'll dance, and we'll laugh, and none of this will even matter. The other life where we're not a great, big tragedy—that's where I'll be waiting for you, baby."

"Please," James begs, and it's a mere breath, almost lost to the wind because it's so soft and feeble. He shakes his head, tears steadily building up and spilling down his cheeks. "Please don't leave me."

"I'm sorry," is all Regulus can think to say in his last moments, because he is. He's so, so sorry about so many things, and it's too late for him to do anything about it. So close, and as always, never close enough. He's sorry that Sirius has to see him die, after losing so much of himself to do everything he could to keep him alive. He's sorry he was too lost and too fucked up to even realize what he wanted, let alone let himself have it. He's sorry he didn't climb higher; he's sorry he never looked inside the wooden horse; he's sorry he's Troy. He's drowning in his regrets before he ever hits the water.

It's easy, somehow, to give himself over to gravity, relaxing back into the freefall. He hears James yell, calling out his name in frenzied desperation, and it's the last thing he hears before he hits the water with a splash. The crimson river welcomes him like it was waiting; it welcomes him with cold, clawed hands that drag him deeper beneath the surface.

Regulus realizes very quickly why it only takes two minutes for those in the crimson river to die—because it's not just the drowning one has to worry about. It's also the hands yanking at him, claws dipping in deep and ripping at his skin, trying to pull him apart. They're relentless, ruthless, and he can't stop himself from opening his mouth to scream underwater, lungs protesting and pain exploding in every limb. Except it's not water, it's blood, and it's thick in his mouth as he swallows it and swallows it, instinctively trying to survive even now, just as he has been this entire time. There are hands raking at his chest, one pushing in like it's trying

to get to his heart and snatch it right out like a trophy—and that's exactly what it's doing, he realizes. And that's how he will die. Heartless.

No one can hear him beneath the surface, but his muffled, water-logged screams take the shape of a name. In his panic, in his haze of pain, it's Sirius he instinctively calls for.

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The raw, devastated scream of grief echoing through the building is so loud that those in the suites above and below the one occupying one Sirius Black can hear it with horrifying clarity, a sound so cataclysmic that it hooks into the soul and floods one's empathy until the pain is too unbearable to withstand—and it's not even their pain.

Imagine how Sirius feels.

It's his. The pain is his. The grief is his. Because his little brother just tipped himself over into a river he can never resurface from, hands yanking him down in seconds. The moment he disappeared, Sirius felt his heart cave in, like it hardened and then absurdly broke apart into fractures all at once, as soon as Regulus was lost to him.

Sirius is here, and he doesn't want to be here. He wants to go away. He wants to stop existing and, perhaps selfishly, not experience this moment. He wants to forget. He wants to lose this, because he can't tolerate it. He can't handle it. Why won't his mind and memory let him escape now?

At first, Sirius doesn't even realize he's screaming. He thinks it's only James, because it's James' wail that plays out in his head, exactly the same length and level of agony that Sirius feels assault him, like they're synced even in their pain.

And then, "Sirius, *Sirius,* hey, stop—"

Sirius doesn't know he's slamming his hand into the side of his head—trying to forget, begging his memory to fail now, wanting it more than he ever has—not even aware of the action until Remus collapses on the floor next to him to yank his hand away. Arms wrap around him, holding him in place as he folds forward into the crook of Remus' elbow, trying to spill out of his arms, trying to crawl away, like he can physically escape the grief if he just moves.

"My brother, he's my brother," Sirius chokes out, desperate for someone to understand, needing someone—needing the entire world—to grasp how fucking devastating this is. If they realized, if the universe understood, maybe someone or something would make it stop.

"Okay, okay, hey, I know," Remus whispers, hauling him a little bit, holding him.

"We—we didn't—we never even got to—" Sirius cuts himself off with a small sound, weak and helpless like he's drowning, too. They didn't get to fix it; they didn't have enough time. Sirius never got to tell him that he loves him.

"I'm sorry, Sirius, I'm so sorry." Remus fists his hand in the back of Sirius' shirt, letting him slump into him, his face turning into Remus' arm. He can feel the hot drip of his tears smearing his face and Remus' sleeve. Remus keeps himself together, being the rock Sirius needs him to be right now. He kneels right there and lets Sirius sob against him, not saying another word.

Sirius tries to forget, and this moment remains seared into his memory, vivid and solid. He'll never forget how much pain Regulus is causing him right now.

Never.

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James yanks so hard on the handcuffs that his shoulder aches, a starburst of pain that joins the rest in his stomach and leg, nothing compared to the sight of Regulus falling into the river.

The strain on his shoulder makes James collide down on his knees, his ears ringing as he curls forward and digs his bloodied hand into the ground, yanking at grass as he tries fruitlessly to drag himself forward, even if it means ripping his fucking arm off. It doesn't do much in the way of results; it only brings the tilting whirl of the world into sharper focus.

James is struggling to breathe, light-headed and delirious from pain and blood loss, dark edges creeping around the corners of his vision, but he blinks and fights it with all that he has left. He can't—he won't do this. It wasn't supposed to happen like this; he had his plan, he made his choice, so this—it isn't fair. It's not *right.* James can't. He—

"Give him back to me," James chokes out, lifting up to fall back on his heels, glaring up at the sky through his tears. "I'm not *doing this.* Bring him back! Please—just, *please* bring him back. I—I can't. I can't. Please, I love him."

No response. It's just him. He's alone here, left to every version of pain there is to feel, only becoming more unbearable by the moment. Even the water is still.

James can't bear this. He won't. He never wanted to, and he refuses to let it end like this. The cannon still hasn't sounded, so James shakily fumbles in his pocket, fingers wrapping around the vial of Horcrux Hornet venom from Vespa—the last thing Vanity ever held onto.

"Sorry. Sirius, I'm so sorry," James croaks, hastily flicking the stopper out of the top of the vial. He takes a deep breath, then exhales. "You either give him back to me and let us go home, or you don't get either of us. You said—you told us we can go home, that there can be two Victors, so that's what it will be. The two of us, or neither of us."

With that, James raises the vial to his mouth without even a split second of hesitation, his ultimatum announced to the world with nothing but promise. If Regulus dies in that river, James will ingest the venom, and he'll be dead before anyone can reach him. They can't have him, not without Regulus. They can only have them both.

So, despite knowing that doing this would cause him excruciating pain, ending in a horrible death, James puts the vial to his lips and turns it up, fully not fucking around. He's *going* to do it, and he thinks that he won't even notice a difference in pain level. This is excruciating as it is.

The venom is thick in the vial, sliding green and shimmery like honey, getting closer and closer to where his mouth is parted. As soon as that cannon sounds, he's downing it. He closes his eyes, wondering almost hysterically how it will taste. Maybe he'll meet Vanity when this is all over, and he can tell her, because she'll surely be curious to know.

"Stop!"

There's a loud splash, and James' eyes snap open as he draws the vial away from his mouth, breath catching at the sight of pale hands lifting Regulus out of the water and depositing him back on the bank of the river. Streams of red spill off of him, and he's hacking and coughing as he crawls forward, deep slashes through his clothes that reveal gouges in his skin, pouring blood. He's more of a crimson river than the one he just resurfaced from.

"Congratulations," comes the tight, shaky voice of Slughorn. "May I present the…Victors of the 84th hunger games!"

James drops the vial, wheezing out a harsh breath as his vision blurs. Across from him, bleeding profusely, Regulus is still crawling and choking. James strains forward as far as he can go, reaching out, but Regulus collapses before he ever makes it. The world tilts, going dark, and James collapses, too.

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Horace swallows thickly as he stares at the blown-up screen in the center of the room. On it, James Potter and Regulus Black are slumped on the ground, arms outstretched with their hands only inches from meeting.

"Sir?"

"Play the victory banners and bring them out," Horace orders, releasing a deep breath as he watches the screen fade into the Hallow emblem—a triangle with a circle inside and a line through it—with pictures of James and Regulus on either side.

The heli-carriers are dispatched, and Horace grinds his teeth as he glances at the screen displaying James and Regulus' vitals. They're going to live, and now they're expected to. He wonders if James realized in his endeavor to save himself and Regulus, he would be condemning someone else.

Horace wonders if James did know, would he even care once he realized it was the head gamemaker he was condemning?

Horace had expected Tom to be pleased by the rule change, much like everyone else. He *is* the Master of the Hallows, so surely he would be in support of their excitement and delight with something that had never been done before. Horace had anticipated praise. Horace had not gotten it.

"The entire point to the hunger games is that there can only be one Victor," Tom had said, looking at Horace with those chilling, chilling eyes of his. "You're right, Slughorn, there has never been two. There's a reason for that."

"Yes, but isn't something new exciting?" Horace had asked hopefully, because he believed in it, because *he* was so very excited by his idea. Two Victors. Two young men in love, who get to go home and have their happily ever after. Everyone would love that; everyone loves a happy ending, even Horace himself. He was looking forward to it, in fact.

Tom Riddle didn't care about that, not one bit. "Something new is *dangerous*. The Hallow doesn't tolerate a threat, not from the outside and not from within. All threats are eliminated. Do you intend to be a threat?"

"No," Horace had been quick to say. "Of course not."

"Then see to it that you don't become one," Tom replied, and Horace knew instantly what he had to do.

The problem is, Horace can't fathom how there's a way around this, since James saw to it that only one Victor wasn't an option. It was either both of them, or neither. All or nothing, and the Hallows would *not* be satisfied with nothing. There was no easy solution, because even if Horace let Regulus die in that river and dispatched people to get James, he would be dead from the venom before they ever reached him.

The only other option was to let James drink the venom and bring up Regulus from the river, but James was waiting for that cannon. Even if Horace brought Regulus up and just let James bleed out, he couldn't be sure that Regulus and James wouldn't collaborate to just die together; they seemed to have reached the point where neither of them were willing to leave that arena alone, and they both proved they were *more* than willing to die for that. On top of that, if Horace brought Regulus up and didn't announce them as the Victors after all of that, the world would surely riot.

Horace can't say what the proper answer for this was; there's never been two Victors, but there's also never been *no* Victors, and Horace's reputation would be in tatters if he disappointed all the viewers in such a way. He just—he only wanted to give the people what they want, and he was in a very difficult position as well. Surely Tom will understand…

There's a heavy weight settling in Horace's stomach that makes him think that, no, Tom will *not* understand. It puts a spike of fear Horace has never fully felt before right down the length of his spine. He gives the final orders—have the Victors carted to the infirmary and the mentor notified—and then he slips out of the room. He's staying in a suite towards the back of the building, down on the lower levels, and he goes through the trouble of taking the lift down to the basement level and walking swiftly in between the empty cells of the servants to reach the elevator on the other side, riding it up to his floor.

It's quiet on the way to his room and inside his room, but he can't shake the feeling of paranoia that slithers under his skin. He feels like he needs to move faster, to get *away,* as if he's being chased; though, there's no evidence to back up that claim. It's just…the memory of Tom's eyes, the shameless way he'd made it very clear that, if Horace were to do something he so happened to dislike, then it would be labeled a threat and dealt with as all threats are.

Horace never meant to become a threat. He has a feeling that Tom won't see it that way, though.

Frantically, Horace throws practically his entire wardrobe into his suitcase, then dumps half out and empties nearly the entirety of the liquor cabinet into his bag instead. He starts to grab his cell and laptop, then pauses and remembers each and every *'personalized'* ad that popped up after he typed in something specific, indicating that he can be and has been monitored on the Hallow servers. With suspicion, Horace dumps them on his bed and leaves them behind.

Again, when Horace leaves, he takes the lift down to the basement level. He breathes easier as soon as the doors shut, tipping his head back and shutting his eyes. Where shall he go? Where *can* he go? Not home, of course. Surely someone would allow him to…lay low for a bit in the city? He has connections, people who he's sure would help him. All he needs to do is—

Ding.

Horace's eyes snap open, head lifting as he steps forward to exit the lift, bag in hand. He keeps his eyes peeled as he moves swiftly through the basement level, heading right for the underground garage that will let him leave the building through the back. He has no car, but he can order one at the pub just up the street, a place he frequents often.

As Horace listens to the echo of his shoes snap against concrete with every step, he comes to the horrifying and dreadful conclusion that he has no earthly idea what he's doing. Trying to hide within a city from the man who *runs it* is a bit redundant, he would think. All of his connections are people who would, realistically, sell him out the moment they believed it could move them up further in this world. Frankly, Horace has no idea *where* to go, or even what to do.

Is this even necessary? He can't help his own skepticism, but again, there's an instinctive twist in his gut that is telling him it's *very* necessary, so insistent that he can't even imagine not listening to it. The thought strikes him—but is this what it is to have survival instincts? Proper ones that grip you when you're in danger of—well, *not surviving.* Is this how it feels for those in the arena, or even a fraction of it? Horace is learning very quickly that the feeling is *quite* unpleasant and not as entertaining when it's him, rather than people on a screen.

As Horace ducks past the entrance to the garage, skirting around the lowered gate, a smooth voice says, "And just where are you going, Mr. Slughorn?"

Jumping slightly—and yelping—Horace whips around with his bag clutched to his chest, his heart pounding as pure terror turns the blood in his veins to ice. He finds the culprit quickly, a young woman with a long, silver cigarette holder that has a dragon ornament wrapping all the way around it, the mouth open and the fangs where the cigarette goes. She inhales, and it makes the dragon look like smoke is coming out of its nostrils. His heart calms as he puts a name to her face.

"Ah, Ms. Meadowes," Horace says wearily, deflating slightly. He clears his throat. "You gave me a fright, dear. I must ask, why aren't you inside, celebrating? The tributes you designed for are Victors and will surely need your expertise soon."

"Oh, they'll have it, don't you worry about that," Dorcas says. He's quite sure that's her name, in any case. If he's honest, he doesn't much like her as a stylist—a bit too radical for his tastes—but he did appreciate her work on Regulus and James for the way it invigorated the viewers. "You seem to be in quite the rush, sir. I would have thought you'd be inside celebrating yourself, actually. And yet…"

"Yes, well…something came up. Lovely talking to you, but I really must be going," Horace declares quickly, nodding at her politely before turning on his heel.

"He will find you eventually," Dorcas announces before he can take even one step, and he freezes in place. Slowly, he turns back around. She smiles at him without any warmth and drops the cigarette from the holder, grinding it under her heel as she slides the holder into the top-knot on her head, making it look like the dragon is sleeping in a nest of braids. "As I thought. Riddle isn't pleased, is he?"

Horace doesn't know what to say, and Dorcas doesn't give him very much time to think up a response, leaving him flustered.

"It's a shame," Dorcas continues lightly. "I think what you did was revolutionary, Mr. Slughorn." She pauses, cocking her head and smiling wider, meaner, with an edge. "Though, I suppose that's why Riddle isn't pleased."

"I didn't—" Horace swallows, flexing his fingers around the handle of his bag. "I had little choice. My hands were quite tied, seeing as the boy—James—left me no options."

"Mm," Dorcas hums, lips twitching, "I sympathize. I really do. That's the thing about the sun, isn't it? No matter what, it just keeps rising. You can't keep it down."

Horace frowns. "What was I meant to do in that situation?"

"I imagine Riddle would have preferred you to kill them both rather than let them live," Dorcas muses. "It's a dangerous thing, giving power to those that aren't meant to have it."

"I wasn't giving power—"

"That may not have been your intention, Mr. Slughorn, but that is nevertheless what you've just done. It's a threat. What do you think Riddle does about threats?"

"He eliminates them," Horace rasps, his mouth dry.

Dorcas smiles again, just as sharp as before. "When he can find them, that's exactly what he does. I'm assuming you'd like not to be found, yes?"

"I'm not a threat," Horace insists, shaking his head, feeling too old and too out of his depth for such accusations.

"Then why are you running?" Dorcas whispers, lips curled as her eyes gleam. She stares him down, her gaze piercing, and then she walks up the dipping driveway out of the garage to stop on the street by a black car. She opens the passenger side door and turns to face him. "Get in, Mr. Slughorn."

"I—I really have to be going," Horace says, his heart slamming away in his chest.

"I said," Dorcas repeats slowly, pushing open her coat by her hip to reveal a gun strapped to her belt, *"get in."*

Horace forgets how to breathe for a moment, and he's quite sure his knees would be knocking together from how hard he's shaking if he dared to shift his feet. In his panic, he can only bluster, "What will you do? Shoot me in the street?! Where did you even come by a firearm? Only Aurors—"

"Clearly not," Dorcas interrupts flatly, one eyebrow sweeping up as she rests her hand lazily on the gun, comfortable with it in a way that sends a chill down Horace's spine. "And, if I did shoot you in the street, who would care? I daresay Riddle would consider it justified, now wouldn't he?"

To that, Horace has no reply, because he thinks she's right.

"Get in the car," Dorcas orders sharply. "I won't tell you again."

Slowly, Horace walks forward on shaky legs, his heart pounding so hard that he can hear it in his head. He holds onto his bag like a shield, utterly terrified, but Dorcas watches him side-step his way cautiously up to the car and ease inside. As soon as he's in, she shuts the door behind him and walks around to get in on the other side.

"Where are you taking me?" Horace croaks, gripping his bag in his lap as Dorcas drives.

Dorcas doesn't respond.

In fact, she doesn't speak at all for quite some time, and Horace is almost certain she's doing it on purpose, just to further unnerve him. They drive deeper into the Hallow, into the heart of the city, and Horace debates on what he can do about his predicament. He's never fought anyone. He's never had a gun in his proximity as a threat, only ever as a form of protection. He's never felt—fear. Not true fear, like this. Fear for his life. The closest he ever came was when Regulus tossed a dagger at his head, and that had genuinely kept him up all night, thinking about how terribly close it had been.

Horace is at first very sure that Dorcas Meadowes works closely with Tom and is the one tasked with seeing him eliminated, as all threats are. His mind races with the desperate need to avoid his fate, but no matter what he eventually comes up with, no plan seems practical.

Then, without warning, Dorcas says, "Mr. Slughorn, I work with an organization that takes issue with…many things, all of which Riddle currently sits at the center of. The hunger games, the forced poverty, the inequality spread throughout the districts in comparison to the Hallow—just to name a few."

"You—" Horace swivels his head to blink at her, admittedly startled. The only thing he can think to say is, "But you're a Hallow, Ms. Meadowes."

"Ah, so you do see the issues, but you simply don't care when they don't apply to you," Dorcas murmurs, shaking her head as she heaves a sigh. "You're not ignorant. No, you're worse. You're aware and willing to perpetuate the problems."

"I do no such thing," Horace sputters.

"I'm aware that I'm a Hallow, Mr. Slughorn," Dorcas continues, as if he hasn't spoken. "That doesn't give me the right to avoid what's wrong in this world, or who is the source of it. Do you want to know how I'm so sure that you've just provided ammunition to the side of the war that Riddle isn't on? The rule change. See, I spoke with Sirius yesterday, who gave you the idea to do it in the first place, and he said—"

"No, you're misinformed," Horace cuts in. "The idea was mine."

Dorcas glances over and gives him a placid, patronizing smile. "Sure it was, sir. In any case, Sirius mentioned that you were quite pleased about it. So, why change it? You're the head gamemaker, and the only person who ranks above you with any influence on the games is Riddle himself. So, if you didn't want to change the rule, the only other person who could make you would be him. Now, why would he demand you change the rule back if he didn't feel that Regulus and James were a threat to him? A threat to *everything?"*

Horace stares at her with wide eyes, once again feeling very out of his depth. He's not entirely sure what she's insinuating, and he doesn't understand what she means by *war.* There is no war; he can't fathom why there would need to be a war. What other side is there, and what are they even fighting for?

"To your credit, you did make an attempt to follow his orders," Dorcas continues. "You just didn't follow through, and that surprises me. Surely you knew your life was at stake."

"I—I was aware, yes, but again, I wasn't sure what I was meant to do in that situation," Horace admits. "If I did kill them both, my reputation would be in tatters."

"Is your reputation more important to you than your life, Mr. Slughorn?" Dorcas asks.

"It's second only to my life," Horace declares with a frown, because a reputation is all a person has, really. It's all he's ever had. His reputation gets him connections, and his connections get him where he wants to be in life. Yes, to be alive is more important, but what is it to live if he's not living as he wishes?

Dorcas chuckles sardonically. "Oh, they're going to eat you alive at the Phoenix."

"What?" Horace's heart jumps again. "The Phoenix? What is that? Is that—is it a prison? Like Azkaban? Am I going to *prison?!"*

"Eh," Dorcas says lightly, tipping her head from side-to-side and waving her hand lazily.

"I'm going to prison?" Horace chokes out.

Yet again, Dorcas doesn't respond. She abruptly straightens up in her seat and grips the wheel with one hand, reaching down to grab the gearshift and yank it into a different gear. The car jolts forward, and Horace frantically looks out the front windshield, his eyes bulging as he realizes where they are.

At the back of the city, there's a tunnel that was once undergoing construction *decades* ago, but was abandoned for some reason or another, and the only thing Horace knows about it for sure is that it's collapsed at the end and has a sinkhole in the middle. A sinkhole that Dorcas is speeding towards without batting an eye, the car revving as she pushes them faster, so much so that Horace feels sick.

"The—the—there's a *sinkhole!"* Horace shrieks, flinging his hand up and bracing it against the ceiling of the car.

Dorcas just laughs, low and smooth, as they approach the sinkhole far too quickly for them to be able to stop in time. Horace squeezes his eyes shut and flinches back into his seat, waiting for the impact, waiting for—

"You can open your eyes now," Dorcas says, amused.

"What?" Horace rasps, eyes snapping open to see them slowing a bit as they continue into the tunnel. He whips around to stare out the back windshield, his brain throwing question marks in every direction because the sinkhole is *still there.* "How did we…?"

"It's fake," Dorcas tells him. "The Order filled it in years ago and used tech to keep up the illusion that it's still there. It works as an alert system as well, so any second—" She cuts herself off as the car starts ringing, the screen on her dash lighting up. She chuckles and reaches out to answer, grinning as she says, "How did you know it was me?"

"Because you're the only one who speeds through," comes the stern, unimpressed tone from what Horace is sure is a woman. She sounds disapproving, like a mother. "I'm in mind to leave you stranded at the gate, Dorcas."

"Oh, don't do that. I have something the Order is *really* going to like. Get the train going, please," Dorcas says.

There's a beat of silence, then a hum. "I see. The gate is dropping now. The train will be ready when you arrive."

"Thank you," Dorcas replies, then leans forward to press the screen. There was no display number or name.

"It's collapsed," Horace points out in distress as they head towards the blocked-off end of the tunnel that's just a wall of rocks and rubble. Aged and dusty.

"Oh, yeah, that's actually still real," Dorcas agrees as they drive right towards it.

Horace reaches up to grab the handle above the door, clinging to his bag with his other hand, his heart hammering away as they get closer and closer. He's tempted to close his eyes again and only *just* manages not to as they abruptly dip down a decline in the pavement that's not visible until they're driving down it, only a few feet before the collapsed end of the tunnel.

The ground evens out again, and Horace stares wide-eyed at the long, dark tunnel beneath the one they just drove through, illuminated by the lights of Dorcas' car. When he glances back around the seat, the road that dipped down is rising back up, a ramp into the tunnel below that lifts in less than a minute.

"Has this always been here?" Horace murmurs in awe.

"Not always," Dorcas replies, "but for a long fucking time. Longer than Riddle has been Master of the Hallow, though."

"He's been Master for quite some time," Horace says.

"Believe it or not, there are people who are older than Riddle," Dorcas tells him. "People did come before him."

"I'm older than Tom Riddle," Horace feels compelled to point out. "If you mean who was the Master before him, of course I know that. I remember him, even all these years later. Gellert Grindelwald."

"I'm not talking about the history of the Hallow," Dorcas declares, the car slowing as it goes around a curve and pulls off to the side. In front, there's an old train-car—just one, and it's quite rusty. "I know that already, even better than you do."

Horace scoffs. "Impossible. I *lived* it."

"Only one side of it," Dorcas counters, taking her seatbelt off and raising her eyebrows at him. "I've heard about the side you didn't even know existed. Now, get out."

"Where are we?" Horace demands suspiciously, but Dorcas just ignores him and slips out of the car, going over to meet a woman that moves off the steps into the train.

The woman has grey hair and wrinkles around her pinched mouth, but despite the signs of her age, she's dressed in black tactical pants—a gun strapped to her belt also—and a black tank-top that shows off the tattoos that cover her arms from the top all the way to her wrist on both.

After a beat, Horace takes a deep breath and hauls himself out of the car, bag in hand. He approaches cautiously, and both women fall silent as soon as he comes within range.

Dorcas turns to him, and the other woman stares down her nose at him like he's less impressive than a lump of dirt. Her lips press into a thin line, and she steps back, letting Dorcas wave him forward, gesturing to the train. Horace frowns, but does move past her to look at the train, eyebrows furrowed.

"It's your ride," Dorcas explains, and Horace turns to stare at her in disbelief, not even caring that he's standing next to the other woman. He's agitated that Dorcas has the audacity to believe that he's simply going to board a train without knowing where he's even going. She must see the indignation on his face, but it only makes her smile. "Oh, don't worry, Mr.

Slughorn, the train is perfectly safe. It's never failed to make it to its destination before, and I can assure you it never will."

"I'm not going to just—just get on that train, Ms. Meadowes, not without answers! That's preposterous!" Horace hisses.

Dorcas raises her eyebrows at him. "You're right, you do have another option, of course. We won't make you go if you decide not to." Her eyes are cold as she steps forward, making him step back instinctively. "Your choice: you can either get on that train, or you can have your brains blown out."

As soon as the words leave her mouth, Horace feels cold metal press against his temple, and he hears the distinct click of a gun's hammer tugging into place. He freezes, his stomach falling right out from under his feet, and it takes no time at all for him to start trembling all over. His fingers clasp the handle of his bag tight, and as much as it terrifies him, he darts his gaze to the side to look—and yes, that's a gun resting against the side of his head in the hand of a woman who looks unafraid to pull the trigger.

"If you get on that train, you will be taken somewhere safe. You will be given food, your own space, and protection in the form of the only place in this world that Riddle cannot find you," Dorcas explains. "In exchange, you will not be asked to fight in a war. You will not be required to get your hands dirty in fixing the problems *you* helped maintain. You will not be tortured, or killed." She steps forward again, reaching out to grasp his chin, eyes bright and blazing. "Where you will go, if you so choose, you will have better than you deserve."

A whimper escapes Horace against his will.

"I *hope* you say no," Dorcas whispers, her voice so sinister and harsh that Horace is just frozen, staring into her eyes like prey caught between the jaws of a predator. Her nails dig into the side of his face. "I would *relish* in getting to scrub your blood off the concrete beneath our feet, because you do not deserve to live, Horace Slughorn. Children are *dead* because of you, so I beg of you, choose not to get on that train."

"I—I—I—" Horace's breath hitches, and he can only stumble over his words, feeling smaller and more afraid than he ever has in his life. He can't stop shaking.

"How does it feel, gamemaker?" Dorcas asks softly, wrenching his head to the side to push him harder into the gun. A choked sound falls from his mouth, and Horace is helpless to the tears that spill out of his eyes. "Are you entertained?"

"Please," Horace whimpers, squeezing his eyes shut.

Dorcas digs her nails in deeper for a lingering moment, making it *hurt,* and then she releases him. His eyes peel open, and she curls her lip in disgust. "This is the last time I'll ask you, Mr. Slughorn. Will you get on the train, or not?"

"I—" Horace swallows, his breath escaping him all wobbly and shaky. "Yes, I'll—I'll get on the train."

"Shame," Dorcas murmurs, and nothing has ever frightened Horace as much as the genuine disappointment in her voice, not even Tom Riddle's empty eyes.

"Get in, then," the woman declares, lowering her gun and gesturing to the stairs. Horace practically rushes to get inside, and as he goes, he hears the woman say, "I'll see you in a few months time, Dorcas."

"You won't be at this post?" Dorcas asks.

"No, Dumbledore has plans for me," is the woman's response, and the last thing Horace hears as he enters the train.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you coming down for the warnings:

attempted suicide/sacrifice: james is bleeding out/dying, and regulus essentially realizes that he would rather die than let james die, for various reasons, so he decides to do

exactly that. he handcuffs james to one of the poles in front of the cave and goes to fall back into the river. james, being james, is Not Okay with this, obviously, so he announces to the world/gamemakers that they either give regulus back, or he'll drink the horcrux hornet venom, and fully intends to do so.

guns/threats of gun violence: dorcas shows slughorn a gun on her hip to threaten him into a car, and later, she informs him that he can either get on a train or get shot. a gun gets put to slughorn's head, and dorcas sort of pushes his head into it in a threatening manner. no one is shot.

reassurances: regulus doesn't die, james doesn't die, they're announced as victors to the 84th hunger games and are lifted out to go home. they will live!!!

to everyone else...

how are we feeling? 😬

well, that was fucking awful, wasn't it? literally no one was having a good time throughout that.

im never going to get over the fact that the we SEE the moment james came to the decision to get regulus home. like, if you go back to chapter one, in the very first regulus POV, that moment when their eyes meet on the stage—that's the exact moment james made his choice. oh, im sick.

not regulus and james pulling some romeo and juliet shit. a lot of people guessed that they would, sort of, but i didn't see very many people guess that regulus would ever go into the crimson river at some point, and those who did all seemed to have abandoned that idea/was convinced it WOULDN'T happen.

and like, do you even know who i am? 🤨 i put a BODY OF WATER with PALE HANDS within the vicinity of regulus. of course he was going in that river. i have not written one fic where there's not some sort of scene of regulus drowning in it, because i am Evil.

also, that scene of regulus going into the river has been planned since the beginning. james being handcuffed—which is why the handcuffs were mentioned earlier in the chapters—to the poles as well. i specifically wrote poles into the arena just so regulus could handcuff james to one and go yeet himself dramatically into the river.

originally, the plan was for regulus to NOT come back out of the river. the first time i got this idea for this fic, it was going to be MCD, and regulus was going to die. i wrote the venom into the story AFTER i decided regulus wouldn't die. originally, james was just going to be handcuffed to that pole with nothing, stuck there, and he'd hear the cannon...

the only thing is, im weak and soft and have never written MCD before, so i decided to go a different route and delve into the whole Taking Down The Government thing, yada

yada yada and so on. so now the fic has grown out of control and im in wayyyy too deep. im sorry? your welcome? whichever suits you, you decide!

also, the sirius scenes... short, but fucking devastating. we see a lot of sirius and remus over the next few chapters, i promise. i miss wolfstar a lot (actually that's kind of a lie because i just finished writing a scene about them, but you get my point)

finally, dorcas!!! an icon!!!! a queen!!! she's so cool, im so sorry, im obsessed with her.

oh, i just KNOW some of you are pissed that slughorn got a POV 😭😭😭 listen, LISTEN, it was very necessary for the plot, okay? it was also to sort of show how hallows are in contrast to others like, for example, dorcas and pandora. say what you want about slughorn, love him or hate him, but that man is a slytherin in any universe and his self-preservation instincts are off the charts lmaoooo. he got a Gut Feeling and DIPPED. Seneca crane could never...

besides, dorcas has officially scared the hell out of him, and like, yeah it was disturbing from slughorn's POV, but honestly? from dorcas' POV, she's still a day or two out from vanity and hodge dying and seeing how much it upset marlene, and still feeling how much it upset her. i don't blame her, frankly.

also, the other woman. you know her, and some of you probably already know who she is, but still, feel free to drop theories if you like!!!

next chapter we get sirius reuniting with both regulus and james!!!!

this feels necessary:

tributes remaining: 0
victors: 2

as always, thank you all so much for the comments and feedback!!!

EDIT 09/14: i have just posted the fic where regulus does die, like a divergence fic, and you can read it from here to see what that MCD would have been like. it has no impact on crimson rivers overall, and it's entirely separate.

Arena Aftermath

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-heavy mentions of blood
-descriptions of vomiting blood
-brief mention of I.V./implied needle??? (like in a hospital, and only mentioned once, in passing)
-depictions of ptsd/ptsd-related responses (nightmares, lashing out, paranoia, things such as that)
-mentions of injuries/scars/surgery
-mild depictions aquaphobia (fear of water)
-a bit of medical mumbo-jumbo and likely very inaccurate to real life (again, im using the excuse that the Hallows have, like, crazy advancements in medicine. it's fanfic, okay? sue me)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius launches out of his chair the moment the doors open, demanding, "Can I see them now? Are they—"

"Mr. Black," the nurse says, holding up their hand in a soothing gesture, "I just came to update you. Mr. Potter is still in surgery, but he's almost finished and he's expected to wake up tomorrow. He won't be recovered enough to be fully released for at least two more days."

"But he will recover?" Sirius insists, because he's been here for fucking *hours* and no one has given him any answers. It leaves him restless and ready to riot.

The nurse hesitates, then clears their throat. "Mr. Potter will recover fully from the stab wound to his abdomen, but his leg unfortunately has severe enough nerve damage that he will be required to use a cane if he's going to be standing for long periods of time or moving great distances, especially when it's cold or he's doing anything strenuous. Of course, he will learn over time when the cane is necessary, as well as his pain tolerance, but we do believe he will need it frequently over the next two months, which means he'll need it during the Victor interview, sadly. The Hallow will provide it, I assure you."

Sirius grinds his teeth, infuriated that this nurse thinks he gives one fuck about how James will look on that stage, over his *health.* As if how he's presented to the world matters more, when Sirius couldn't care less.

"And Regulus?" Sirius whispers, hands balling into fists.

"The nature in which he received his scars means they will never heal completely, unfortunately. We're treating them, so they will fade a bit, but—"

"Not—I don't mean the fucking *scars.* Is he *okay?"*

"He ingested quite a bit of blood from the river," the nurse informs him, which is when it hits Sirius that the river in the arena was *actually* made of blood—just now, he realizes this, and it makes him feel close to vomiting. "Due to this, he'll be vomiting quite a bit through the night and will likely suffer intense abdominal pain until tomorrow, at the very least. We're flushing his system with fluids and medicine to fight any bacteria or infection, which will help."

"Anything else?" Sirius demands.

"Due to the nature in which he received his injuries, the scars will always remain, but they should be faded before the interview, and easily covered by makeup," the nurse says, as if that's going to comfort him, as if Sirius even cares. Clearly seeing that this is *not* helpful, the nurse tries again. "He'll be released tomorrow, if all goes well, but we'll be holding Mr. Potter for an extra day to have a specialist come in and work with him on what he should expect with his leg."

Sirius exhales shakily. "Is—is my brother awake?"

"He is, yes," the nurse confirms gently.

"Can I see him?" Sirius chokes out.

The nurse's face softens. "Of course. Follow me, Mr. Black."

"Thank you," Sirius breathes, his shoulders slumping as he surges forward to follow the nurse through the doors.

"I don't want you to be alarmed," is the warning Sirius gets as they move through the clinically-white hall, taking a corner and stopping at a closed door. The nurse glances back at him, lips tipped down. "His scarring is…quite extensive."

Sirius just nods, his hands trembling as he tries to regulate his breathing, starkly aware that his baby brother is on the other side of the door. He's begging his memory not to fail him now, because he wants to be here for this. He needs to be here.

The door opens with a creak, and the nurse steps aside to allow him in, carefully shutting the door behind him as soon as he steps inside, leaving Sirius alone with—

Oh.

Sirius doesn't mean to, but he sucks in a sharp breath, his heart sinking right to his feet. Regulus is there, on the bed, looking so small, his head turned away. There's an I.V in his arm, a few other cords hooked up to him for his vitals and such, and he's in a gown, leaving his legs bare to his knees and his arms bare up to right above his elbows.

The nurse wasn't lying. Regulus has scars all over his arms and legs, dragging down in harsh, red arcs like there are still claws yanking at him. They're closed, but still healing, leaving them fresh and stark against his pale skin. Every group of scars comes in four or five, making it clear that hands did this to him, and they're not thin like the lines on Remus' back, nor do they layer and criss-cross over each other. Where the gown slips down over Regulus' shoulder, Sirius can see scars slashed over the hill of his collarbone and towards his back; it disappears beneath the cloth, but Sirius is quite sure that his back and chest are suffering the same fate.

At the sound of Sirius' inhale, Regulus' head rolls to the side, his eyes unsettlingly dull, and there—on the other side of his face, the left side, there are scars starting right at the bolt of his jaw and curving down the side of his neck. They're not as deep, not as stark, but the sight of them still makes Sirius' stomach lurch. Regulus was being ripped apart in that river.

Regulus clearly wasn't expecting it to be Sirius coming in, because the blank void of his eyes shift as soon as it seems to hit him that Sirius is there. It takes maybe all of five seconds for those eyes to fill with tears, and then Sirius is moving.

Regulus is already rising up from his bed by the time Sirius reaches him, and he should be gentle with him—he wants to be careful—but he just—he has to get his arms around him, he has to hold onto him and know that he's here, make sure that he's alive and here, where Sirius is. Regulus doesn't seem to care about being treated tenderly, because he practically molds himself into Sirius' arms with a horrible, choked sob.

Sirius shudders out a harsh breath and tips his face down into Regulus' hair, squeezing his eyes shut because they're stinging. He clings to his little brother for a long moment and just *breathes,* and it feels like he can breathe for the first time since Regulus walked away from him to enter the arena.

A bolt of energy bordering on desperation zings down Sirius' spine, and his hands fling up to frame Regulus' face and ears and hair as he snatches back and looks down at him, waiting for Regulus' watery eyes to meet his before speaking.

"Listen to me, okay, Regulus?" Sirius says firmly. "I love you. You're my brother; of course I love you. Always have, always will, and nothing—absolutely *nothing* in this world could ever change that, do you hear me? You're enough for me, and I love you. Never, *never* fucking doubt that."

Regulus stares up at him for a moment before promptly bursting into tears all over again, his whole body deflating like a popped balloon. He ducks his head forward and presses the top of it to Sirius' chest like he's five instead of twenty-five, hiding away from the world. Sirius loosens his arms a bit in case he's actually hurting him, but gently scrubs his hand back and forth over Regulus' head.

For a long time, neither of them move. Regulus eventually stops crying, his heaving shoulders just—drooping. Sirius feels like a weight has just lifted off his chest, which is ironic because the top of Regulus' head is still resting there, but that's neither here nor there. The important bit is, Sirius has told Regulus that he loves him, because he didn't get to before, and he's so grateful that he gets the chance to now.

Sirius doesn't need Regulus to say it back. He knows. Just from all that's happened between Regulus asking Remus to take care of him, and Regulus admitting to Evan that he missed him, and Regulus begging James to live for him—yeah, Sirius knows. Even now, just this, the way Regulus leans into him like Sirius is his port in a storm, a shelter to crawl into for safety when the winds grow too harsh; the way just hearing that Sirius loves him is enough to make him weep so deeply, so wholeheartedly, that the touch of grief is almost worth it.

Regulus doesn't say it back, but Sirius hears it anyway, hears it in all the ways it's said without words, and always has been for years, even wrapped in pain and anger. Sirius doesn't expect Regulus to say it back, because he's Regulus, and he always struggled to say such things, even long before all of this. Sirius has the same issue at times, likely from the way they grew up, but he's had something that Regulus purposefully distanced himself from—James Potter's influence. So, Sirius can say it, and Regulus doesn't have to. What matters is that Sirius hears the response loud and clear, echoing over the distance, after all this time they spent unable to meet halfway. He hears it.

He knows.

Regulus abruptly goes stiff against him, and to his credit, he does try to rock back in enough time, but he doesn't quite manage it before he's vomiting up copious and alarming amounts of blood right on Sirius' shirt. He curls over and nearly falls to the floor, his body heaving, and Sirius frantically dives for the pan on the stand by the bed, holding it under Regulus' head and making sure he doesn't fall.

It's *violent.* Regulus shakes and shudders through it, gasping and choking, and Sirius tries not to freak the fuck out, but watching someone you love throw up literal blood isn't really cohesive with serenity.

"Okay, okay, hey, just breathe," Sirius blurts out, pushing Regulus' hair back from his face as he shakes, only to quickly drop his hair again when he sees how bad Regulus looks. It leaves

him red from strain, face swollen, blood dribbling from his mouth and tears streaming down his face.

Regulus' body seizes again, curling forward, and Sirius grimaces as he rubs between Regulus' shoulders. He doesn't know if that helps, but he keeps doing it anyway, just in case it does. There's another round of vomit that leaves Regulus groaning and clutching weakly at Sirius' arm where he's holding the pan for him. The smell of iron is thick in the air.

Finally, the brief moment of sickness seems to subside, at least for now, and Regulus pants as he rocks back, trembling all over. He looks like shit, quite frankly, not that Sirius would ever tell him this. It doesn't seem proper to mention it.

"Sorry," Regulus rasps, his voice hoarse and soft like it hurts to talk—which, after all that, it likely does. Regulus stares at Sirius' shirt, looking miserable. "I'm sorry. I—"

"What, this?" Sirius huffs out a forced laugh and very pointedly doesn't look down at where he's currently covered in hot, sticky blood that his brother just projectile-vomited on him. That's the stuff of nightmares, frankly, and so he would like to *not* see it, thank you. "Not my first time being covered in blood. It's fine. I didn't even like this shirt."

(Sirius *really* liked this shirt.)

Regulus continues to look miserable, and also like he's in pain, so Sirius swats away his ridiculous thoughts—realizing that he's absurdly nervous—and sits the pan aside to move over and grab a wet-wipe from the pack sitting on the stand, then takes the paper-cup on it and fills it up with water from the small basin in the corner.

"Here. Wipe your mouth and rinse it," Sirius murmurs, holding out the wipe first.

Regulus reaches out to grab it, then immediately drops it. His hands are shaking too hard, far too unsteady. He tries; it's very obvious how hard he's trying, but he can't manage to hold onto the wipe, so it repeatedly falls from his hand to land in his lap. He makes a noise of frustration, something quiet and fussy, like he's on the brink of a fucking breakdown.

"Fuck," Regulus croaks, sounding dangerously close to tears, and Sirius knows this. He knows how hard this is, how close to falling apart one feels when they make it out alive. You do make it out alive, but that doesn't make living easy.

"Okay, just." Sirius clears his throat and reaches out to snag the wipe, flicking Regulus on the end of his nose, upwards to get him to look up. The moment Regulus does, Sirius quite literally wipes his entire face with no finesse, as quickly as possible, because he knows Regulus is going to—

That. He's going to do that. Regulus sputters and flinches back in disbelief, looking downright *appalled* that Sirius is wiping his face like he's a fucking toddler. Regulus may not like it, but when needs must and all that. He'll just have to deal.

"Sirius," Regulus hisses, "I don't need you to—"

"Shut up," Sirius interrupts, holding out the cup as he balls the pink-tinged wipe in his hand. "Rinse and spit."

Regulus scowls at him. "Fuck off. I'm not an infant."

"Rinse and spit, Reggie, or I'll waterboard you under the tap," Sirius tells him, eyebrows raised.

"I hope I vomit on you again," Regulus grumbles, but he dutifully takes the cup in his shaking hand and manages to down it, gurgling before spitting it back in the cup. Like the wipe, it's tinged with pink.

Sirius tosses the wipe in the bin, then takes the cup and pan to the basin to clean them. As he does, he keeps talking to Regulus, speaking over the running water. "Wouldn't be the first time, and I'm not talking about this time either. I have a memory of you showing up at the foot of my bed—you had to have been either five or six—and you told me you weren't

feeling well approximately three seconds before you vomited all over me and my bed, then started crying. Is that—did that actually happen, or is my brain making things up again?"

"No, that actually happened," Regulus confirms grudgingly, and Sirius can't help but smile a bit, because he didn't lie. The memory is fuzzy, but *real,* and it fills him with a fondness he's happy to let flood through him right now.

After shutting off the tap, Sirius carefully eases out of his coat, which thankfully is blood-free, and he peels his shirt off to ball up and toss in the bin as well. Following that, he cleans off the damp spot of blood that soaked through his shirt, then puts his coat on and zips it up. When he turns around, Regulus is still sitting on the side of bed, hands braced on the edge of it.

"Well, not much difference in all the years in between, I suppose," Sirius says softly, despite the fact that it's the boldest lie he's ever told. All the years in between have made all the difference in the world—and yet, here they are.

Regulus lowers his gaze. "I'd say vomiting blood is a key difference." His throat visibly bobs. "Did they tell you why? It's because I ingested so much blood in the arena."

"They told me," Sirius admits.

"I swallowed so much blood," Regulus whispers, his gaze distant, something chilling and tragic in the lines of his face. "The whole time, I was just swallowing blood."

"Regulus," Sirius calls quietly, cautiously, his chest feeling tight because it's quite obvious that Regulus is…not okay. Which, yeah, he wouldn't be, but this is—

"I couldn't breathe," Regulus rasps, lifting his gaze to look at Sirius as if he's not even seeing him. "I had to swallow it to breathe; that's all I was doing the entire time. I couldn't *breathe,* Sirius, and it's still—it's *in* me, it's still—"

"Okay, hey," Sirius blurts out, moving forward to crouch down in front of Regulus. "It's not—it won't always be—" He halts, swallowing harshly, feeling like a liar because it *will.* It doesn't matter if Regulus' body rejects every drop of blood he swallowed down, he'll never get rid of the taste. He'll never forget choking on it. Sirius wishes he could tell him that it will get better, get easier, but that's simply not true. And it's not fair that Sirius can't even comfort Regulus right now, not without lying. All he can say is, "You're getting it out, Reggie. Should be gone by morning, all of it, and—and you're breathing now, yeah? You can breathe now."

"They told me I'm a Victor, but I should be dead," Regulus announces with a startling steadiness to his tone, and Sirius flinches instinctively at the words. "I don't trust them. You have to—I need you to tell me if—"

"You got out," Sirius cuts in instantly, because he knows this, too. He knows the surreality of actually making it; he knows how hard it is to believe. "You're here."

"Okay," Regulus croaks, deflating a bit more, trusting him instantly, which makes Sirius feel like he could fucking cry. There's a pause, then Regulus glances down at his legs, specifically the scars on them. "I—I thought it made sense, because why would I have scars if I was dead?"

"Don't worry about them," Sirius tells him, shaking his head when Regulus glances up again. "Not now. Not today. You don't have to think about them right now, okay?"

"I've never seen your scars," Regulus says quietly. "I knew you had them, of course, but I've never…"

"Well, I don't make it a habit to get undressed in front of you, do I?" Sirius mutters, but he knows what Regulus means. It's just another way that Sirius never opened up and let Regulus in after his time in the arena. Sirius would have ripped his skin off before showing Regulus the scars he bore for him, scars he volunteered to have so that Regulus wouldn't. And now, Regulus bears scars of his own.

"Yes, well, if it was a competition, I feel compelled to point out that I'm winning by an unfortunately large margin," Regulus grumbles, cringing as he tips himself to the side, trying to get back onto the bed. The way his mood swings from concerning to seemingly stable reminds Sirius of himself.

"I know, which is terribly upsetting, frankly. There's nothing more distressing than knowing your little brother looks cooler than you," Sirius murmurs, moving over to help ease Regulus down, because he's clearly struggling.

Regulus seems too exhausted to really fight the assistance, and he slumps down with a weary sigh, curled up on his side. It takes him a second, and then his gaze slides up to lock on Sirius as he whispers, "James?"

Sirius wonders how long he was working up to that.

"He got out, too," Sirius says softly. "He's alive. They're working on him in surgery now for his leg. As nice as the medicine was, it couldn't fix everything, so he has nerve damage severe enough that he'll need a cane. But he's okay, Regulus. He should be awake tomorrow."

Regulus' eyes sink shut, his fingers curling into the sheet beneath him. He's like a marionette with all his strings cut at once, slumping into the bed as he releases a deep exhale.

"Okay," he says, not opening his eyes. Sirius moves across the room to grab the chair from the corner, bringing it to the side of the bed so he can sit down, and Regulus' eyes flutter open to look at him. "How? They—they changed the rule. They—"

"James," Sirius cuts in, a lump forming in his throat. The mere memory makes his skin crawl. "He—well, he essentially said either both of you were making it home, or neither of you were. He refused to leave that arena without you."

"But I—I handcuffed him to the pole," Regulus says, his voice ridiculously small and oddly betrayed. "He didn't—he couldn't have done anything, I made sure of it. He had no weapons, couldn't reach any, and he was bleeding out, for fuck's sake."

Sirius heaves a sigh. "The venom from the Horcrux Hornet that James kept after Vanity died —it was still in his pocket. He was going to drink it. He would have been dead before they

could have reached him."

"Why would he do that?" Regulus chokes out, his chest heaving on a deep, shuddering breath.

"Because he loves you," Sirius says quietly.

Regulus seems to gag on a harsh inhale, then tips himself forward and proceeds to vomit up blood right into the pan that Sirius actually manages to shove under his face in time. It's as violent and awful as it was before, and again, Sirius rubs in between Regulus' shoulders carefully in what he hopes is a soothing gesture. Just like last time, Regulus shakes and sobs through it, and this time, he doesn't stop when it's over. He just continues to fall apart.

He doesn't even protest when Sirius cleans his face for him again, just lying there limply and crying silently, which is somehow worse than weeping where he can be heard. He rinses and spits again when Sirius urges him to, then stares up at the ceiling for a long time without saying a word.

When Regulus does speak again, his voice is hoarse and brittle as he says, "Will you stay with me?"

"I'm not going anywhere," Sirius replies firmly, reaching out to lay his hand on Regulus' arm, careful not to press too hard on his scars. Regulus looks over at him, his eyes bright with a sheen of tears he's clearly fighting valiantly not to let fall. Sirius nods at him reassuringly. "I promise."

That vow seems to be the final blow that takes all the fight out of Regulus, and the tears tip right over the edge. He closes his eyes and cries, and cries, and cries.

~•~

Remus feels strange without Sirius around. He's been gone all day, literally from the moment James and Regulus were announced Victors. It's getting close to evening now, and Remus will have to go to his cell soon. He has spent the entire day stress-cleaning quite literally *everything*.

He can't stop worrying about Regulus and James, as well as Sirius, and that leaves him restless. Everything had happened so quickly, a sequence of events that took place so rapidly that it was hard to follow. There was Sirius losing it because James was dying, then losing it because Regulus was, then left reeling for a long moment when they both survived. All of that had happened in less than ten minutes, and frankly, Remus was just as fucking stunned by the emotional upheaval it all caused as Sirius was. Then, less than five minutes after the Victor banners played on the screen, Sirius was picking himself up in a desperate scramble to go to the infirmary.

It's not that Remus isn't used to spending a good portion of his day without Sirius; it's just that Sirius is usually back by now, and Remus really just wants to know that everything is okay. He has this churning anxiety in the pit of his stomach, making it hard to focus, and he just—he wants to know *something* before he goes back to his cell tonight.

The sound of the door opening makes him look up, fully expecting Sirius, because the only people who can get into the suites are those who actually stay in the suites, but it turns out to be Pandora. She also technically stays in the suite, so he supposes he shouldn't be surprised, but he—well, alright, deep down he was *hoping* it was Sirius.

"Oh, darling, you look stressed," Pandora says gently, her face softening as she moves over and holds out her hand to him.

Remus takes it after only one beat of hesitation. He's still not very used to physical contact with anyone who isn't Sirius, but he's not opposed to it when it's Pandora. While watching the games together, they've instinctively reached out to each other in moments of distress, even embraced when celebrating. So, in a wild turn of events Remus didn't see coming, it's Pandora he's most comfortable with after Sirius, at this point.

"Have you seen them?" Remus asks, unable to keep the hope out of his voice, settling down when Pandora leads them over to their seats where they sit side-by-side.

"James won't wake until tomorrow," Pandora murmurs. "He needed surgery for his leg, so he's still recovering, and they won't allow visitors just yet. Regulus is awake—or he was—so Sirius is with him now. I didn't go in; Sirius wasn't sure if Regulus would want anyone to see him, and he was sleeping, so he couldn't say. *But* Sirius did come out to speak to me."

Remus instantly feels some tension drain out of his shoulders, blowing out a deep breath as he nods. "What did he say?"

"He's staying overnight with Regulus, and will likely spend most of the day between him and James tomorrow. Regulus will be released tomorrow, but James won't be released until the following day. Sirius won't be returning until he brings Regulus here, so he asked that I would come and let you know that they were both alive and recovering, and *he* was also doing alright, and that he'd see you tomorrow," Pandora explains.

"Okay," Remus breathes out, finally feeling better, also wildly grateful that Sirius—in the midst of everything—thought about him and his feelings enough to actually send someone to give him answers. Sirius is so fucking considerate.

"I have to bring him some clothes to change into. Apparently there was an incident that made him lose his shirt." Pandora shrugs when Remus blinks at her. "Don't ask. He wouldn't give me details. All he said was that you might like to choose for him, so if you want…"

"Oh," Remus mumbles, admittedly startled when she stands up and holds her hand out to him again. After a brief pause, he reaches out to take it, letting her pull him to his feet, dropping his hand as they start towards Sirius' room. "Was he alright? I mean, did he seem okay?"

"As okay as he could be, considering everything. I think getting to be with Regulus has helped him, and I'm sure seeing James tomorrow will as well," Pandora murmurs as they push inside, heading right for the closet. "Unfortunately, that's not the end of everything. There's still the final interview."

"Right," Remus says. "Do we have a schedule for that? I know it's different every year, depending on how much recovery time the Victors need, but did Sirius say…?"

"They haven't confirmed it yet, but the Hallow as a whole is very eager to see James and Regulus again, so I wouldn't be surprised if it's the day after they're released," Pandora replies as she sweeps into the closet.

Remus falters a moment in the doorway behind her, a lump forming in his throat that he feels incredibly guilty about. He knows that James and Regulus—and even Sirius—will feel more at peace at home, but he can't stop himself from thinking about what happens when they do leave.

Back to wearing his mask full-time. Days and days on end in his cell back in Azkaban, only granted time away when he's out on assignments, if he's assigned to any events or parties at all. No talking, no freedom, no Sirius.

Swallowing harshly, Remus pushes it from his mind, refusing to think about it. Not yet. Not now. He knows it's coming, but he's not ready, so he ignores it.

Taking a deep breath, he goes inside to pick Sirius' clothes.

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Sirius doesn't get much sleep. This isn't very new, honestly, not since Regulus and James' names were called, but it's much worse this time. He stays up all night, repeatedly taking care of Regulus as he vomits up blood until he can't even speak, waking up from nightmares that have him lashing out.

It's a bad night. Regulus spends most of it vomiting, in pain, and delirious from all of that *and* nightmares. He asks for James no less than fifteen times, and he hits Sirius in the face completely by accident at least twice, just flailing and trying to get away while Sirius tries to calm him down. He's a sweaty, bloody mess, honestly. Sirius cleans his face when he's too tired, soothes him when he's too out of it to realize he's not still in the arena, and manages maybe two hours of sleep all together, in total. It's exhausting, but Sirius does it anyway.

By morning, Regulus is practically nonverbal, mostly communicating in one-word answers or just not acknowledging anything anyone says to him at all, not even Sirius. He doesn't cry

anymore. He doesn't ask for James. He just lays there, staring off into the distance with dead eyes. It's deeply unsettling, as well as concerning, but it's not completely unexpected. Sirius had hoped this wouldn't happen, but it doesn't surprise him that it has.

After getting back, there is a grace period where everything that you went through doesn't fully hit you. Sirius knows this well. Your brain literally can't make sense of it all, especially when there's so much else going on—being in the infirmary, dealing with nurses and injuries and pain, realizing you *actually* survived. But then, eventually, it all catches up to you, bearing down on you like this weight you'll never be free from again—and you won't, not ever, because the only thing that happens is that you just learn to carry it. All of it settles in your mind, in your bones, in your nightmares; it consumes your every waking thought, until there's no escape.

Sirius can't erase what happened to Regulus, or James. He can't fix the suffering they endured, or the suffering they will continue to endure. He can only be here for them, and take care of them, and so that's what he intends to do.

While Regulus is blatantly doing worse mentally, and emotionally, he's doing much better physically by the time the sun rises the following day. The nurses repeatedly treated his scars throughout the night, and though they'll never fully fade, they have gotten better. They've shrunk, getting a bit thinner, and they're no longer an angry red, but a soft pink. Time is the only thing that can take them from that to opaque white lines.

The vomiting has also stopped, thankfully, and he seems to be in less pain. When he's cleared for a shower, he just—doesn't get out of bed. They tell him that he can, and he doesn't move.

"Regulus," Sirius says quietly, "come on, have a shower, yeah? It'll make you feel more human, I promise."

Regulus just looks at him blankly, as if he's not sure he'll feel even *close* to human ever again.

"This is going to be really embarrassing for both of us if I have to pick you up and carry you into the shower," Sirius warns, his voice strained. He so desperately hopes that Regulus' distaste for any form of vulnerability will cause a spark within him, but it doesn't. Regulus doesn't even twitch.

Sirius leans forward to reach for Regulus, genuinely planning to help him up if he has to, but Regulus catches his wrist and says, "No."

"You'll feel better," Sirius whispers, feeling helpless.

"The water," Regulus croaks, and there is something in his eyes now, something that breaks Sirius' fucking heart. *Fear*. "Don't make me get in the water."

"Okay, Reggie. That's okay," Sirius murmurs, his heart sinking as he settles back in his chair. He's stumped, honestly. He isn't sure what the fuck to do in this situation, because Regulus will have no choice but to come in contact with water at some point. He'll have to get clean before his interviews, for one thing. Maybe he just needs more time.

Regulus lets him go and returns to staring at the ceiling.

A few more hours pass from early morning to mid-morning, and then there's a knock on the door. Sirius gets up to see who it is, relieved when he finds Pandora on the other side.

"How is he?" Pandora asks.

"Been better," Sirius mumbles. "I don't—I'd say come in, but I don't think that's a good idea. At least not now. He's being released this afternoon, though."

Pandora nods. "That's fine. I just wanted to check. I think I'm going to stay with—stay in the suite." She gives him a significant look that he reads easily. They've been speaking entirely in code and unfinished sentences about Remus since the previous day. "Heard anything about James?"

"Nothing yet," Sirius says. "I'll update you when I get back. Is the…suite alright?"

"Yeah, but I think it's better if I'm there," Pandora replies, which basically translates to *Remus won't be alone.*

"You're a gem," Sirius informs her, and she cracks a weak smile. He reaches out to pull her into a hug, and for a long moment, they just hold onto each other.

"And you?" Pandora whispers as they break apart. She searches his face. "How are you?"

"I'll be alright," is all Sirius can bring himself to say, and she sighs as she squeezes his hand. He squeezes back.

Pandora doesn't stay for much longer, so Sirius goes back into the room with Regulus, who hasn't moved an inch. He's so still and quiet that Sirius has to repeatedly stare at his chest to make sure he's still breathing. He's doing just that when a nurse comes in to tell him that James is awake.

That gets a reaction out of Regulus. Not much of one, honestly, but he does turn his head to look at them. The nurse waits to show him to James' room, but Sirius…hesitates.

"I'm coming back," Sirius tells Regulus, needing to make sure that he knows that. "I have to come back anyway when you're released, alright? I can—I mean, maybe I can bring James over to visit you, so you two—"

"No," Regulus cuts in, and again, there's fear in his eyes. He seems to shrink into the bed.

Sirius frowns. "I'm sure they have a wheelchair I can bring him over in. Is that—" He glances at the nurse. "Can we do that? Can we make that happen?"

"Yes, it shouldn't be a problem," the nurse assures him.

"No!" Regulus bursts out, louder and more animated than he's been this entire time. It makes Sirius jump and stare at him with wide eyes, genuinely caught off-guard. Regulus has his sheets clenched in his hands, and he's as pale as a ghost, shaking his head fervently. "No, don't bring him here, Sirius. I don't want to see him."

"You were just asking for him last night," Sirius points out, so startled by this response, not sure what to make of it.

"I don't care. I don't want him here. I don't want to see him. Get out," Regulus chants, his voice a stilted rush of panic and anger all mixed together. Defensive and lashing out like he did when he was having nightmares. "Go. Just—just go to him, and leave me alone. Don't bring him here."

"Okay, hey, I won't," Sirius says quickly, raising his hands like he's soothing a wild animal, which agitates him as soon as he's done it, because he always hated it when people did it to him. He drops his hands and exhales slowly. "I won't bring him, Regulus, I promise. And I'll go, that's fine, but I'm coming back. Just…get some rest, yeah?"

As soon as Sirius makes it clear that he's going to comply with his wishes, Regulus relaxes again. Or, well, he sort of just deflates and goes limp, like someone abruptly unplugged him. He returns to that unnerving silence and stillness, turning his head once more to stare at nothing.

Sirius tells Regulus twice more that he's coming back, which gets no response, and then he lets the nurse lead him out the room. James isn't very far at all, only three doors down, which honestly soothes Sirius more than he could ever say. Well, it does until he hears muffled shouting from within James' room, and he's bursting in before the nurse can even open the door.

James is apparently giving the nurses trouble. There are three surrounding his bed, trying to hold him down, loudly pleading with him to calm down and take it easy, he's still healing, but he's just blatantly not listening to them. They must read as some sort of threat to him, or maybe he's just belligerent from confusion, because he's responding like they're trying to fucking kill him. He's shouting his head off, not making much sense, and despite his injuries, he's lashing out with all limbs and actually making progress, almost out of the bed entirely.

Despite the fact that Sirius *knows* they're just trying to keep James from hurting himself further, he reacts like they're a threat, too. Not even *meaning to,* he just responds, surging forward to yank the tallest man back, clearly the strongest. He has him flat on his back in seconds, boot pressed to his throat as he swivels his head to glare at the other nurses.

"Let him go, or I'll stomp this man's windpipe to dust. Back the fuck *off,"* Sirius snaps, and the silence that rings after is somehow louder than the yelling from before.

The other nurses step away slowly, which may have something to do with the fact that James has sunk back into the bed, staring up at Sirius like he's some sort of divine entity he never thought would come to bless him. The man on the floor whimpers, and Sirius removes his foot carelessly, focusing on James entirely as he shifts closer to the bed.

"Sirius?" James whispers, sounding downright breathless.

"It's me. You're fine," Sirius whispers back, approaching the bed with none of the wariness the other nurses seem to have. They're all shuffling back, even the man from the floor, who has gotten up and swiftly gotten out of range. Carefully, Sirius perches on the edge of James' bed. "Relax, James. What's all the fuss about? Tell me, and I'll fix it."

"Regulus," James says instantly, and there's this razor-sharp edge to his voice that seems to put everyone else on pins and needles, but only makes Sirius' heart clench. "They won't let me see him. I don't—I need to see if—they said he was alright, but I—I just need to—"

"He's alive," Sirius assures him, because he gets it. James doesn't trust these people any more than Regulus does, any more than Sirius did when it was him coming out of the arena. "I promise he's alive. I was just with him."

James chokes out a harsh breath, finally slumping back against the bed like all the fight has gone out of him at once, only for it to flood right back in. He surges up and asks, "Can I see him? Just—just to—I just need to see that he's okay."

"He's resting," Sirius murmurs, taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out. Oh, this is hard. He'd love nothing more than to take James three rooms over and put him at ease, but that's

not what Regulus wants. "You'll see him tomorrow when you're released, alright? For now, you're both healing. But trust me, he's alive."

"Tomorrow?" James says warily, like he's not sure if tomorrow even exists—and yeah, Sirius knows what that's like, too.

"I promise," Sirius tells him, reaching out to gently push James back down to the bed by his shoulder. "Just breathe. You're still on the mend."

"Yeah, ow," James mumbles, blinking rapidly as he slumps again, this time like he's exhausted. The adrenaline wearing off, no doubt, letting his pain catch up to him. He reaches up to fumble for Sirius' wrist, then seems startled when he actually wraps his fingers around it. He gives a gentle squeeze, staring and staring at where they overlap, and then he looks up at Sirius with wide, watery eyes. "Oh. I've missed you."

Sirius chokes out a laugh, fighting valiantly not to break down into tears, and James gives him a weak grin, even as the tears spill from his eyes. James shifts a little, tightening his grip on Sirius' wrist, then fully just yanks him down.

They sort of fall into each other, embracing and laughing through tears. Sirius can't decide if this is the best he's ever felt, or the worst. He thought—for a bit there, he really thought he'd never get this again. Never see his best friend again. Never hug him, speak to him, simply exist with him. The relief is overwhelming, and it still can't erase all the fear and pain that came from nearly losing James.

At some point, James is just weeping and clinging to him, and he's bigger than Sirius, though not by much, but he still feels so incredibly small and fragile at this moment. Delicate, almost. Sirius feels like he's cradling him, and nothing short of death could rip him away when James needs him. He'll hold onto him forever, if that's what it takes.

James quite literally buries his face into Sirius' hair and refuses to budge an inch, even when his sobs turn soft and quiet, then eventually stop. He's just breathing, as well as keeping Sirius awkwardly slumped over him on the bed, arms linked around his back like they're made of steel.

"Mr. Black," says one of the nurses, sounding wary, "we really do need to check Mr. Potter's wounds. Is—is that alright?"

"Why are they still here?" James mutters, sounding rather agitated, which Sirius understands. He would also like for other people to stop existing right now. Can't they see this is a very important moment between two best friends?

Sirius heaves a sigh. "They'll go away once they check you over. It'll be quick, and I'll be here the whole time."

"Fine," James grumbles, but he dutifully lets go, allowing Sirius to straighten up and shift to the side.

He watches with his arms crossed as the nurses come to examine James—excluding the one Sirius possibly unfairly assaulted, who apparently left the room at some point. They're still wary, and Sirius glaring at every move they make doesn't seem to help their nerves, but he can't bring himself to care. It clearly soothes James to know that he's there, being on guard, which works out because Sirius can't really help it anyway.

One nurse works on removing the wrap around James' stomach where he was stabbed because the medicine did the job of healing it as much as it ever will. All that's left is time, which will make it fade but never erase it entirely. Sirius doesn't know whether to be amazed or baffled by the fact that James was stabbed in the same exact spot as Sirius was when he was sixteen. They quite literally have matching scars now, even if they look different.

The scar on James' leg is also healed, but he has an additional one on the outside of his thigh, all the way down to his knee, from the surgery. The two points where the hook pierced him look like scars the size of coins, matching on each side, the skin knotted and raised. The only other scar James has is the faded lines from where the bear trap went into his leg, so faint and small that they're barely even noticeable.

"Hey, we match," James says softly, while poking idly around the scar on his stomach, grimacing every time he does it.

"Yeah, and take it from me, prodding it while it's still healing isn't the smartest idea," Sirius replies, reaching out to grab James' hand and tug it away. James keeps holding on, so Sirius doesn't let go.

"I didn't feel it when it went in," James tells him, his voice quiet and pensive. There's a far-away look in his eyes that makes Sirius' stomach twist. "Hard thing to miss, being stabbed, and yet I still…"

"I didn't really feel it either," Sirius offers. "It's the adrenaline, and with so much going on…"

James swallows, his gaze unfocused. "Yeah."

"Did they tell you about your leg?" Sirius asks, desperate to get that haunted look out of James' eyes, at this point.

"Hm?" James blinks and looks over at him.

"About needing a cane."

"Oh! Yeah, they—yeah. It's—I mean, it's fine. I suppose I'll get used to it."

Sirius feels his chest go tight at the resignation in James' voice. Just quiet acceptance in his tone, like he's not even allowing himself to be upset about it, about how unfair it is that he's suffering this at the result of something he should have never had to deal with, or go through. Nothing about this is fine, and just hearing James say it makes Sirius so angry that he has to take a steadying breath to remain calm. That's what James needs right now. A soothing presence.

They're both quiet as the nurses finish up, then quickly leave with instructions for James to remain in bed. As soon as they're gone, James tugs on Sirius' hand, urging him to climb in

next to him without even saying a word. Sirius doesn't deny him, equally as desperate to be close as James is.

It takes a bit of maneuvering, but they eventually settle on the bed together. James can't really lay on his side, so Sirius does it for him, curled up against him as they just—breathe in perfect sync. In and out, together, as one.

"I'm so tired," James whispers.

"Me too," Sirius confesses.

"It's not over, is it?" James asks softly.

Sirius shifts back to look at James, who turns his head to stare at him with his eyebrows furrowed. "No, not yet. You won't be released until tomorrow, and then there will be the interview you and Regulus will have to do together. It's—it's hard, James, I know, but don't think about that right now, yeah?"

"I'd rather think about what's coming than think about what already happened," James croaks, blinking rapidly.

"Okay," Sirius says instantly. "Well, Regulus gets released today, so I'll have to take him back to the suite, but I'll come back and stay the night with you, then stay until you're released, too. I haven't gotten confirmation on when the interview will be taking place, but these things generally happen quickly while things are still fresh. After the interviews, we'll stay one last night, then leave the following morning."

"So…less than a week?" James checks.

Sirius hums. "Less than a week, probably, and then you're home, James. It's almost—" He halts, because he was about to say *it's almost over,* but they both know it's not that simple.

James is silent. He doesn't respond for a long time, just breathing. Sirius lays there and lets James fiddle with his fingers, a restless motion that speaks of anxiety. He doesn't know how to soothe it other than letting James play with his hand, pinching the knuckles gently and moving his fingers at will, with no resistance. Sirius wouldn't resist anyway; if he thought it would help, he'd cut his hand off and give it to James like a fucking stress-ball.

"Thank you," James croaks, suddenly.

"For what?" Sirius asks, a touch incredulous as he tips his head back to look at James, unable to fathom what he could possibly be thanking Sirius for when he didn't *do* anything.

James swallows. "For what you said, before I went into the arena. I—I needed to hear it. I thought about it a lot, and I think it was one of the only things that made everything seem more…bearable. So, thank you."

"Oh," Sirius whispers, dropping his gaze immediately as a lump forms in his throat, shame curdling in his gut. He doesn't know what he said. He can't remember. Something important to James, that *helped* him, and Sirius wasn't even fucking there for it.

"Sirius?" James mumbles.

Taking a deep breath, Sirius lifts his gaze and bites the bullet, giving James a bitter smile. "I, um. I don't—I can't remember what I said. I'm sorry, James. What did I say?"

"Ah," James says softly, his eyes sad. "You—you lost that, didn't you? Our last moments?"

"Yeah," Sirius admits.

"Oh, Sirius, I'm—I'm so sorry," James rasps, tangling their fingers together, squeezing them. Even now, even here, James is still trying to take care of everyone else.

"What did I say?" Sirius insists, because he's not standing for it. He remembers what James said in the arena, what he told Regulus about how he takes care of others to avoid the fact that he needs to be taken care of, too. Sirius isn't going to let that happen, not again, not when he's here to stop it.

"Well, you told me you loved me," James murmurs, and Sirius feels something in his chest shrivel up and crumble when he processes that, because he told James he loved him. He told James, even when he wasn't himself, but he couldn't figure out how to say it to Regulus, and it doesn't matter that he's said it now, because he didn't say it *then,* and Regulus almost died. He could be dead, never knowing, and Sirius—oh, he would have never forgiven himself. "I—well, you don't remember, but I said it back. But you also… You told me…"

"What?" Sirius demands, a little harsh because he's still upset with himself, unable to let it go.

James exhales shakily. *"I forgive you.* That's what you said. You forgave me for—leaving you."

Sirius' breath punches out of him, almost sounding like a laugh, because isn't that just… It's fucked. He looks at James and feels his insides knot up, a deep sweep of pain unfurling through him. He forgave James and didn't even know it.

"But you didn't, did you? That wasn't—" James cuts himself off, gazing at him, pained. *That wasn't real. That wasn't true. That wasn't you.* However that sentence ended, it works, and it's not fair. It's not *fair* that something that brought James such comfort, that helped get him through the arena, wasn't what he thought it was.

The worst part is, Sirius thinks he would have said it anyway, if he had been present for their last moments. To give James that comfort, to absolve him, he would have said it. He would have lied. Because it is a lie.

It's a complex thing, this weird jumble of resentment and relief. Sirius *didn't* forgive James for choosing to die, and he still doesn't, even knowing that, originally, it would have meant the loss of Regulus—another thing he couldn't handle, or forgive. There's no simple solution

to this situation, there never was, and the only thing that fixed it was that he lost *neither* of them, which is exactly what happened.

That doesn't mean it just makes the feelings of anger and hurt go away. They're still there. Sirius thinks they'll always be there, existing in some liminal space where he can simply avoid it, because it didn't happen. He'll never forgive anything that could have ended with losing James or Regulus, even *them,* but he doesn't—he isn't angry with them for it, for the choices they made. He doesn't blame them.

Because, honestly, what's the point? They're here. They're alive, and here, with him. It *didn't* happen, and Sirius doesn't want to be upset with them about it. He knows better than anyone what being in that arena will push someone to do. It's a strange comfort, but Sirius reminds himself that they wouldn't have done that under any other circumstances.

It was never that they wanted to leave *him.* Sirius knows that. He knows that, in a perfect world, neither of them would have ever even *considered* dying. But this isn't a perfect world, far from it actually, and now Sirius has to live with the fact that he knows what it's like to lose them both. It was only moments, in reality, but he experienced those moments in visceral detail, enough to know he wouldn't have survived it.

"It doesn't matter," Sirius whispers, squeezing James' hand and taking a deep breath. "None of that matters now, James, because it didn't happen. You're here. You're both here."

"Your forgiveness was one of the things that kept me going, Sirius," James chokes out, his eyes brimming with tears, and it feels like Sirius' chest is caving in. To have that comfort ruthlessly taken from him, shattered before his very eyes by the source, by the *one* person who has never failed to comfort him before—it has to be crushing. Sirius feels like he's being crushed right along with it. "Do you forgive me now?"

James is looking at him like he's desperate, like Sirius' forgiveness is the only thing he needs, and without it he would simply give the fuck up, like the guilt would eat him alive. So, Sirius softens as much as he's able to, and he says, "Of course I do, James. There's nothing in this world you could ever do that I wouldn't forgive you for."

James releases a deep, gasping breath and starts crying again, and Sirius shifts up to hold onto him as much as he's able to, letting him sag against him and leech comfort from him as

much as he needs to. Sirius finds himself grateful, despite everything, for lying to James then, just so he would *be* comforted in the arena.

Much the same, Sirius is grateful for the lie now, for the comfort it brings to James. Because still, even now, it is a lie. He can never fully forgive what would have resulted in having James taken from him, but he doesn't have to.

This is a lie he can live with.

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Remus swings his head in perfect sync with Pandora when the door opens to the suite and Sirius comes shuffling in with Regulus right behind him, both of them looking exhausted.

Remus isn't sure why, exactly, but the mere sight of Regulus makes him feel a little faint, a bit spooked, like catching a glimpse of a ghost out of the corner of his eye. It's at this moment that he realizes some part of him was still stuck on seeing Regulus go into that river, not entirely sure he ever came back out until now, when he's in front of them.

He's clearly seen better days, that much is for sure. Regulus has a set of scars down the side of his throat, pink lines that disappear underneath the collar of his shirt, undeniably from where he was dragged beneath the water. If he has more, they're not visible, because he's in a long-sleeve shirt.

He looks very tense, clearly uncomfortable and uneasy, sort of hovering next to Sirius as he flicks his gaze around the room like he's waiting for something to jump out at him. He doesn't speak, or meet their eyes, or acknowledge them at all. Sirius murmurs something to him, and he nods stiffly before making his way swiftly through the room, heading down the hall to presumably go into *his* room, the door shutting quietly.

Sirius watches him go, blowing out a deep breath, then reaches up to run his hand wearily down his face. He looks dead on his feet, completely depleted of energy, and Remus' heart clenches violently in his chest.

"I can't stay long," Sirius mumbles as he moves over to them, his tired eyes tugging at Remus' heartstrings. "Just—can you keep a check on him through the night, Pandora? I don't think he wants to talk, really, but I'd appreciate it if you'd knock and stick your head in every once in a while."

"Yes, of course," Pandora replies immediately. "Is he hungry? We made sandwiches. I can bring him one."

"You can try," Sirius says softly.

Pandora immediately stands up like a woman on a mission, heading into the kitchen as Sirius steals her seat next to Remus. He deflates for a long moment, leaning his head back with his eyes shut. A minute later, Pandora sweeps right back out of the kitchen with a sandwich on a plate, going down the hall without a stutter in her stride.

"Hi," Remus whispers when Sirius opens his eyes and rolls his head to gaze at him.

"Hi," Sirius whispers back, his lips curling faintly only for a moment before flattening out again. He studies Remus' face for a minute, quiet, then, "Will you kiss me?"

Remus leans over to cradle Sirius' cheek, granting his request with a tenderness he didn't even know he was capable of. It's a soft kiss, and Sirius sighs into it like he's coming home. Even though it's not deep, or teeming with passion, Remus feels it hook in his chest and tug at him until he's glowing from the inside out. It ends naturally, gently, their foreheads pressed together as they sit there in silence and breathe.

"I have to go," Sirius tells him. "I'm staying the night with James, but I'll—I'll check in on Regulus in the morning, so I'll see you then. I'm sorry, Remus, I just—"

"Don't apologize," Remus cuts in gently. "It's okay, Sirius. Regulus is going to be okay here with Pandora, and I'll check on him as well before I have to leave for the night. You stay with James. It's okay. Everything is going to be okay."

"It doesn't feel like it," Sirius admits.

Remus tilts his head up to press a kiss to Sirius' forehead, then leans back to hold his gaze. "One day at a time, remember?"

"One day at a time," Sirius repeats, blinking slowly, sluggishly, like he's too tired to hold his eyelids open for long. And yet he still does. He still fights to.

"Don't forget to take care of yourself in all of this, especially if I can't be there to help," Remus says. "Try to get some rest, at the very least. Eat a sandwich before you go."

"Okay," Sirius replies. "As for Regulus, I'm worried about him, Remus. He's not—well, obviously he's not doing well, and I don't expect him to, but I'm still—I'm really—"

"Worried?" Remus fills in, when Sirius can't seem to finish.

Sirius swallows. "Yeah. Really worried."

"He's alive," Remus reminds him, because saying that has always comforted Sirius. "I know you're going to worry, Sirius, but you're doing everything you can. You're taking care of them, and that means something, remember?"

"Thank you," Sirius breathes out, his eyes fluttering shut. When they open back up, he reaches out to gently push Remus' hair to the side, just a bit, grazing his fingers over his forehead. "And you? Are you okay, Remus?"

"I'm okay," Remus murmurs. "For now, I'm okay."

"Do you need anything?" Sirius asks.

Remus quirks a tiny smile. "Another kiss, if you're willing."

"For you, I'm forever willing," Sirius says softly, a light teasing undertone to his words, counteracted by the heavy truth in them. He means that. Of course he does.

Sirius rocks forward across the small space between them and kisses him again, slow and tender and warm. It's precious, and Remus treasures it, cherishing each moment between them, only more beloved because it's finite. Sirius speaks of forever between them like it's an option, and Remus can taste it from his mouth, but forever isn't a hope that they'll ever get to have.

"You're so precious to me, did you know that?" Remus whispers when they break apart.

A slightly high-pitched giggle tumbles out of Sirius' mouth, bordering on delirium—likely from the lack of proper rest he's gone without—and, despite everything, he blushes that lovely blush of his as he gazes at Remus with fucking stars in his eyes. His giggle rapidly turns into a mildly hysterical bark of laughter as he chokes out, "Oh, fuck, that was embarrassing."

"Humiliating, really," Remus teases, smiling helplessly. Sirius settles down with a gusty exhale, just gazing at him with undeniable affection, even while he still looks so tired. Oh, but Remus loves this man. He really—

Oh.

Oh, Remus thinks, his heart doing this bittersweet sort of clench-and-release in his chest as he realizes that it's true. Not just in abstract. Not just them heading towards something they can never really have. Not just falling in love—but landing. Remus loves Sirius. He *loves* him. It's already there; it's already happened. It's love. He's in love.

Remus swallows harshly and blinks rapidly to fight the stinging in his eyes, and Sirius' eyebrows furrow with obvious concern, clearly about to ask what's wrong. But that's the

thing, this is so right, *they're* so right, and there's nothing wrong with being in love with Sirius at all. It's everything else that's wrong, all those things they can't do anything about, and that's what hurts. He saw this coming, and he's still not prepared for how much it impacts him.

Before Sirius can even speak, Remus folds forward to kiss him one more time, just as slow and gentle and *loving* as each time before. Sirius melts into it, as he always does, and Remus lets this—all of it with Sirius—curl up safe and warm next to his heart, where he will guard it and keep it, because it's all he gets to have, which is better than having nothing at all.

They break apart at the sound of steps approaching, and Pandora returns with an empty plate and a triumphant gleam in her eye. She says, "He's eating."

Hope blooms in Sirius' eyes once more.

Remus cherishes that, too.

Chapter End Notes

well. james and regulus are officially out of this arena! and they are not having a good time 😃

let's get into it, ig.

first, the sirius and regulus reunion. oh, you don't even KNOW. it's probably obvious by now, but i have family trauma, so NOTHING fucks me up like the dynamic between regulus and sirius. genuinely, there is no angst in canon, or fanon, or outside of either that rips my soul to shreds like regulus and sirius do. keep in mind, the LAST thing that sirius said to regulus—that wasn't just notes on a card in the arena—was literally "i promise you won't" after regulus told him he didn't want to die. it's been EIGHT DAYS since that (but 16 chapters). like, the last thing sirius said to regulus was a promise that he wouldn't die, and then regulus didn't, and the first thing he says when regulus makes it back is that he loves him. nah, i was WRECKED.

just, like, at the end of the day, no matter what else, when it comes down to it—they love each other. they're BROTHERS. im gonna die.

regulus is Struggling, which is fair. everything in the arena + going into that river really fucked him up, and yes, im evil, because in chapter 24, regulus said he couldn't wait to have a hot shower, and now... yeah, it's something he deals with throughout the fic, among other things.

also, not wanting to see james... there is a reason for that—not that he needs a reason after all that he's been through, honestly—but there is one, and we find out later.

on the topic of james, he's Not Doing Too Hot either, which is also fair. yes, throughout the fic, james will have a cane off-and-on as needed. i didn't go a Full Peeta (which, if you've read the books, you know what im talking about).

the sirius and james reunion... no, because they're BEST FRIENDS 😭😭😭 im gonna fucking cry just thinking about how much they love each order. they love each other soooooo much. like, sirius was about to Kill A Man for james—and he would have, no hesitation. don't sleep on sirius, he's fucking DANGEROUS. you think regulus is unhinged? sirius is so, so much worse 😳

but also, heartbreaking that sirius—even in the midst of dissociative amnesia—told james he loved him when he couldn't say it to regulus. that shit is so devastating to me GOODBYE. also, the fact that the last thing sirius said to james before he went into the arena was "i forgive you"??? 😭 HE FORGAVE JAMES FOR LEAVING HIM AND IT WAS A LIEEEEEE. why did i do that? who let me do that? why have none of you hunted me down and burned me at the stake yet?

and finally, remus!!! a king!!! an icon, as always!!! head over heels IN LOVE with sirius, and valid for it!!! his "oh" moment 😭😭😭 no im in love with him. and him being sad/upset about how little time he and sirius have left together... THEY DESERVE THE WORLD. (i do indeed have the power to give them that, and might just, at some point...eventually...)

honorable mention to pandora!!! she's always a woman on a mission, putting in the effort, helping as much as she can!!! she got regulus to eat!!! (okay she literally just went in and chattered at him until he agreed to eat so she would go away, but you know what? she still DID THAT!!!).

i feel weird at the end of these notes for not having to do numbers anymore (for the arena, i mean). like, i dunno, i feel like im Missing Something.

oh!!! oh, yeah, i wanted to say that i do realize that The Medical Stuff isn't realistic to real life (there's no way people just heal That Fast), but 1) ive established that the Hallow has advancements in healing/medicine and have no shame in using the excuse that im paralleling it to the magical world in canon, and 2) its fic and what i say goes, and ive decided that This Is Just How It Is. so, any nurses/doctors/medical field workers out there, i apologize to you and you only bc im sure you were Cringing at some medical parts, which is so valid, but please let me have this, okay? thanks. love you. appreciate you!!!

okay, no, i still feel like im missing something without the numbers, but alas, im sure ill get used to it.

Responsibilities

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-ptsd/ptsd-responses (defensive, lashing out, paranoia, things such as that)
-depictions of aquaphobia (fear of water)
-refernces to child abuse (because of walburga and orion's a+ parenting)
-brief hints to a minor panic attack (VERY brief and mostly implied, you might not even notice it)
-vague hints to addiction/references to past addiction (also very vague and implied, you might miss this too, and it's about drinking and nothing else)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus glances up when Sirius steps into the kitchen, his expression pinched like he's trying very hard not to let it show on his face what he's feeling.

"I'm assuming it didn't go well?" Remus asks carefully, wrapping the sandwich he just finished grilling for Sirius and passing it to him.

"He punched me. Again," Sirius mutters. "He was still sleeping, so he just—reacted. I should have woken him up before touching him."

Remus sighs. "You were just eager to check on him, don't beat yourself up about it."

"Don't have to, do I? He did it for me," Sirius grumbles.

"Oh, stop it." Remus snorts and shakes his head. "I don't see a bruise. Are you hurt?"

Sirius' lips twitch. "No, I'm fine. I blocked it, mostly. In any case, he didn't even realize it happened. Wasn't happy with me when he fully woke up, anyway. Or, well, I don't think he was."

"Still not talking?"

"Not a word. I think he's just doing things to get people to go away, really, so at least that's one way to get him to eat. He doesn't want to come out for breakfast, so would you…?"

"Yeah, I'll bring it to him," Remus assures him.

"Thank you. You're the best." Sirius leans in and pecks him on the mouth, smiling distractedly as he pulls away.

"Anything else I can do?" Remus asks.

"Unless you can coax him into a shower…" Sirius' smile falls, and he starts chewing on his lip, his habitual concern taking over once more. "He's—well, he's afraid of water, I think. Can't say I blame him, but he's going to have to take a shower at some point. They'll make him before his interviews, and if he refuses, it won't be pretty. I just—I don't know how to…"

"I'll see what I can do," Remus murmurs, his heart sinking in his chest. "Have you seen Pandora?"

"James said he didn't mind seeing her, so she's already gone off to visit him." Sirius glances up at the clock on the wall with a small frown. "I really should be going. They're giving James his cane soon, and I have a meeting before he's released."

Remus blinks. "With who?"

"People who are going to tell me when the interview is," Sirius says. "I'll update you when I get back, yeah?"

"Alright," Remus replies.

Sirius nods quickly, clearly still distracted, and he once again leans in to give Remus a quick kiss, this time on the cheek in parting. Remus has his hands full with finishing breakfast, so he can only lean into the contact, and then he watches Sirius leave with a quiet sigh. Life is rarely kind, and he finds it particularly cruel for not giving them enough time together.

It's quiet in the suite once more when Sirius is gone, as well as Pandora. Remus finds the silence foreboding somehow, like an omen of what's to come when they're all gone for real.

Breakfast isn't too heavy, just something light that Regulus can keep down. It takes a bit for Remus to actually work up the courage to go and knock, because there's something deeply unsettling about the dead look in Regulus' eyes every time Remus sees them. He's not entirely sure how to appropriately treat him. Gently, with care? Or as if nothing has happened?

There's no answer when Remus knocks, but there never is, not for anyone. It's just a warning so he doesn't react explosively at someone intruding on his space. Carefully, Remus nudges the door open and peeks in. As expected, the room is empty.

Regulus has taken to sitting out on the balcony. Remus isn't entirely sure why, but he seems to prefer it out there than anywhere else. Remus would think that the sounds of the city would be overwhelming, after everything, but something about the location seems to bring Regulus comfort anyway.

Again, Remus knocks before he slips out on the balcony, unwilling to be punched on his way through the door. It's immediately clear that Regulus is tense, but he always seems to be, so Remus doubts it's just because of his presence.

"I made breakfast," Remus explains as he sits the plate down, then hesitates only for a moment before sitting in the chair on the opposite side of the table. Regulus doesn't respond

or look at him. "You don't have to finish it."

Again, nothing.

Remus doesn't know what to say, or do, so he releases a muted sigh and mumbles for Regulus to let him know if he needs anything, then he leaves. He goes back out and cleans up from breakfast, just to give himself something to do.

He then tasks himself with gathering clothes and washing them, just to pass the time.

After that, he goes back to collect Regulus' plate, only to find it sitting outside the door, empty. Well, at least he ate. Remus considers that a win and takes the plate to wash that, too.

Remus dusts.

Remus wipes counters.

Remus sweeps the floor.

Remus folds clothes and puts them back where they belong.

Remus spends hours just trying to figure out how he can help Sirius help Regulus, simply because he *wants* to, because he wants to help in any way he can, if he can at all. Nothing comes to mind, and maybe that means the proper thing to do would be to leave it alone and he should just stay out of it, but when has Remus ever been any good at being proper and doing what he should? Never, that's when.

So, Remus gathers his resolve and once again knocks on Regulus' door, then knocks on the balcony door when Regulus is predictably still out there. He doesn't look to have moved an inch, still tucked up in his chair like he's trying to disappear into himself, staring blankly out at nothing.

Remus thinks that, if it was him, he would appreciate honesty, so that's what he leads with. There's no easy way to deliver the truth when it's something you don't want to hear, so he just dives right into it with, "They're going to make you shower."

Regulus goes stiff all over, jaw clenching so hard that the muscle at the bolt of his jaw twitches. For the first time, he turns to look at Remus, *really* look at him, and the expression on his face clearly states that he's willing to fucking kill someone if they dare to try. It's chilling.

"I understand why you don't want to," Remus continues, because he does, "but not everyone is going to care about that. The Hallows…" Remus swallows. "Well, whatever serves them is what they'll do. Do you understand what I'm saying, Regulus? They will *force* you, if they have to."

The murderous intent in Regulus' eyes shifts into something else, something that makes him look small where he's curled up into the chair, rather than a predator coiled up like he's about to attack. It's blatant fear.

"It's wrong," Remus says firmly. "It's not fair, and I'm sorry, and if there was any way around it, Sirius would find it. For you, he would find it, but—there isn't a way, so I think you should be free to do it yourself."

"I *can't,"* Regulus rasps, squeezing his eyes shut.

Remus takes a deep breath, sitting on that for a second. He thinks about what makes Regulus afraid of water. There are too many reasons behind it, too many possibilities, so a solution isn't simple to come up with. He doesn't know the exact source, so the only thing he can do is ask.

"Is it the water itself?" Remus murmurs, watching Regulus' eyes flutter open. He looks haunted. "Too much water? Running water?"

"I—" Regulus seems to struggle, his face twisting, and then he shakes his head. "It's cold. It's—it's so cold, all the way to the bone, and it gets in my mouth, weighs me down, but it's blood, and—and the *hands—"*

"Okay," Remus cuts in quickly, his stomach falling out from under him when he gets it, fully and completely, because Regulus is talking like it's still happening to him, even now. Like any contact of water on his skin just takes him right back there. "So, alright, what if—what if the water was warm? What if there wasn't very much of it? You have a tub, Regulus."

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't—" Regulus gives up and presses his face to his knees, breathing in and out.

"Alright," Remus says quietly. "Just—just give me a second, alright? I'll be right back."

Again, Regulus doesn't acknowledge him. Remus gets up and leaves to go into the kitchen, grabbing a cup, and then he heads back into Regulus' room—still knocking, just in case. Regulus is still out on the balcony, so Remus shuts himself in the bathroom, closing the door to muffle the sound of running water. The shower comes with a tub built in, likely between eighteen and twenty inches deep, but Remus only fills it about a quarter of the way. Only enough for him to press his palm flat against the bottom and reach just a bit above his wrist.

The water is hot, no chance of it being cold, but not too hot that you can't touch it. On the cusp, maybe, but Remus thinks the stark difference might help, rather than be an issue. He pours some of the body wash in the water and swirls it around, just to fill the bathroom with a nice aroma, nothing that will remind Regulus of blood. On the side of the tub, he lines up the body wash, shampoo, and conditioner with the cup, then picks himself up and heads back outside.

Regulus is pale and shaky when Remus knocks and slips back out on the balcony. He's clearly worked up, struggling with even the thought of this.

"Obviously you don't have to," Remus starts, "but I think, if it was me, I'd like to do it on my own terms. The water is hot, and clear, and there's not very much of it."

"I don't know if I *can,"* Regulus snaps, the words coming out sharp like a whip-crack, full of frustration and anger and fear.

"Do you want to try?" Remus asks calmly.

Regulus is silent, just breathing. He flexes his fingers on the side of his legs, his body held tense like he's about to snap. It takes a while—and Remus waits patiently—but he does eventually unfurl from his chair, standing stiffly.

"I can go," Remus offers. "Or I can stay. I can sit outside the bathroom, or inside it. I can talk, or I can be quiet. Just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it."

"Didn't Sirius tell you that you're not our fucking servant?" Regulus spits out, visibly on edge.

"I'm a servant to the Hallow," Remus says. "This—what I'm doing now—I'd like to think it's just helping a friend."

"We're not friends," Regulus informs him, though there's less bite to his tone now. Remus is quite sure the back-and-forth is calming him down, taking his mind off the water.

"You don't have to be my friend for me to be yours," is all Remus says. "Let me help you."

Regulus works his jaw, hands clenched into fists, but he does follow Remus from the balcony. Remus opens the bathroom door and lets Regulus in, standing in the doorway and watching as Regulus observes the water like it's actually a tub full of flames. He just stares at it, frozen in place.

Remus brushes past him, careful not to touch, and he bends over to put his hand in the water. He swishes it around for a moment, then lifts it out and flicks his fingers.

"Here," Remus mumbles, holding out his hand towards Regulus, watching him with clear eyes.

"Sirius is going to get jealous," Regulus says absently, but he nonetheless reaches out to grab Remus' hand. Coming into contact with water like this doesn't seem to bother him, really. Remus thinks it's just…bodies of water. Rushing water. Too *much* water. Anything to remind him of the river.

"That's alright. He's cute when he's jealous," Remus replies lightly, huffing out a laugh when Regulus reflexively wrinkles his nose a bit. It reminds him of every time Sirius did basically the same thing when James would flirt with Regulus in the arena. He made that same exact face. It's oddly adorable on both of them, honestly. "Now, do you want me to stay, or go?"

Regulus drops his hand with a sigh. "Well, I don't want you to see me naked, for fuck's sake, but…"

"I can close my eyes," Remus tells him.

"I'm supposed to trust that?"

"You can trust that the only person I have an interest in seeing naked is your brother."

"I liked it better when you seemed afraid of me," Regulus mutters, which…okay, that's fair. Remus *was* a bit afraid of him; not because of what he might do, or how he might lash out, but because Remus wasn't sure how to interact with him and didn't want to get it wrong. "Just…sit outside the door."

"I can do that," Remus says, and then does just that. He steps back out the bathroom and sinks down the length of the wall beside the door, staring at the bed in front of him.

Neither of them speak, but Remus can hear Regulus slowly getting undressed, the shush of clothes sliding against skin and hitting the floor. The sounds eventually come to a stop, but

there's nothing else. No tiny splash of water indicating that Regulus has stepped in, or even dipped his fingers in. All Remus can hear is Regulus' shaky breathing.

So, Remus starts talking. At first, it's tentative, not entirely sure if that's what Regulus wants, or needs. When Regulus doesn't tell him to shut the fuck up, Remus settles into it more, choosing one of the stupid, meaningless stories about the drama between Hallows that he's overheard in the last five years, because he has a whole vault of those. After at least ten minutes, there's the sound of a faint splash, something small, definitely not an entire body going into the tub, but it's progress, so Remus assumes he's doing something right.

Remus keeps talking, and talking, and talking—and, eventually he hears the squeak of limbs against the tub, the splash of water that indicates Regulus *has* gotten in. It's very quiet otherwise, which honestly worries Remus, but he keeps talking anyway. There's the distinct sounds of someone in the bath, cascading water and the pops of caps on the bottles, which Remus thinks is a good sign, at least.

"Welda was upset because Kinsom kissed her wife, but Kinsom told her that it wasn't his fault, because he was just drunk, which is a load of tosh, obviously. I mean, it's double the damage, really, because she lost her wife *and* her friend, and I found out last year that they got married and Welda tried to burn their house down, and honestly? Can't blame her for that one," Remus rambles, shaking his head as he recalls all of *that* drama that swept through the Hallow. There's a quiet, choked noise from within the bathroom that steals his attention. At first, he thinks it's a laugh—which would be fair, because the gossip *is* absurd, honestly—but he realizes that it's actually a faint sob. "Regulus?"

"F-Fine," Regulus calls back, and it's immediately clear that he's crying, which makes Remus sit forward warily, fighting the urge to swing his head around the doorway to check on Regulus. "Just—just keep talking, please."

Swallowing harshly, Remus squeezes his eyes shut as sorrow crests within him, but he exhales and keeps talking. "Welda ended up getting remarried, though, and her ex-wife cheated on Kinsom with his *mother,* which is just karma, really…"

Heart heavy, Remus continues to talk, and inside the bathroom, Regulus continues to weep.

~•~

"How did your meeting go?" Pandora asks.

Sirius heaves a sigh and tears his gaze away from where James is slowly making his way across the room with his cane, his eyebrows furrowed with concentration. "It went."

"Bad news?" Pandora murmurs.

"I'm not happy about it," Sirius admits, lips pressing into a thin line. "I hoped they'd at least have a day where they could…acclimate, a bit, but that's not going to happen. The interviews are taking place tomorrow afternoon, and then we'll stay that final night and leave the following morning. I thought that would be the case, but I really did hope they'd at least have an extra day to get ready."

"They'll be ready, Sirius," Pandora says softly. "We'll make sure they are."

"I don't want to do this to them," Sirius croaks, glancing over at her. "What we have to do, what we have to prepare *them* to do… Pandora, I don't want to."

Pandora grimaces slightly. "I know, but it's—" She looks around, then leans in and lowers her voice. "You know it's necessary. What James did…"

"I know," Sirius cuts in, swallowing. "How well I know."

"He doesn't know," Pandora whispers, turning her gaze to where James is steadily making his way back across the room, leaning on his cane for support.

"No, he doesn't," Sirius agrees, a tight clench of fear squeezing down at the base of his spine. "It—yes, it was defiance, but he didn't do it to *be* defiant. He did it…"

"For love," Pandora fills in.

Sirius sighs again, voice grim as he mutters, "Yeah."

"Well, at least he won't have to lie," Pandora murmurs, then clears her throat and straightens up. "If you want, I'll go ahead and check on Regulus while you walk James back."

"Thank you," Sirius tells her, then catches her arm as she goes to turn, reaching down to grab her hand and bring it up to his mouth to press a kiss to the back of her fingers. He meets her eyes and smiles. "Really, Pandora, thank you."

Pandora smiles back gently, squeezes his hand, then leaves him alone with James. Sirius watches him take another circuit of the room, then moves over.

"I'm a bit slow," James mumbles sheepishly as he lifts his head and looks at Sirius, a slight strain around his eyes. The cane might be helpful, but it can't erase all the pain entirely, especially so fresh after the injury itself.

"That's alright. We'll go at your pace," Sirius assures him.

James hesitates. "I'm free to go, then?"

"Indeed you are. Come on, I'm breaking you out of here," Sirius says grandly, offering James his elbow with a wink.

"Back to the suite?" James asks with a weak huff of laughter, reaching over to curl his fingers in the bend of Sirius' arm, his other hand gripping the cane as they head towards the door.

"Mhm."

"Where Regulus is?"

Sirius struggles not to roll his eyes and repeats, "Mhm."

"What?" James mutters. "Why the face?"

"There was no face."

"There *was* a face. You made a face, Sirius."

"I didn't make a face."

"I saw it. You did make a face when I mentioned Regulus."

"I really didn't," Sirius protests.

James pinches his arm lightly and insists, "Yes, you did. Come on, why the face? Do you—are you upset? You don't like it, do you? How I feel about him, I mean. You don't approve?"

"James, I don't think we should talk about this right now, alright?" Sirius says quietly, staring straight ahead as they make their way through the hall.

"Well, we didn't really talk about it *before,"* James replies with a heavy sigh. "I know why we didn't, because we both thought there wouldn't be a point, but now I think we…have to."

Sirius squints slightly and runs his tongue over his teeth, fighting his agitation as much as he can. "We really don't."

"You're upset," James states glumly.

"Obviously I'm—" Sirius takes a deep breath and works to keep the bite out of his tone. He glances over at James, who is watching him cautiously, which takes all the wind out of his sails at once. He sighs. "It's complicated."

James snorts weakly. "You're telling me. Trust me, I *know."*

"You never fucking said anything," Sirius whispers a little heatedly. "Ten years, and you never said a word, James."

"What was I supposed to say?" James asks quietly. "Hey, Sirius, by the way, I'm head over heels for your brother, who hates my fucking guts and has issues with you, but don't worry about it, because nothing will ever come of it, seeing as he would be more likely to spit in my face than ever give me a chance anyway. I mean, no offense, but what would be the *point* of saying anything? It would only cause problems."

"The point is, I'm your best friend, and it's something that you were dealing with," Sirius hisses. "You were *struggling* with it; you were *hurt* because of it. You just carried that on your own, kept it close to your chest, and I—I never even got the chance to help you with that. You didn't even give me the choice to care, but I would have, James. I would have chosen to care."

"I just… I didn't want to make things harder for you," James croaks, his head ducked down. "You and Regulus were already so… You *know* how it was, and I didn't want to put you in a difficult position and add to the burden."

Sirius exhales slowly and lifts his free hand to cover James' fingers where they're tucked in his elbow. "You're not a burden. You're *never* a burden. Not your pain, or your problems, or anything."

"But he's your *brother,"* James tells him, biting his lip.

"Yes, I'm aware," Sirius mutters dryly, and James ducks his head again, this time because he's flustered. "I get that it's complicated. It was then, and it still is, but I'm your best friend. You can trust me with anything, James, even…that."

James lifts his head and frowns. "You don't like it, though."

"Not because of the reasons you might think," Sirius murmurs with true regret. "It's not that it's my best friend and brother. It's not because I'm ragingly jealous in both directions, even though I *am,* so beware of that. What it really is…" He swallows and meets James' gaze. "It's the circumstances in which it came about. I—you know, I don't really care, because after everything, I would hope that both of you get to have even a slice of happiness. I mean that, alright? The problem is that neither of you had any agency in it. If it had happened last year, before all of this, maybe I wouldn't feel so upset about it, but it *didn't.* It was about survival, and that's not fair to either of you. *Both* of you deserved so much better than this."

"Maybe," James says, his voice sounding heartbreakingly hollow, "but regardless of the reasons, what I feel for him is real. It's *real,* Sirius."

"I know," Sirius replies.

James is silent for a long time, leaning into Sirius harder the further they go, and he doesn't speak again until they're in the lift. "He said… Before he—I mean, I'm not—I don't expect anything, you know that, but he—"

"James," Sirius says very carefully.

"He *chose* me," James rasps, looking at Sirius with wide eyes, big and brown and swirling with emotion. "He didn't say he loved me, but he said something like it, I think, and I… Sirius, I still don't know what any of it means. Somehow, I'm *still* fucking confused, and I'm —I'm so *angry* at him. I begged him not to do it, and he still… Why would he do that?"

Because he loves you, Sirius thinks, but he forces himself not to say it, because that's not fair. It's one thing to say it to Regulus about James, who made it very obvious, who stated it right to his face multiple times. It's something else to say it to James for Regulus, who *didn't* say it,

who *showed* it with actions, but it's not that simple with him. Love is very different for Regulus than it is for James, and that's something they have to figure out together, if they want to, if they even can. The thing is, Sirius doesn't know if Regulus is going to be willing to.

Sirius can't tell James that Regulus loves him, even though Regulus *does* love James—and Sirius knows that for a fact now. The problem is, love doesn't solve everything. Love isn't going to fix what's wrong with the world. Love won't stop Regulus' nightmares, or heal James' pain. Love can't change their past, and it refuses to solidify their future. Love only makes this harder. It's something they'll have to choose to work on *together,* and Sirius can't promise that they will; Sirius can't give James that hope when he doesn't know if they can.

So, all Sirius can think to say is, "I don't know."

"I just…" James blows out a deep breath and shakes his head as they unload from the lift. "Maybe it doesn't even matter right now, because everything is… It's all too much. *I* can barely deal with everything, so I know he won't be ready to, at least not now. But I just—I want to see him. That's all. It would be enough just to see him and know he's…here, you know?"

"He, um…" Sirius winces slightly, and James looks over at him warily, which is fair. "Well, he hasn't been in the best mood, honestly. He's not really talking to anyone, so just… All I'm saying is, be prepared for him to ignore you, yeah? Don't take it personally. He's just… It's hard right now. *You* know that."

"He doesn't have to talk to me," James says instantly. "I just want to *see* him."

Sirius nods. "I get it, James. You will soon. Very soon, actually. We're almost there now."

"Will you…?" James trails off, uncharacteristically awkward.

"What?" Sirius asks.

James looks at him with some chagrin. "You—you don't have to, of course, but will you sleep with me tonight?"

"Yeah," Sirius answers immediately.

"Thank you," James breathes out.

They're silent the rest of the way to the suite. It's a bit slow-going because James is still getting used to his cane, but Sirius doesn't rush him, *or* let him rush himself. This is going to be an adjustment, and that takes time. They're both very impatient when they're working towards a goal, so Sirius has to make sure that James doesn't push himself too hard. Really, he expects too much out of himself at times.

When they make it into the suite, Sirius looks around in the vague hope that maybe Regulus has ventured out of his room, but he's nowhere to be found. In fact, Remus is also missing. Pandora is the only one there to greet them, and she stands up with a tight smile as they come in. Sirius instantly directs James to a chair to let him rest, but he looks at Pandora curiously, because the look on her face…

"You should go check on Regulus," Pandora says, and James' head snaps up, his eyes wide. "I'll stay here and get James something to drink. James, what would you like?"

"Something to take the edge off, please," James mumbles wearily, propping his cane up against his chair.

"No," Sirius protests quickly, because he knows better than most how slippery of a slope that is. James frowns at him, but Sirius just shoots him a stern look before focusing back on Pandora. "Water is fine. I'll be right back."

"Sure," Pandora murmurs, shrugging at James when he groans and tosses his head back against the chair.

Sirius pats James' shoulder apologetically, but he doesn't let James' sad eyes change his mind, which is actually a major achievement, because he would usually cave immediately.

James grumbles under his breath as Sirius leaves, which is fine. Sirius can't blame him. Nonetheless, he doesn't let that stop him on his way down the hall to Regulus' room. He knocks when he reaches the door and starts to turn the handle, only to find the door locked. He blinks, then immediately feels panic grip him, but the door opens a bit before he can freak out.

Again, Sirius blinks when he sees Remus' face peeking out at him through the crack in the door. As soon as Remus sees him, he shuts the door once more, leaving Sirius baffled on the other side. There's a muffled conversation, and then the door opens up yet again, revealing Remus for the second time.

"Where's James?" Remus asks.

"Um…sitting in the main room?" Sirius says, bewildered.

The door closes, and there's *another* muffled discussion that Sirius can't quite make out. He hears Regulus' voice, though, which means he's talking. That sparks hope in Sirius' chest, and he feels a wave of affection wash over him to know that Remus actually managed to get Regulus to talk again.

After a minute, the door creaks open *again,* and Remus slips out with a sigh. He shuts it behind him and clears his throat, giving Sirius a weak smile. "Hi."

"Hi," Sirius replies, eyebrows raised.

"You can go in," Remus tells him. "I just have to stand out here and make sure…" He pauses, flicking his gaze down the hall, and then he leans in and lowers his voice to a whisper that *Sirius* almost can't hear, let alone anyone else. "I have to make sure James doesn't. Regulus doesn't want to see him."

Sirius feels his heart sink. "Still? But… Fuck, James *really* wants to see him, Remus. Just see him, that's all."

"I mean, you can try, but…" Remus makes a face like he sincerely doubts that Sirius will make it happen. "I don't think you should push it. He's…had a rough day."

"Regulus?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?" Sirius asks, tensing all over.

Remus swallows. "He took a bath. It was—hard. I helped."

"You—" Sirius rears back a little. "By *help,* you mean…?"

"I mean I helped," Remus repeats, lips twitching when Sirius' eyebrows tug together. "Don't worry, I didn't see him naked or anything. I just sort of sat outside the door and talked to him. It was—well, it was still fucking awful for him anyway."

Sirius stares at him incredulously. "How the *fuck* did you get him to do that?"

"I just…talked to him?" Remus shrugs. "Honestly, I don't know. He's sort of been following me around ever since. He *was* out of his room. Still wasn't talking much, but he sat in the kitchen while I cooked and seemed to like it when *I* talked. He holed himself in his room as soon as Pandora came back and said that James was on his way, though."

"He was following you around?" Sirius murmurs, softening helplessly by the mental image.

Remus seems baffled, but he nods. "Yeah, pretty much. Sort of like a very quiet shadow."

"You're a marvel," Sirius breathes out, utterly astonished. There's something oddly amusing about the idea of Regulus just trailing around after Remus wherever he goes, but Sirius supposes that makes sense. After all, if Remus *did* help Regulus with something he was so afraid of, he *would* find comfort in him after that. "Thank you. Remus, really, I—"

"You don't have to thank me. I wanted to help," Remus tells him gently. "And, you know, I think I did. Even just a bit."

"Of course you did," Sirius says softly, his heart swelling is his chest because Remus seems *genuinely* pleased that he actually managed to help at all.

Sirius shakes his head, feeling such a rush of love for this man grip him that he almost can't breathe around it. He can only step forward and reach out to catch Remus' face in his hands, drawing him into a kiss. Remus tips forward into it eagerly, his hands coming up to cup Sirius' neck on either side, ever so gently stroking his skin like it's precious. For a long, long moment, they just stand there and kiss slowly, feeling every inch of it for as long as they can before they break apart.

"Go on," Remus whispers, tilting his head up to press a careful kiss to the very tip of Sirius' nose. "Go see your brother."

Sirius hums, his eyes fluttering open, and he feels his face heat up the moment he sees how fondly Remus is looking at him. The blush makes Remus laugh quietly, and Sirius laughs along with him, rocking forward to kiss him one more time, quickly, and then he pulls away to go into the room.

"It's just me," Sirius announces as he shuts the door quickly, because Regulus is watching his entrance suspiciously, his eyes narrowed and his body tense where he's sitting at the top of his bed. "James is resting anyway."

"Resting?" Regulus asks, clearly interested and doing his absolute best to hide it.

"Yeah. He's getting used to his cane, but that doesn't make the pain in his leg just go away, unfortunately," Sirius mutters as he moves over to sit down on the edge of the bed, only a few inches away from Regulus' sock-clad feet.

Regulus is silent for a long moment, the tension slowly draining out of his frame. At least he's comfortable with Sirius, which is a nice thing to be sure of. Sirius scans him carefully, because he hasn't seen him since this morning, and he can't stop himself from looking for any changes.

It's clear that Regulus has gotten a bath. His hair is a little damp, no longer limp and greasy from sweat, now holding healthy waves and curls. He's clean, too, and in a new long-sleeve shirt and pair of joggers. The only scar that's visible is the one on his neck.

"Is he okay?" Regulus says, finally. He doesn't lift his gaze, and he plucks at the seam of his joggers with a small frown.

"He's…doing his best," Sirius replies, because no, James *isn't* okay. Neither of them are, frankly, but Sirius knows James so well that he can see how bad off James is currently. Maybe it's not obvious to most, but the random bouts of silence he goes into, the way he drifts off, how he bristles like he's about to fight when someone he doesn't instinctively trust gets too close to him—all of it, and more, is so *obvious* to Sirius, but James is still trying, because of course he is. Even now, he is.

Regulus frowns harder. "And his leg?"

"The pain will get better with time," Sirius explains. "He'll need the cane for a while, but he'll eventually be able to go without it, just not always."

"Has he…?" Regulus doesn't finish.

Sirius purses his lips, then carefully says, "You can see him, you know. He's only a room away."

"No," Regulus denies immediately. "I don't want to see him."

"Reggie," Sirius whispers, "he *really* wants to see you. Just see you, that's all. It's just—he just wants to see you alive for himself, okay? That's all it is. Won't you—"

"No," Regulus snaps.

"You don't have to talk to him," Sirius tries, his voice strained. He doesn't want to push, but at the same time, he knows how much better James would feel just to *see* Regulus. "You—"

"I said *no!"* Regulus shouts, his head snapping up, eyes slightly wild. His chest is heaving and his hands are clenched into tight fists. "I don't want to fucking see him! I *won't!"*

"Alright, hey, that's—it's okay, you don't have to," Sirius says quickly, backtracking immediately when he sees that this isn't just Regulus being contrarian or stubborn. It's *clearly* an issue for him, a big one, which is going to be a problem tomorrow when he'll have no choice in the matter. The more pressing issue is to set Regulus at ease *now,* and Sirius reaches out instinctively to touch his arm in the endeavor to do that.

It's a mistake. As soon as Sirius' fingers lands on his arm, Regulus snaps his arm out and backhands Sirius right across the face, hitting him *hard.* It's done with such force that Sirius' head whips to the side, and he curses sharply as he surges to his feet and puts space between them.

"I'm—fuck, I'm sorry," Regulus chokes out, nearly tumbling off the bed with wide eyes full of instant regret.

"You're fine. It's fine," Sirius grits out, reaching up to prod at his face with one hand and lift the other to try and wordlessly tell Regulus to stay back. "I know you didn't mean to. It's—"

"Sirius, I'm sorry," Regulus says yet again. "I shouldn't have done that. I didn't know I was going to do that. I—"

"Regulus, it's okay," Sirius cuts in firmly, dropping both hands and releasing a deep breath as he steps forward to let Regulus look at him. "See? It's fine. It was just a reflex."

"I'm sorry," Regulus repeats, this time much softer, his eyes drifting shut before he lifts both hands and swipes them over his face. He gives a hoarse laugh and shakes his head as his hands fall limp to his sides. "I—I've never hit you. Not once. No matter what, I never hit you, and now—"

"Stop it." Sirius is quite sure now is not a good time to mention that Regulus has been attempting to beat the shit out of him in his sleep multiple times already. Probably for the best to keep that to himself. He sighs when Regulus looks at him with this horrible, awful self-hatred in his eyes that Sirius knows for sure he's seen in the mirror before. "Look, just—can I touch you? Is that alright?"

"I don't know," Regulus rasps.

"Alright, so I won't," Sirius says simply.

Regulus swallows. "You should be able to. You're my brother."

"It's not that simple," Sirius tells him, giving him a bitter smile. "Reggie, you're *two days* out of the arena. Do you think I don't understand? I—" He sucks in a sharp breath, holding it because he's never told anyone this, not even James. It's one of his greatest sins, in his opinion. One of his biggest regrets. Something he's always been ashamed of. "I—I hit Effie."

Regulus stares at him, clearly startled.

"Yeah," Sirius mumbles. "I didn't mean to. It was an accident. The day after I got out of the arena, she startled me, and I just *reacted.* I hit her, tried to tackle her to the floor, and she…

Well, she made me eat dirt, actually." He chuckles, and Regulus blinks at him. "Had me pinned on the ground in seconds, at least until I calmed down, then basically coddled me afterwards when I had a meltdown for hurting her."

"She wasn't angry?" Regulus whispers.

"Far from it," Sirius says wryly. "In fact, she mocked me for being too slow to properly finish her off. She's more dangerous than you'd think, that woman. But it's… I get it, yeah? I'll tell you like she told me; you're still in survival mode, and you have no reason to be ashamed for what counts as a threat to you. I know it doesn't seem like it now, but you'll feel safe again. You will, Regulus. You just need time."

"I don't want to hurt anyone else," Regulus tells him, and the words wrench at Sirius' heart because he knows that feeling well. "I don't want to feel like this anymore."

"I know."

"When does it stop?"

It doesn't, Sirius thinks, and he can't bring himself to say it. He can't do it. He can't crush Regulus with the truth. He'll find out eventually, but Sirius doesn't want to hurt him either.

"You know, James is good about it," Sirius says instead, and Regulus' lips press into a thin line. "He's always been one to reach out mindlessly and touch, you know that, but when it matters…he always seems to know when to ask. If you're worried he'll touch you, or you'll hurt him, you don't need to be. He's been through this before with me, and he's—well, he's going through it now, too."

Regulus' eyebrows pinch together, like the mere concept of James being violent doesn't add up in his head. "He's…"

"He was fighting the nurses when I went to visit him the first time," Sirius admits. "It's not just you, okay? It's not that you're predisposed to violence."

"Is that what you thought?"

"Yeah, and that's why I know *you're* thinking it."

"Because of Mother and Father," Regulus says softly.

Sirius inclines his head. "It's easy to believe, isn't it? We grew up in a violent home, Reggie. Only makes sense that we'd think we're more violent because of it."

"And we're not?"

"That's not what this is. Obviously we're not unaffected, but being abused doesn't make us into abusers."

"I suppose not," Regulus agrees slowly. He huffs out a laugh without any humor. "No, we became killers instead."

"We didn't choose that," Sirius replies very, *very* carefully. It's a fine line to walk, Sirius is realizing, because he can't very well go on not blaming them, or holding them responsible for their actions in a situation they never had control over, while doing the exact opposite for himself. It makes him uncomfortable to think about, but he also had no control, and it's becoming increasingly obvious to him that he's been unfair in refusing to forgive himself for what he had to do.

"I'm tired," Regulus announces abruptly, turning to settle back down on the bed. He's usually more subtle about wanting to avoid talking about something, but he doesn't seem to have the energy or the care to be anymore.

"That's fine," Sirius says softly. "If you need anything, just shout for me. I'll be in James' room tonight, but I'll hear you if you call. And I won't bring him along, I promise."

"Thank you," Regulus mumbles, picking at his joggers again. He clears his throat. "Remus can come back in here."

Sirius clicks his tongue. "Is this what you're doing now? Not just my best friend, but you're stealing my man now, too?"

"I'm collecting them all," Regulus tells him, his mouth curling up in one corner. It's faint, and it doesn't last very long, but it's there. It's fucking *there,* and Sirius feels like something in him pops and comes loose, letting him exhale just a little easier.

"I'll be sure to let him know," Sirius mutters dryly, fighting a smile as he heads towards the door.

"Sirius?" Regulus calls after him.

"Yeah?" Sirius asks, glancing back over his shoulder with his hand on the doorknob.

Regulus opens his mouth, hesitates, then swallows thickly and shakes his head a little. "Sorry about your face."

"It's alright," Sirius assures him yet again. He's quite sure he has a bruise this time, but it'll be fine. After a beat, he flashes Regulus a grin. "Sorry about yours. Must be dreadful being stuck with it."

"Fuck off," Regulus grumbles.

Sirius takes his win and cackles as he slips out the door, quite literally bumping into Remus' back as he comes out. There's something mildly hysterical about the fact that Remus is

essentially standing guard outside Regulus' door right now. Remus blinks in surprise when he sees him.

"What happened?" Remus hisses, reaching up to press his fingers gently to the side of Sirius' eye.

"Oh, this is just the bruise finally blooming from where I tripped and fell the moment I saw you," Sirius says sweetly, and Remus' concern fades as he releases a startled huff of laughter. Sirius grins and slides his hands up Remus' chest to wind around his shoulders, leaning in to pepper kisses along his jaw, heading for his mouth.

Remus hums in approval the moment their lips meet, his arms slipping around Sirius' waist to drag them closer together. It's easy now to let himself sink into it completely, because James and Regulus are alive, and they're here, and Sirius doesn't have to worry about them nearly dying in the arena. No, there's just this, Remus' strong arms and Remus' warm mouth.

Sirius is fucking obsessed with being close to Remus, kissing Remus, touching him and having him. He can't get enough of it. Even still, it makes his heart race and his stomach swoop, full of butterflies. Remus can kiss him, just kiss him, and have him rattling like he's about to fall apart, or fucking *explode.*

"Mm, so I assume that it *did* go well with Regulus, despite the bruise on your face?" Remus asks breathlessly when they pull apart, both of them dazed.

"Yes and no," Sirius admits. "But, well, you've been granted blanket permission to be around him, so there's that. He didn't say he wanted you to go back in, but he basically did. You don't have to, of course, but…"

"He wants me to?" Remus murmurs.

"In his own Regulus way, yes," Sirius says, amused. His face softens when Remus snorts. "I have to go talk to James and then have a shower anyway. By the time I get finished with everything, it'll almost be time for you to go."

Remus sighs softly. "Yeah. There's never enough time."

"I know," Sirius whispers, reaching up to push his fingers through Remus' hair before shutting his eyes and leaning in to press their foreheads together.

"Go ahead," Remus whispers back after a long moment, his arms sliding away from Sirius' waist. He pauses long enough to squeeze his sides, then drops his hands. "You have things you need to do. I have gossip to spread."

Sirius blinks. "What?"

"Regulus likes gossip," Remus informs him.

"Regulus doesn't give a fuck about gossip," Sirius corrects, because he's quite sure that Regulus doesn't. In fact, he would say that Regulus finds gossip irritating.

Remus arches an eyebrow. "Trust me, he likes it."

"Please tell me that's not a euphemism," Sirius says.

"A—what?" Remus stares, then busts out laughing, his entire face lighting up. "Fucking hell, Sirius, *no.* I'm not joking, he *actually* likes gossip. I swear it."

"If you're sure…" Sirius squints at him playfully, and he feels like he's going to melt into a puddle just from the way Remus' eyes gleam bright with humor. "Obviously this isn't an issue, but I'll ask for my peace of mind anyway. You've no interest in my brother at all, right?"

"Well, he *is* quite—"

"Remus!"

"What?" Remus asks with a straight face. "You asked. I'm just saying, he's really—"

"I know you're fucking with me," Sirius cuts in.

"Of course I am," Remus murmurs, his lips curling up as he reaches out to brush his knuckles down Sirius' cheek, unbridled affection practically *oozing* off of him. Sirius' knees almost fucking buckle. "Am I predictable now? Has the novelty worn off already?"

"You couldn't be predictable if you tried," Sirius murmurs, gazing at him with his bottom lip caught between his teeth. "You're entirely unique, Remus Lupin."

"Mm, I've always aspired to be, you know."

"Well, aspirations reached. Nothing exists in this world that could ever come close to you."

"You're biased, sweetheart," Remus teases softly, leaning in to bump their noses together, their lips grazing.

Sirius feels like a cooked noodle. He's about to collapse. "Is that a thing? Can that be a thing? I want it to be a thing."

"What? Sweetheart?"

"Yes, please."

Remus chuckles and presses a smile against the corner of Sirius' mouth. "Well, I couldn't possibly deny you that. You've asked so nicely. So *polite."*

"I can be…so polite," Sirius mumbles, his breath hitching as Remus' mouth trails down to his jaw, then dips even lower. "I have manners. So many manners. All of the manners."

"Mm, good job," Remus says, the words muffled into the bend of his throat, and he's there, doing lovely things to Sirius' skin for only a *second,* and then he's abruptly pulling away and lifting his head. He blinks like he's coming out of a fog.

"What? Why?" Sirius asks in dismay. "But I was *polite."*

"I—" Remus blinks again, then laughs, his lips spreading into an open-mouthed smile so wide that his eyes crinkle. He shakes his head in amusement. "Yes, you were, and *trust me,* I'd love nothing more than to reward you for the bare minimum at literally any given moment, but need I remind you? James. Regulus. You need a shower. I have to spread gossip."

"Oh. Right. Got a bit…" Sirius coughs and steps back, waving his hand around his head, admittedly a little frazzled, as well as flustered. He's blushing again, which amuses Remus. "Yes, we have—things. To do. Important things. Right."

"We can finish *this* tomorrow," Remus declares, flicking one finger between both of them. "If you want to, that is."

A tight coil of anticipation curls up in Sirius' stomach, and this is the first time he actually allows himself to be really, *really* excited by the thought. His mouth is so dry. "Yeah," he croaks. "Tomorrow. We'll—yeah. That's. Yeah. Good. Okay."

Remus looks at him fondly, laughing softly as he leans in and presses a quick kiss to Sirius' mouth, then his cheek, and then he pulls away and slips into Regulus' room with one last lingering look over his shoulder as he goes.

Sirius takes a second to let his legs gather their strength back, regulating his breathing, and then he sweeps off to go do what he needs to do. It's nice getting to go with a smile.

Chapter End Notes

ahhh, an overall lighter chapter!!! or, well, maybe not. ive only just realized that maybe my measurement for what's, like, really angsty in my fics are super diluted, because im the one writing it, technically. so, like, ill drop a chapter and be like "oh it's so much lighter" and then the comments are like: zar i just cried until i threw up. and then im sitting there like: 😟

so, to ME, this was a light chapter.

like, okay, regulus is having a rough time, but...well, that's to be expected, really. can't blame him for that. and like, that whole scene where remus helped him through bathing—in a very non-invasive way—was just. idk, it was really special/sweet to me. like, obviously it fucking sucked that it was hard for him and something he struggled with (and will continue to), but the fact that remus helped him through it? because regulus GENUINELY wouldn't have been able to do it without remus, which is essentially why regulus pretty much immediately latched onto him.

like, regulus is in a pretty vulnerable state and constantly on edge, and remus just basically made him feel extremely safe while he was dealing with something that scared him the most. it's just. remus lupin, my love, you are SO IMPORTANT TO ME. idk why im getting emotional about it NOW, like i didn't fucking write it, but remus is just such a good person. he's a really, really good person. i love him so much.

and yes, remus and regulus are now friends. i did say a while back that they'd end up getting close/being friends. something about the moon controlling the tide something about remus helping regulus with his fear of water. im connecting the dots, i say, as if i didn't sit down and write this fanfic myself.

anyway, moving onto sirius!!! oh, sirius my beloved. the truth comes out! he doesn't give a shit if regulus and james are together at this point because he just wants them to be happy, but he also knows, realistically, that it's not that simple in the aftermath of the arena. we see him talk about more about his Feelings and Thoughts about jegulus in chapter 29.

sirius and james' talk was super important, though, because like. james literally Never Spoke Of This for TEN YEARS. he never once breathed a word of it to sirius—and like, his reasoning for NOT came from a place of good intentions (he didn't want to be a burden, basically), but it was really important for sirius to be like: hey idiot you're NOT a burden, you could NEVER be a burden, i am here for you FOREVER. even when it's about his brother. sirius is such a good person, too, im gonna sob. james really needed to hear that 😭😭😭

also, thinking about how desperate james is to see regulus—just SEE him—is so, so sad. he's not. it's like, he has his issues, yes, but he's quite literally zeroing in on One Thing to avoid it as much as he can, and the moment it catches up to him... well, it DOES catch up to him. regulus isn't the only one who's traumatized.

however, regulus NOT wanting to see james isn't just like. him being stubborn or him refusing to out of an unwillingness to deal with His Feelings. like, i hope that came across loud and clear here that the idea of seeing james invokes a legitimate trauma response out of him—which we find out why in the next chapter. like, he LITERALLY panics immediately. but it's also obvious how much he cares about james bc he keeps asking about him etc etc.

the fact that regulus has been smacking the shit out of sirius in his sleep without even knowing it and sirius is like: you know what? im not even gonna mention it bc you're THAT pitiful right now bro 😭😭😭 GOODBYE. also, sirius hitting effie... the way that's one of his greatest sins, in his mind... HEARTBROKEN. but also the fact that she immediately knocked him flat on his ass and still held him when he broke down for lashing out??? SHE'S A MOTHER!!! euphemia>>>

and finally, wolfstar 😌😌😌 my babiesssss. my one true loves. our only source of joy at the moment lmaoooo. they're so cute, im obsessed with them. not sirius literally about to swoon every single time remus Just Looks At Him. he's so real for that, actually. and remus calling him sweetheart bc he knows sirius like pet names 😭😭😭 THEY'RE EVERYTHING TO ME

(honorable mention to pandora again. i am also gently kissing the back of her hand rn)

oh, and yes, we will be getting a jegulus reunion next chapter, so don't fret about that. or do, that's your prerogative, but either way, it's coming!

Breakup

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-ptsd/ptsd-responses (lashing out, paranoia, mild hallucinations, nightmares, more of the same from the previous chapters, things such as that)
-references to past death
-references to past child death
-depictions of aquaphobia (fear of water)
-depictions of panic attacks
-mentions of blood (not in real/present time)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James is running, but he's not going to make it. Somehow, he knows this. Regulus is there, standing next to the river, waiting for James with his hand outstretched.

He keeps running anyway, closing the distance between them as fast as he can, his heart pounding and Regulus' name snatched from his lips, lost to the wind. He draws closer, and the hope starts to take root. Maybe he can make it; maybe he can grab Regulus' hand and pull him away from the water; maybe if he just runs faster, tries harder—

The river is in turmoil, bubbling and rocking in waves of blood, slapping along the sides of the ground and seeping out towards Regulus' feet. A hand raises up and claws into the ground, and then another joins it, and then another, and another… The hands snap out at grotesque angles, and James watches in horror—even while he sprints—as Hodge drags himself out of the river, followed closely by Peter.

Their eyes are dead, and their limbs move like dolls that have been broken, a horrible creaking and shuffling that makes them look like stop-motion corpses. James calls out to Regulus, trying to warn him, and he's close, so close…

Hodge and Peter's hands slip around Regulus' throat and chest, fingers digging in. Regulus doesn't scream; he just closes his eyes. James is *right there,* close enough to reach out and grab him, nearly managing to before a hook buries itself into his leg and yanks him back at the last second. His hand *almost* grazes Regulus', but it doesn't. It doesn't.

The pain in James' leg makes him cry out, but it takes the shape of Regulus' name as he's dragged back into the river by Hodge and Peter. Helplessly, James tries to crawl forward, determined to reach in and pull Regulus right back out, but the hook in his leg tugs harder.

When James scrambles to look at who is yanking him back, he chokes out a harsh sob to see Vanity at the other end, blood pouring out of her throat even as she holds the rope.

"Please," James begs. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but I need to get to him. He's *dying.* I have to save him."

"You can't. You couldn't even save me," Vanity says, and the cannon sounds, making James jolt as he surges up with a deep gasp, shivering violently while scrambling around and trying to find his hatchet.

"—mes," filters through, a disjointed voice that warps in James' ears as his heart races, the oppressive darkness creating shapes and spots in front of his eyes.

Something touches his arm, and James immediately lashes out at it, somehow sure that the ghosts of those he's responsible for being dead have come to life to keep him from making it to that river. He has to get to the river. He won't let anything stop him, not even the solid mass that he slams his hands against, fighting with all his might to make it *stop moving.* Like Mulciber. What if it's Mulciber? Where's his fucking *hatchet?*

There's a grunt, then James finds himself flipped so quickly that he can't make sense of how it even happened. He's held down, legs wrapped tight around his knees and arms locked around his chest, keeping him from moving. Belligerent and hostile, James tries everything to get free, flailing and shouting and struggling with all that he has in him.

"James! James! *James!"* By the third shout, it registers that it's Sirius' voice in his ear. James goes still.

How is Sirius here? How did he—

Slowly, it comes to James in fractures. He can hear Sirius panting in his ear, and it takes him a long time to realize that Sirius is holding him from behind, trapping him in place. It takes even longer for the tension to slowly ease out of him, his confusion receding like the tide, finally pulling back to reveal the shore of reality.

Oh.

Nightmare.

All at once, the fight goes out of James, and he slumps as he gasps for air, head rolling forward as he finds himself weeping. Sirius' grip loosens on him, only a bit, going from restricting to cradling in seconds. He shifts, letting James turn into him, and then he's just holding him as James sobs into his chest.

"Okay, hey, I know," Sirius whispers, his hand coming up to cup the back of James' neck, gently squeezing it.

"Where are we?" James chokes out, because he doesn't—he can't see, and he doesn't know. "I can't—it's dark, and I—"

"Shh," Sirius soothes him, briefly leaning away, and there's a click before light washes over them both.

James frantically looks up, staring around desperately as he tries to reorient himself, letting it slot into place that he's no longer in the arena. He's in Sirius' room in the suite, in his bed, not in a cave or on the ground or near a river. It takes another few minutes before James' breathing evens out, slowly calming as Sirius rubs soothing circles on his back.

"I'm—I'm sorry," James stutters out, flinching back from Sirius as if he's been scalded. "Fuck, did I hurt you?"

"No, you're fine, it's fine," Sirius assures him, pushing himself to sit up and hold his arms out like he's presenting himself, providing proof that he's unharmed. "See? I'm fine."

"Fucking hell," James croaks, squeezing his eyes shut and blowing out a deep breath as he lifts his hands to cover his face. He stays like that for a long moment, feeling himself shake, and then he drops his hands and pushes himself up as well with a wince. His leg is throwing a fit, and he can feel the phantom pains of the hook buried in his thigh, even now.

"You're alright, James," Sirius says softly, watching him carefully. "You're not there. You're here, and I've got you."

James fights the surge of emotion that nearly overtakes him, because he remembers how many times he said those exact words to Sirius after he got out of the arena. James is only just now realizing how important those words are, because hearing them when he needs them makes him feel more safe than he ever has in his life. James has to fight the urge to ask Sirius to say it again, and again, and just never stop reminding him.

"I'm sorry," James says instead. "I'm a fucking mess. I'm—"

Sirius snorts, reaching out to grab James' hand, letting James cling to him without complaint. "Oh, don't even start that nonsense. As many times as you took care of *me* when I was the one going through this…"

"Maybe it's selfish of me to say, but I really wish I wasn't going through this," James mumbles, averting his gaze as he stares at the wall. The way the shadow drapes over the table by the door makes a silhouette next to it. To James, it looks like the outline of a man with a hatchet sticking outside of his head. It's morbid, but he can't look away, even as his gaze unfocuses and he remembers it. His first kill.

"For what it's worth," Sirius tells him, "I wish you weren't either."

"I wasn't supposed to go through this," James whispers, feeling exhaustion seeping into his bones until even just breathing saps him of energy.

That's the thing, isn't it? James never planned to go through this, and he's only just now realizing that some part of him had been grateful that he wouldn't have to, because he knew. He *knew* how this would happen, because he's seen it through Sirius, even a bit with his mum, and it's hitting him that a part of his choice was to avoid this, too.

James wouldn't be going through this right now if Regulus hadn't gone into that river. Perhaps it's irrational, but James is angry at him for it. He's so fucking angry at Regulus for doing that to him, for putting him through that, and now leaving him alone in this. James *needs* him. He needs—

But Regulus won't see him. Won't let James see *him.* Not even a fucking glimpse. James just needs to see him. Just lay eyes on him and know that he's alive, proof for himself, no matter what anyone else tells him. They don't even have to talk, or touch, or spend longer than a second together.

Just a glimpse. James needs just a glimpse.

"James."

"Sorry, what?" James mutters, blinking as he turns his head to stare at Sirius, who swallows.

"Called your name a few times," Sirius admits. He takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Look, I… Well, I know all about ghosts, yeah? Things that haunt you from the arena. People. Pain. Fear." He squeezes James' hand. "You don't have to talk about it, but I'm here if you need to."

"Yeah, thanks, I just…" James swallows past the lump in his throat. He and Sirius haven't spoken about anything that happened in the arena yet, and James isn't sure if he'll ever be ready to. He just wants to block it all out; he wants to cover his ears and close his eyes and stay one step ahead of it all. "It was just a rough nightmare, Sirius. I'll be alright. I'm—my mouth is dry, so I'm going to get some water."

"I can get it for you," Sirius offers immediately.

James shakes his head. "No, I need to—my leg is stiff. I need to walk a bit, but thank you."

"Okay, I'll come with you," Sirius says instead.

"Sirius," James mumbles weakly, "I love you, I really fucking do, but I just… Can I just have a moment? Please?"

Sirius' face softens. "Yeah, of course. I love you, too."

James gives him a tired smile and eases himself to the edge of the bed, leaning forward with a grimace to grab the cane that's propped up next to the stand by the bed. He plants it on the floor, using it to brace himself as he stands, gritting his teeth through the sharp ache that blooms in his thigh. He takes a moment, just breathing as the pain settles to a dull throb, one he can actually tolerate as he walks.

He's still getting used to the cane, so he's a bit slow, but he's nonetheless very grateful for it. He leans into it as he takes one step after the next, feeling genuine relief from the weight it takes off his leg. It's mostly about support, because without it, his leg will just buckle and send him to the floor. He's been reassured that the threat of that will lessen with time.

"James," Sirius calls as he reaches the door.

"Yeah?" James asks, pausing as he glances over his shoulder.

"Don't…" Sirius hesitates, then exhales deeply and sets his shoulders, holding James' gaze. "Don't go to Regulus. I'm sorry, I know you want to see him, but he—"

"But he doesn't want me. Yeah, Sirius, I know," James snaps, and Sirius' mouth shuts with a loud click. "What else is new?"

Sirius can't seem to find a response before James opens the door and shuffles out into the hall, shutting the door behind him. He stands there for a moment, then sighs.

Obviously James doesn't go get water.

No, of course James goes right to Regulus' door.

He doesn't just barge in, though, no matter how tempted he is. He also doesn't open the door and dare to steal a peek, no matter how desperately he wants to, because just one quick glimpse that Regulus possibly won't even know about would be so *easy,* and it would help him exponentially. Instead, he presses his forehead to the door and blows out a deep breath, eyes closed as he raises his hand and knocks.

It's late, James is sure. The middle of the night. There's a certain kind of stillness like the whole world is caught in a slumber, except for those that rest doesn't come easy to. He's among them now, and he doesn't doubt Regulus is as well. Even still, Regulus *might* be asleep, and James doesn't want to wake him if he is, but if he *isn't*...

"Regulus," James calls softly, knocking yet again.

When he gets no response, James drops his hand and fights the tears that sting at his eyes. He swallows thickly and flexes his fingers around the handle of his cane, taking measured breaths. There's no sound from the other side of the door.

"I don't know if you're listening… Shit, maybe you're asleep," James murmurs, turning slightly to press his shoulder against the door as he looks down to fiddle with his cane. "But if you aren't, and you can hear me, I just—I wanted to say—"

James halts, blinking harshly as he rolls his jaw. As hard as he strains his ears, he can't hear anything from inside the room. Regulus has always been good at being quiet, though.

"Do you remember when I told you about Schrödinger's cat? You and Sirius never learned about it in school, but my personal tutor taught me, and you were…" James feels a small smile curl at his lips, despite everything. "Oh, you were just *fascinated* by it when I explained. You wanted to know all about it, asking so many questions that I never had the answers to, and I barely understood it myself." His smile slips as he tips his head back, eyes wet. "I get it now. Regulus, you're my Schrödinger's cat right now, okay? You're alive, and you're dead, and I—I need to see in the box. Do you get what I'm saying? It doesn't have to be anything else, but *please…"*

Nothing.

Complete and utter silence.

James squeezes his eyes shut and hangs his head, holding his breath as everything seems to twist up inside him, a torrential storm he can't get out of, because it's just him. He feels on the verge of exploding, fighting every impulse to rail against the containment of reality, so harsh and unforgiving, because all he wants is just a little reprieve. Something. *Anything.*

There's nothing.

And then, from the other side of the door, softly, "James."

The sound of Regulus' voice genuinely feels more piercing than getting stabbed. He reaches up to press his hand over his mouth as tears flood his eyes instantly, even though they're shut, and he leans harder against the door. He works so hard to muffle the quiet sound that rises up his throat, hitched and weak, but he doesn't know if he manages it or not.

"Regulus," James croaks as soon as he drops his hand. It's silent again, but James knows that Regulus is standing right there on the other side of the door. He wants to open it, and his leg is aching, and he feels like his emotions are spilling out of him all over the place, like a pot boiling over—and he just can't, he can't keep it together, no matter how hard he tries.

Carefully, he slides down the length of the door, using his cane to help him get down safely. Once he's there, he leans his head against the door and breathes. Tries to breathe. Tries not to cry. Regulus is alive, and maybe James doesn't even need a glimpse. Maybe just the sound of his voice is enough.

"Oh," James chokes out, half-laughing and half-sobbing as he blinks rapidly. "Fuck. Fucking hell, it's—it's good to hear your voice. Thank you for—thank you."

Regulus' voice is muffled through the door when he responds. "Are you on the floor?"

"I needed to sit down," James admits, taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out. He gets no response for a while, just more silence. "Sorry for… I know you didn't want this. I know you don't want to see me. I'm sorry, I just…" Again, more silence. James swallows and draws his cane over his lap, anxiously fiddling with it. "Well, I suppose I just needed to know that you were okay for myself. I mean, are you okay?"

There's no response for so long that James thinks he's not going to get one. Maybe Regulus has gone back to bed, or maybe he's gone out on his balcony. James has almost made his peace with that when Regulus *does* reply, and his voice is lower to the ground like he's sitting on the floor, too.

"I don't know," Regulus says.

"Yeah, I, um… I don't really know either," James confesses quietly. "You don't have to talk to me, you know. You're not required. This was foolish of me. They said—" He shakes his head, blowing out a deep breath. "Sorry. I'm stupid."

"No, you're not," Regulus tells him. His voice sounds thick, and James doesn't know if it's from the barrier between them, or because Regulus is crying.

"I just needed to know," James croaks.

"Schrödinger's cat," Regulus says, like that makes sense to him, like having that comparison helps him understand.

James nods, even though Regulus can't see him. "Yeah, exactly. I mean, Sirius said you were alive, but I still... You told me you can't help if I don't tell you what I need, so I—I guess this is me telling you what I need."

"What do you need?" Regulus asks.

"You," James whispers. "I need you, love."

There's more silence, and then James falls slightly as the door opens up a sliver, just a small slice. James catches himself quickly so he won't be pushing the door open with his weight, and he holds his breath as he swivels, peering through the crack in the door. Regulus' face hovers just on the other side of it, only one eye and one corner of his mouth and one small portion of his hair visible, but he's there.

"Oh, hey," Regulus says, and his voice cracks, and then the door wrenches open all the way, because apparently one glimpse was all *he* needed.

James barely gets to brace himself before Regulus is quite literally crawling right onto him, sucking in deep, gasping breaths as he carelessly shoves James' cane aside. It slides away with a clatter, and then James has him, James has both arms around him, holding him, pulling him closer.

It's a complete mess. For some reason, James is crying, and he can't stop, and it's so difficult not to just fall over as Regulus insistently attempts to meld them together. He's not letting any

space between them, or giving James much room to really move, so it takes concentrated effort to scoot them both back so he's propped up against the doorway. Finally, that support seems to work for them both, because they get situated in a tangle of elbows and knees.

James isn't entirely sure which of them is clinging to the other harder. Maybe it's an equal exchange. It's borderline aggressive, actually, the way they both dig their fingers into each other, holding on too roughly like they share the same fear that the other might be snatched from them. James locks both arms around Regulus and refuses to ever let go again, burying his face in his shoulder as he trembles so hard that his teeth chatter. He can feel Regulus' arms wrapped around his shoulders, fingers curled tight in his hair.

It's not the first time James has had Regulus in his lap like this, and really, it's an improvement in some ways, because they're not in the arena and James' leg doesn't even hurt that much in this position, just a small twinge he can ignore with ease after all the pain he's had to deal with.

Regulus isn't crying, but James is almost positive he's having some sort of panic attack. His breathing is short and stuttered, and he's shaking as badly as James is. James wants to help him, comfort him, but he's too busy falling apart at the same time to manage it. They're both a fucking mess.

"Let me—James, I need you to stop touching me. Don't touch me," Regulus wheezes, and James instantly draws his arms back and plants both hands on the floor, palm-down. Regulus exhales sharply and relaxes a little more. Just a little.

"Better?" James asks, choked-up, unable to help it, and Regulus nods jerkily before he's suddenly groaning and shaking James a little violently right there against the doorway.

"I hate you. I hate you so much. Why would you do that?" Regulus breathes out, fisting his hands in James' hair even tighter and just—yanking a little. "You weren't supposed to fucking *do that,* James."

James sobs out a hoarse laugh, letting his head tip back as he stares up at Regulus through a haze of tears. "You're a hypocrite, Reg. Fuck you. I'm so—I'm so *angry* at you."

"I don't care. Shut up, I don't care," Regulus whispers, sort of tripping over his words as his chest heaves. He shakes his head. "That was so stupid. You're so fucking stupid."

"Me? *Me?"* James demands, a fresh wave of tears just streaming out of his eyes, even as he laughs. "Oh, I have *nothing* on you in terms of stupidity. What the fuck were you thinking? You nearly *died,* you idiot."

Regulus' hands slip from James' hair to cradle his face, swiping his tears. "You *were* dying. What was I supposed to do? I didn't know what else to do. I—I couldn't—"

"Okay, hey, let's just—let's just—can we just—" James can't figure out where that sentence ends. All he knows is that they're both barely hanging by a thread at the moment, and he desperately doesn't want it to snap.

"Yes, alright, okay," Regulus agrees, even though James didn't even really suggest anything at all.

And yet, something shifts. They fall silent and just breathe slowly, leaning into each other. Regulus is the only one holding on, his grip more gentle now, and James is left to feeling his weight against him. James closes his eyes and risks letting his head rest on Regulus' shoulder again, and Regulus presses his face into James' hair as he slips his hands down, one resting in the curve of James' neck and the other draped over his chest, right where his heartbeat is slowly calming.

Suddenly, it's like this moment could exist anywhere, like it already exists everywhere. James can feel it taking shape in the flow of time, hollowing out a space for them to huddle into. They're in the arena, and they're in the Hallow, and they're home. It doesn't matter. This is forevermore.

James is so tired, but he's scared. He's genuinely afraid to fall asleep. He doesn't want to, so he peels his eyes open, coming face-to-face with scars on the side of Regulus' neck that he's finally settled enough to properly notice. The sight of it makes a lump form in his throat, because he knows what it is immediately. The skin is a soft pink, but it's caved in a little where the claws legitimately ripped into him.

Carefully, James says, "Your scar," and Regulus stiffens against him.

"Please don't look at it," Regulus whispers.

"I'm sorry," James whispers back, turning his head instantly as he leans back to look at Regulus. He's apologizing for so many things, barely sure where to start.

Regulus just shakes his head, clearly unwilling to talk about it. He studies James' face for a long moment in silence, and then he abruptly looks stricken. "Where are your glasses? Why haven't they given you your glasses back yet, James?"

"Sirius said I'll get them back after the interview tomorrow," James murmurs. "I'll be wearing them soon, I promise."

"Will you feel strange, wearing them?" Regulus asks softly, his eyebrows furrowed as his lips tip down, like he's displeased by the mere thought.

"I don't know," James replies honestly.

"I'm sorry," Regulus rasps, and it seems like he's apologizing for more than just one thing, too.

James wants to smile. He wants to be someone that smiling comes easy to, like he was before, an unconscious thing rather than something that feels perpetually out of reach. He tries, but it doesn't feel like it fits on his face right. "Don't be upset. Even if that is the case, I'll get used to them again."

"Okay," Regulus says quietly.

"Regulus."

"Yes?"

"I want you to know that I don't—" James takes a deep breath before slowly letting it out. "I don't expect anything from you, alright? You don't have to do, or say…anything. I'm not—it's not like I'm—I'm waiting for—" He stops, frustrated that he's failing to get this right. It's so *important,* and he's fucking it all up. "Just don't feel pressured to—"

"James," Regulus cuts in.

"Sorry. I'm—I mucked that up. Please tell me you get what I mean," James mumbles, strained.

"Do you mean about—the arena?" Regulus asks carefully.

"Well, that too, but I was talking about…us," James replies, just as cautious as he scans Regulus' face warily.

Regulus' expression flickers, and then his lips press into a thin line, and he sort of just—deflates. He blows out a breath so deep that his cheeks round out, tapping James' chest as he releases a laugh that cracks in the middle. *"Us.* Right, that."

"I shouldn't have brought it up," James announces, knowing it down to his bones. He wants to rewind time and take it all back. He wants to snatch the words back from where they fell carelessly, impulsively from his mouth.

"No, you shouldn't have," Regulus confirms, and James feels his heart sink. "Do you know why I was so fucking scared to see you, James? Every time I thought about it, about actually laying eyes on you, all I could think was that I would look at you and have to go back there. I knew seeing you would take me right back, and it still feels like I'm there, and I don't want to be there anymore. I want to go home."

James bites down on the inside of his bottom lip *hard,* feeling those words like a blow to his chest, and he can't even blame Regulus for that. He gets it, actually. Even just having Regulus in his lap like this, on him just like this, makes the world go hazy around the edges, and there's a part of him that's utterly terrified that he's not actually here, that he never got out.

He can't look at Regulus without thinking about the river, without feeling the weight of his hatchet missing from his hand, without hearing Vanity's scream in the distance and seeing Mulciber's chest split open behind his eyelids every time he blinks. He can't have Regulus without experiencing the crushing desperation to keep him safe. They're here together, and James is still trying to survive.

"Every time I look at you, I'm ready to go into that river," Regulus rasps, his eyes wet. "I don't want to feel that way anymore, James. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Hey, no, I—" James' voice catches, and he clears his throat violently, shaking his head. "No, it's okay. I—I get it."

"You do?" Regulus asks, the tears shining brighter.

"I'm still trying to save you," James admits, utterly crushed as he gives a wobbly smile and shrugs helplessly.

"It's not fair," Regulus whispers, his bottom lip trembling as the tears finally spill. "James, it's not *fair.* We've had this taken from us *twice.* I get so close every time, but I never get close enough. It's not fair."

James swallows harshly. "I know, love. I know it's not fair. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

"I don't want to be a great, big tragedy anymore," Regulus chokes out, looking at him almost desperately.

"Me neither," James admits. "Maybe, someday, we won't be. Maybe, one day, we'll look at each other and see that other life, and maybe we'll actually get to have it. I can find it in me to hope for that, even after everything. I've had so much practice these last ten years, so I'll just do it for us both."

Regulus releases a hoarse laugh, his body sagging as he tips himself closer into James' chest, eyes sinking shut. "Of course you will. It has to be you, doesn't it? I don't know how."

"I can teach you."

"Start now."

"Well," James says softly, "first you have to figure out what it is that you even want."

"I want you," Regulus exhales, the words a mere breath, and he doesn't open his eyes. In fact, he squeezes them shut even tighter like he can pretend he didn't even say it if he doesn't open his eyes to see James' reaction.

As for James' reaction, his heart nearly stops beating in his chest, and he briefly stills out of a rush of pure fucking joy, despite absolutely *everything,* because he's been wanting to hear that for ten years, and that outweighs even the trauma stitched into his skin now. He has to force himself to keep breathing, to remain calm, but it's genuinely a struggle.

"Right," James croaks, his heart racing. "Right, well, after that you just… You, um. You…"

"I…?" Regulus cracks open one eye, peeking at him, clearly waiting for further instructions, which is really quite adorable.

James coughs. "To be completely honest with you, love, I never really got farther than that. I —I never thought… I mean, I didn't expect that you'd ever—that we could be—"

"So, basically, you *also* have no idea what to do next?"

"Er, yeah, pretty much. Sorry."

Regulus' lips twitch. "You're so stupid, James Potter."

"Stupid about you, yeah," James tells him with no shame whatsoever. "It's supposed to be simple, isn't it? I mean, wanting you has always been simple. I've been doing it so long that it's as habitual as breathing now. But past that? I suppose I *don't* have practice with hope for it, not like I thought, and it's—it's more complicated now."

"Yeah, it is," Regulus agrees, swallowing. "I don't know if I can, James. You're right, it's not simple, and I can't—I don't think I can handle it. I can't even bear to be touched, really. Everything is too…much, and I'm not even sure if I'm willing to try, or if I ever will be."

"So…" James hesitates, because it feels like—an end. The ending of the beginning they never even got. Saying goodbye to someone you haven't even met yet. It shouldn't hurt, it shouldn't feel like his heart is being carved into, but it does.

"Let me go," Regulus says softly, so soft, and it breaks James' heart immediately. "You held on for ten years, and you can't possibly know how much that means to me, but you're holding onto someone who doesn't know how to hold you back, and you deserve to be held. You deserve better than me."

"There isn't better than you," James protests weakly, his eyes burning. "You threw yourself into a river for me, Regulus."

"And every time I look at you, all I know is that I'd do it again," Regulus tells him. "Without hesitation."

"Talk about character development," James croaks, because he wants to laugh, instead of cry. He does some mixture of both.

"I'm sorry I can't give us what we should have gotten to have. I'm sorry it was stolen from us," Regulus says, lifting his hand to cradle James' jaw. "I'm sorry, James, but it's—it's gone. Our chance, it's been gone a long time, and it's gone again. So, let me go. I'm telling you to let me go now, okay?"

"I don't know how," James chokes out. "I don't *want* to."

"I want you to. I want you to try." Regulus looks so fucking sad. His eyes—they're full of remorse and something James hasn't ever seen before. Heartbreak of his own. "You asked me to return your heart, and now I am. I'm sorry I didn't treat it right. Let someone more capable take care of it, because I don't know how. You should have someone who does."

"Stop," James rasps. "I don't want anyone else, Regulus. Don't you get it? I told you that it's you. It's always been you, and it's always going to be you."

"I'm tired of breaking your heart," Regulus mumbles, his eyebrows drawn together. "You've been so gentle with mine."

"Do I—you mean I have it?" James asks, his breath hitching.

"You've had it since I was ten," Regulus admits, huffing out a weak, sardonic laugh. "You know, it's ridiculous, really. What a fool I was to think I ever took it back."

James searches his eyes for any hint of dishonesty, as if maybe Regulus is just indulging him to soften the blow, but it's real. This is real. "Well, that will just have to be enough, then. I can live with this, Regulus. Just knowing that you… I mean, even if you can't, knowing that you *want to* is enough."

"You deserve more," Regulus says, sounding so *upset.*

"So do you," James reminds him sadly. "It's not just me, love."

"I hate that they took it from us," Regulus grits out, his jaw clenching. "And I hate you. I hate you so much, James."

"Still?" James mutters petulantly.

Regulus' face softens. "At all times, baby, at all times."

"You can't call me *baby* when you're telling me that you hate me ceaselessly," James complains, even though his heart jumps in his chest and does a ridiculous little twirl. He heaves a sigh and gathers his courage. "So, this is…it? On us, I mean."

"Yeah, James, this is it," Regulus murmurs.

James swallows harshly, blinking hard as he firms his jaw and nods jerkily. "Right. Okay. That's—it's okay. Maybe time is all we need. Maybe that's the answer."

"Maybe," Regulus allows. "Maybe not."

"Well, I'm going to hope for it anyway," James declares, holding his gaze in a challenge. "You can't stop me. We're right for each other, Reg. We just—all we need to do is find the right time, that's all, and I believe we will."

"It's selfish, but I'm so glad that you do," Regulus whispers, then gives him a small, aching smile. "Close your eyes for me and hold very still."

The thing is, James is capable of being selfish, too, because he knows what's coming, and he wants it so badly he can't even think. So, he closes his eyes and holds still, keeping his hands on the floor.

The kiss comes to him gentle and unwavering, so steady that James can let himself sink into it, and it's theirs; their true first kiss, alone, and its one that tastes of goodbye. Regulus' mouth is warm against his own, tender and tragic. It's not everlasting.

It's a parting gift.

Five minutes later, James is slipping back into bed with Sirius, and the moment he turns to face him, James breaks. His face crumbles as he ducks his head and starts weeping so hard that it comes from the very depths of him, wrenching at his very soul as he lays there and shatters, and shatters.

"Oh, James," Sirius whispers sadly, shuffling over to wrap him up in his arms immediately. "I told you not to go to him."

James folds into him and doesn't reply, too busy sobbing his little heart out to do so, and the part of him that is weak and sad and scared wishes he had listened.

~•~

Regulus doesn't want to like Remus Lupin, but he likes Remus Lupin. To begin with, admittedly, Regulus was indifferent about Remus on the whole. He was aware that Sirius was tripping all over himself every time Remus so much as looked at him, and frankly, Regulus was more than happy to ignore their first little stumbles into love, because he honestly had more pressing matters to deal with, up to and including the steady approach of his required presence in a death arena.

The death arena has come and gone—though it continues to loom over him at all times—but Sirius and Remus remain as stupid about each other as ever. Regulus *still* has more pressing matters to deal with, really, so he remains indifferent to whatever the fuck they have going on. He is mildly relieved to know that he doesn't have to put any energy into worrying about it, because it's quite clear that Remus is one of Sirius' only sources of happiness in the Hallow.

However, Remus as a separate entity from Sirius is something else entirely. Before, Regulus just treated him as he would anyone else, curt and distant, because he doesn't like people. It's not that Remus is a servant. That's not something he really thinks about, because he refuses to play into the Hallow's absurd and barbaric methods for dealing with criminals.

Now, after Remus helped him… Well, that's the thing, isn't it? Remus *did* help him. While Regulus sat there in the water, tears streaming down his face as he took a bath, it was Remus who kept him tethered, kept him from going right back to the echoes of clawed-fingers digging into his body; it was Remus' voice that kept him from hearing his own muffled screams; it was Remus' close presence that kept him from tasting blood. Remus helped him, and Remus isn't afraid to be blunt and honest, and damn it all to hell, Regulus likes him.

What matters the most, Regulus thinks, is that Remus kept his word. He took care of Sirius. Regulus will always be grateful for that, even if he'll never say it.

So, it's easy to be around him. Well, it's easier to be around him than anyone else, though Pandora is a strong contender, which Regulus honestly didn't see coming. She has this way about her that makes everything she says sound so…rational, like it's the right way to be. She's dangerously persuasive, but never in an underhanded way, just sort of like she makes everything she suggests make too much sense to argue with. And she's—comforting. Regulus didn't expect that either, how comforting people who aren't James and Sirius can be. Remus, most of all.

"You know," Remus muses, "you're going to have to see James eventually, so putting it off is a moot point."

Regulus heaves a sigh and keeps staring out past the balcony edge. The Hallow is teeming with activity today, people no doubt excited about the upcoming interview that Regulus is doing his level best not to think about. He and Remus are once again sitting out on the balcony, where Regulus prefers to spend most of his time. Regulus can feel Remus' eyes on him where he's bent over in his chair, arms braced on the table.

"I already saw him," Regulus confesses, swiveling his head to look at Remus. "He came to my door last night."

"Oh," Remus says, clearly startled. "How'd that go?"

"We broke up," Regulus murmurs.

"Oh," Remus repeats, still startled. "You were…together?"

Regulus frowns, gaze drifting to the side. "No."

That's the thing, isn't it? They were never together, never even got to be, not really. They exist in almosts, not absolutes. It doesn't matter what they want, or how badly they want it, because they never get to have. It should be simple, but it's not, and here they are. Defeated by circumstances. Time and time again, that's all it is. Always a great, big fucking tragedy.

A defiant part of Regulus wants to fight it anyway, to go to James and cling to him, and never let go no matter what tries to tear them apart next—but that takes effort. They both have to put in the work for that, and Regulus is tired. James is tired, too, he can tell. They're both so beaten down by everything that's been attacking them for the last ten years. When things just keep hitting you over and over and *over,* eventually, at some point, you just close your eyes and give into it.

Maybe, one day, when the hits stop landing, they'll both be able to pick themselves up and brush themselves off, tend to their bruises, let them heal, and figure out how to meet in the middle when they're not under attack anymore. It's a tentative thought in Regulus' mind, tasting faintly of hope in the back of his throat, and it scares him, but he's unwilling to shove it down and hide away from it. If that's all he can do for James, then he'll do it. James deserves that, at the very least.

"Well," Remus says carefully, "either way, it's shit. Sorry."

"Thanks," Regulus replies.

Neither of them speak for a while, and Regulus likes that about Remus, too, that he knows when not to talk, or just randomly has no idea how to fill the silence at the exact right time. Regulus finds safety in silence now, the same way he does in not sleeping; not talking ensures

he doesn't have to give life to the horrors in his head, and not sleeping ensures he doesn't have to confront them in his nightmares.

Every time he sleeps, Evan is there. Irene is there. Avery, and Mulciber, and Vanity, and everyone. They're all there. And he's there, swallowing blood just to breathe. With every inhale and every exhale, he can taste where it coats his teeth.

There's a knock on the balcony door that immediately makes Regulus' muscles bunch up under his skin, and for a brief moment, he asks himself who he is going to have to kill so that he and Remus will survive. It makes his stomach churn, the way he responds like this every time, and no one is safe. Anyone close to him, he'll just drag right into the arena with him, and then he wonders how they'll die, if their blood will be on his hands, literally or metaphorically.

Then Sirius pokes his head through the door, and Regulus wills the tension to seep out of his frame. Sirius is safe. Sirius is a dream, actually. Every time Regulus looks at him, he can feel the flicker of doubt in his mind that maybe he did die in that river, and seeing his brother again is his reward for doing one thing right in the end. But, in the same breath, Sirius told him that he's alive, he's here, and there's no one Regulus instinctively trusts more than Sirius, even now.

The sight of Sirius always makes a confession lodge in Regulus' throat without fail. He should have said it. He—he *wants* to say it. He looks at Sirius and thinks *I love you, too* as loudly as he can, practically begging the words to crawl out of his throat, willing to vomit them up if he has to, even if they come out covered in blood.

Of course Regulus loves his brother. Despite everything, despite all their history, that never went away. He supposes he hated Sirius for that, too. He hated Sirius for a lot of things, he thinks, but he doesn't remember them anymore.

Suddenly, it's as if Regulus can't recall any reason he was ever angry with Sirius, not ever. It's different now, from the other side of it. He can only think about how he hit Sirius, and he imagines how Sirius must have been after he got out of the arena. He knew that it was bad, distantly, only in the abstract. After all, Sirius never let him see it, always kept him at a distance with James' help, pushing him out until he turned inwards and vowed never to try to go back.

But Regulus gets it now, firsthand. He understands in a way he didn't before, and he's not angry. He doesn't hate Sirius anymore, not at all, not even a little bit. Regulus loves him so much that he chokes on it every time he looks at him.

He wants to tell Sirius so badly that it *hurts,* because the fact that Sirius *didn't* say it when Regulus was going into the arena, but he said it when Regulus got out, is so important to him. It means so much to Regulus that he can't even articulate it. Because Regulus has killed people, and Sirius still said it. Because Regulus isn't the one who took care of him, and Sirius still said it. Because Regulus is mean, and miserable, and no longer that boy that was once worth loving; now he's just this, just someone who doesn't deserve it, and isn't worth it, and Sirius still said it. Sirius still said it, and he *meant it.*

Regulus wants to say it back. He wants Sirius to know that he loves him, too, even after everything, even though this is who he is. He's still capable of it. He swears he is.

He just can't get the words out.

Completely oblivious to Regulus' inner turmoil over this, Sirius steps outside, leaving the door cracked as he gives Remus a soft smile. Remus returns it immediately. Regulus looks away, because privacy is so, so important to him now. Everyone deserves privacy. Everyone.

"Reggie," Sirius says, drawing Regulus' gaze, "I know you're dreading it, but I need you to come out to the main room so Pandora and I can prep you and James for the interview."

"How much time do we have?" Regulus asks quietly.

Sirius grimaces. "An hour, and then you both have to go meet with Dorcas. You—you'll have to bathe."

Regulus hates the way he's instantly terrified, every cell in his body screaming out in protest. No, no, he doesn't want to do it again. Please don't make him do it again.

"Dorcas has agreed to only filling the tub a small bit, and she's promised to stay with you the entire time," Sirius says softly, and Regulus wants to just—toss shit around. He wants to slam his dagger into something, or someone, and he doesn't even have it anymore. He keeps searching for his daggers without meaning to, his hands feeling misshapen without them.

Regulus hates feeling like this. Vulnerable. Broken. He hates that the mere thought of water can make him want to crawl right out of his skin. He hates that he's scared, that panic instantly floods his entire nervous system, that it's the equivalent to his life being in danger every time.

What is he going to do? How is he going to do this? Because not being clean is just as much of an issue; that takes him right back to the arena, too. Every bath is—it's torture, it's *pain,* it's memories and blood clogging his throat and fingers digging into his skin, dragging him down down down…

How is Regulus supposed to live like this? He can't expect someone to talk him through bathing for the rest of his life. He can't just—not bathe for the rest of his life. He doesn't know what he's going to do. He doesn't—

"Regulus," Sirius calls, crouching down in front of him, so close that Regulus clamps down on the arms of his chair so he won't lash out like his instincts demand him to. "Just breathe. *Breathe."*

Regulus inhales sharply, feeling it stutter in his chest, catching and hitching. Sirius watches him with visible concern, so much of it that Regulus just feels guilty.

"There you go," Sirius murmurs a few moments later, as Regulus' breathing slowly starts to settle into a rhythm that's acceptable. "It's going to be quick, okay? Dorcas promised. In and out and over before you know it, I promise."

I love you, too, Regulus thinks, and he doesn't speak. He can't.

"Come on," Sirius says, standing up. "It's going to be okay, Regulus. I promise it will. Come on, we need to talk."

"I'll go find something to do," Remus mumbles as he pushes to his feet at the same time Regulus does.

Sirius frowns at him. "Don't be ridiculous. You're coming, too. I mean—well, only if you want to. You don't *have to,* obviously, of course you don't, but—"

"Obviously he's coming," Regulus mutters as he pushes past Sirius, rolling his eyes. Oh, *honestly.* He genuinely cannot understand how Sirius doesn't realize that there's nothing Remus wants more than just to be around him. Idiots.

"Well, apparently I'm obviously coming," Remus says in wry amusement as he follows them through Regulus' room.

Sirius says something under his breath that makes Remus snort, and Regulus picks up his pace because he really does value privacy more than he ever has, so he refuses to be an interloper to their stupid flirting. Not that he particularly wants to anyway, but regardless.

When Regulus steps out of the hall, he comes to a brief halt, because James is walking around with his cane, apparently getting a feel for it. Practicing. Letting it become an extension of him, because he has to rely on it now, as well as in the future when he needs it. Seeing it makes Regulus want to rewind time and rip Axus' fucking head off.

And that. It's *that.* Even just looking at James takes him right back. The mere sight of him pushes him to the brink, where he's willing to kill for him, willing to *die* for him. Being on the brink is terrifying. He doesn't want to be there anymore.

As James turns, he glances up, then comes to a stop as well. Regulus sees his hand clench on the handle of his cane, and despite that, his eyes are soft. Sad. Adoring. There's love there, in his eyes. Regulus misses his glasses.

"Hey," James greets, seemingly calm.

"Hello," Regulus replies, just as steady, despite the fact that this exchange feels so terribly inadequate following the events of the previous night. Regulus wants to crawl into his arms again. Regulus wants to never be touched again.

"I'm, ah…" James clears his throat and gently taps his cane to the floor. "I'm getting better with it. The pain is a bit better today. Shouldn't look like too much of an idiot when walking out on the stage, so that's…you know, nice, I suppose."

This is where Regulus would usually say *you always look like an idiot,* but he can't bring himself to, because it would be a lie. James never looks like an idiot, certainly not while leaning on his cane. He looks beautiful. He's always so beautiful.

There's a barrier between them. A heavy sort of block that makes Regulus feel itchy. It's genuinely awkward. No matter what they've gone through, they've never been *awkward* with each other; they've never been uncertain about how to act; they've never been truly uncomfortable in the other's presence, and he's only just realizing this now, because it's the first time it has happened. He despises it.

"Come here, Regulus, sit down," Pandora calls gently, patting the seat beside her with a sympathetic smile.

Regulus looks away from James and moves over to do just that, only to stop a few steps later. He glances at James again, who swallows when their eyes meet. For a second, as their eyes lock, Regulus hears the countdown to the games in the distance. He waits for the cannon, but it never comes.

"You look—good. With the cane. Or, no, not—" Regulus sighs, exhausted already. He ignores the fact that Remus and Sirius are lingering in front of the hallway and Pandora is visibly holding her breath, all of them staring at him like maybe he's grown a second head. "You don't look like an idiot, I mean."

This is where James would usually smile and say *no, no, you said I look good, say it again,* but he doesn't. He says nothing. Regulus turns away and goes to sit next to Pandora, gaze lowered.

James is ushered into his own chair, while Remus and Sirius plop down next to each other across from Pandora and Regulus. They're holding hands, and their legs are pressed together, which Regulus doesn't look at. That's theirs, no one else's. Regulus thinks he would kill someone if they dared to think they were entitled to any part of it, and then he thinks he has to stop jumping immediately to murder for anything he takes issue with. He never wanted that to become a habit.

"Alright, we don't have much time, so I'm not doing this delicately," Pandora announces. She shifts slightly so she can face Regulus and James at the same time. "You two are going to be interviewed by Rita again, and just like last time, it's not going to be a fun process."

"Understatement," Sirius mutters, sounding oddly nervous, which is Regulus' first clue that something is…wrong. He feels suspicion immediately take root.

"Rita will talk about what happened in the arena," Pandora says firmly, completely no-nonsense and not pulling her punches just to coddle them, which Regulus admittedly appreciates. "That means everything. Everyone you killed. Everyone you lost. She will ask questions; she will want you to talk about how you felt during those moments; she will demand an explanation for the reasons behind every move you made, and every choice you settled on."

Regulus' stomach twists up into knots, his gaze shifting to look at James, who is so still that he looks made of stone. His face is slack, and he looks like he's going to be sick.

"You cannot, under *any* circumstances, respond aggressively to anything she says," Pandora declares sharply, and there's an edge to her tone that makes Regulus stiffen as he turns his head to stare at her. "You are not allowed to insinuate that you place blame on the Hallow, or Riddle, or the hunger games themselves. You *both* will take full responsibility for everything that happened, do you understand?"

"Are you fucking joking?" This, surprisingly, comes from Remus. He sounds absolutely *furious.* "But they're not—"

"I don't *care,"* Pandora hisses, cutting him a sharp look that would make a lesser man shrink back, but Remus does not. If anything, it only seems to make him more defiant.

"Remus," Sirius says quietly, "stop."

"What?" Remus blurts out, whipping his head around to stare at Sirius with wide eyes. "You —"

"Please don't look at me like that," Sirius croaks, his expression pained as he drops his gaze. "I—I know it's—I know how it seems, but she's right."

"There's something you're not telling us," Regulus says as soon as he figures this out. He swings his gaze between Sirius and Pandora. Sirius doesn't meet his gaze. Pandora does.

"What you and James have gone through is not your fault. Neither of you are responsible," Pandora murmurs, her voice softening. "Unfortunately, it's crucial that you lie anyway. Do *not* acknowledge that everything that happened was out of your control. Even… Regulus, even when she mentions Evan, you can't respond with anger."

Regulus clenches his jaw. "Don't talk about him."

"Like that. You can't do that," Pandora says, her eyes full of remorse. "You have to… I know it's hard—"

"No, you *don't,"* and that, shockingly, is *James.* Regulus looks at him to see that he's angry, too, his eyes blazing. "You don't fucking know. You don't know anything. You weren't there, and you will *never* have to be there, and you—you—"

Pandora swallows. "Yeah, that. You *definitely* can't do that. This anger you have, the both of you, can't exist during this interview. Even though I'm your friend, I'm still a Hallow, and you

hold resentment." She lifts a calm hand when Regulus starts to open his mouth. "You have every right to. It's not fair. The Hallow is to blame, and so is Riddle, and I *don't* know. But that can't matter. On the stage, it *can't* matter."

"So, we're supposed to just go up there and—and pretend like we don't know that all those people who died never would have if it wasn't for all of this?" James snaps.

"Yes," Pandora whispers. "I'm sorry, but yes."

James scoffs. "Fuck that. They can't just continue in ignorance. They can't just—"

"James," Regulus interrupts, his voice soft and hollowed out, nearly empty. Because he knows. Because he's thinking about Gideon, and he's thinking about Fabian. Because he's sure that Sirius would never agree with their forced compliance if there wasn't danger waiting on them if they refused.

"No," James grits out, glaring at him. "Those that are gone, they deserve better. They deserve *better,* Regulus. Vanity—" His voice cracks on her name, and he flinches as soon as he's said it. He swallows and shakes his head. "She deserves better. She was too young. She was—I couldn't—I wasn't able to save her, and she was too fucking young, and I—I *refuse* to—"

"They're dead, James," Regulus rasps. "They're all dead."

"Regulus," James says, staring at him in nothing short of betrayal, looking absolutely capsized by the words.

"You know who isn't dead?" Regulus continues. "Your parents. My parents. Sirius. Barty. They're not dead, James, and I think if we'd like to keep them that way, we should do as we're told."

"What?" James looks around, surging forward with immediate panic, fear in his eyes that makes Regulus tense, automatically ready to kill whatever has him afraid—but this, he can't

kill this. It's terrifying. "I—I don't understand."

"The games are still on," Regulus murmurs, closing his eyes as he exhales in a horrible mixture of exhaustion and relief. He's so tired, but he almost feels…better, just to think that there's a reason for him to still be so focused on survival.

The danger is still here. It's here. For some reason, the realization sharpens him. Clears his head. Makes it easier to focus, to breathe, to not feel so lost.

"Defying the Hallow in any blatant way is dangerous, James," Sirius croaks, and when Regulus opens his eyes, he sees that he looks tired, too. Haunted. Regulus understands now. Sirius enters the arena every year, even as a mentor. The realization is crushing. "I'm not—I don't want to frighten you, but it's *imperative* that neither of you come off as rebellious in any capacity, not even accidentally."

"Oh," Remus says softly, slumping back as his face twists, like he's suddenly understanding as well.

"Are my parents in danger?" James demands. "Sirius, tell me."

"They—no, but they—they could be," Sirius whispers, squeezing his eyes shut, as if the mere thought terrifies him so much that he just wants to block it out. "If this goes wrong, they could be. We all could be."

That settles between all of them, heavy and stifling. James sinks back into his chair, his hands trembling in his lap. Regulus is utterly still. *I'm sorry,* he thinks. *Evan, I'm so sorry.*

"Okay," James chokes out, finally. "Okay, I'll—we'll do it. We'll go up there and play their stupid game."

"If it helps, I'm going to essentially give you a script," Pandora mumbles. "When Rita talks about the people who died, those that you lost, you can respond in grief. You can talk about

missing them. You can talk about them, that's fine, but you can't talk about how unfair it is that they're gone. You can't say that anyone is at fault for them being gone besides those that killed them. You can't get angry, or defensive, and it's… Well, it's best if you act like their sympathy is helpful."

"Can we say we don't want to talk about it?" Regulus asks.

"No," Pandora whispers. "I'm sorry."

"Then give me something to say," Regulus whispers back, swallowing harshly. "Anything, Pandora, please."

"If you don't know what to say, just—just say that you'll never forget them," Pandora tells him sadly. "Say their sacrifice will remain in your heart forever." She takes a deep breath and sets her shoulders. "There's something else that's—that's really important, and you're not going to like it."

"I never do," Regulus mutters. "What is it?"

Pandora's gaze flicks to James, lingering, and so Regulus looks at him as well. "James, what you did at the end, when you threatened to ingest the venom if they didn't let you and Regulus both come home… It was defiant. Too defiant."

"What?" James croaks, his eyes widening. "But I—I wasn't trying to—I didn't mean to—"

"I know. We know you weren't trying to disregard the system or rebel against order, but nevertheless, there will be some who see it that way," Pandora says, her voice strained. "This is why you're going to actively disband that notion by playing up your one and only motivation."

Slowly, Pandora's eyes crawl to Regulus, and so does James'. After a beat, Regulus glances around to see that Sirius and Remus are also staring at him, and it still takes him a second to

realize what's happening. When it hits him, he releases a harsh laugh and launches to his feet.

"Oh, *fuck no,"* Regulus snarls. "Absolutely fucking *not."*

"Reggie," Sirius says with a heavy sigh.

"No!" Regulus bursts out. "You—you can't seriously be asking me to—to do it *again.* To give them a fucking show, *again.* To play into romance for survival, *again."*

Sirius leans forward and lifts both hands to rub them up and down his face, and then he looks up from his palms to stare at Regulus as he whispers, "I'm sorry."

"What are we supposed to do?" James asks quietly, subdued.

"You're going to have to convince everyone—and I do mean everyone—that it was all about love," Pandora announces, just as regretful as Sirius. "That what happened at the end was out of desperation because you're in love. That everything you did, all of your motivation, was sourced from love. You'll need to present yourselves as—happy and together. A couple. A believable one that everyone will adore."

"I won't do it," Regulus hisses. "No. *No,* Sirius."

"You don't have a choice," Sirius says, shaking his head. "If this is going to work, you have to do this. It's—it *is* survival, Regulus, and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—"

"Fuck off!" Regulus explodes, turning away while cursing vibrantly, feeling like he's about to fly apart.

"Regulus. Reg, come here."

"Fuck you, too, James."

"Regulus," James snaps, and his voice is harsh enough that Regulus actually does halt and release a huff as he swivels around with a glare. "Stop being a brat and come here."

"I should have fucking killed you," Regulus declares.

"But you didn't. Here's the consequences, love." James gives him a tight smile and leans forward, snatching up his cane and holding it from the bottom as he reaches out to hook the handle around Regulus' arm, giving a tug. "I said, *come here."*

"I'm not doing it," Regulus insists, even as he moves forward with a scowl.

James holds his gaze. "My parents could be in danger, so you will, in fact, be doing it. You're going to hold my hand, and you're going to smile at me, and you're going to tell the entire world that you love me so much that you went into that river because you couldn't imagine living without me. You're going to smile when I tell everyone how much I love you, and you're going to listen as I explain that I planned to drink that venom because I couldn't live without *you,* and you're going to kiss me back when I lean in for one. We're going to go up there on that stage, and we're going to act like we're so in love that it makes us crazy, and we're going to be so convincing that even *we'll* struggle to know it's not real. Do you understand?"

"Okay," Regulus whispers, unable to look away from the intensity of James' eyes.

"You're doing it," James reiterates firmly.

Regulus exhales slowly and croaks, "Fine. I'm doing it."

"Okay," James mumbles, his expression changing rapidly from one intensity to another, something entirely different that puts another unfortunate heart flutter in Regulus' chest. Oh, the heart flutters are still here. He'd thought—well, he thought they'd gone. James' voice is soft as he says, "Glad we agree."

"Right," Regulus says, studying James' face helplessly. "Right, yes, we definitely—well, actually, I don't agree at all, but—"

"But you're going to do what I say anyway," James cuts in, his gaze holding Regulus' with unwavering focus, keeping him trapped until it's just the two of them, and nothing else exists.

"Yes," Regulus blurts out, a little stilted and strained, as if he's not getting enough oxygen to his brain. Oh, he *hates* James Potter so fucking much.

"Well, that's a first," James muses. "How did I manage that, I wonder."

Regulus takes in a short, choppy breath. His chest stutters on his inhale, and that's—well, that's really quite embarrassing, actually. The tension is so thick he feels like he could swim through it, and it's so muddled with his confusion that he's not entirely sure if they're about to fight or—

Nope. No. No, no, no. Absolutely not. Regulus takes a firm step back, watching James blink like he's just been smacked right back into his own body with *force.* Regulus glances away, resisting the urge to clear his throat.

Sirius looks so uncomfortable right now.

Pandora coughs. "Great. Let's, ah, discuss details, then."

Chapter End Notes

welp.

okay, so first, before we get into me rambling about my own fic like i didn't write it, there's one thing i desperately need everyone to know. in the previous chapter, when sirius starts to leave regulus' room, and regulus calls him back, then hesitates before he says "sorry about your face" (because he hit him), he wanted to tell sirius he loved him. just, ya know, a bit more heartbreaking information for ya. k, thanks.

anyway, let's get into it now, then.

james from an outsider's perspective: seems mostly alright
from james' perspective: barely keeping it together

so, yeah, babe isnt doing too well, sadly. he's trying very, VERY hard, as you can tell, and one of the things he was clinging to was regulus. he's STILL clinging to regulus, as in he's in love and intends to wait for their right time. however, he knows and understands that neither of them are in a good enough place for NOW to be the right time, which means that's not something he can really...focus on anymore. it opens up to a delayed trickle of trauma, basically. so he's gradually being unable to avoid his problems or just brush them off.

now, this may seem fucking awful, but opening himself up to the things he's struggling with allows him to get help for it in the future, and it takes time, but let me reassure you, he does. he lets himself be taken care of, after some time, plus sirius wouldn't stand for anything else anyway. like you see little moments of james trying to just Be Okay, like everything that happened to him didn't impact him at all, and then you see little moments of him acknowledging that he's not okay and getting help/support for it.

there's a promise of growth with james, i promise. i know a lot of people take comfort from him as a character (same, honestly), so i think it's really important to show that just because you're not okay doesn't mean you've given up/aren't trying, and that trying is good, yes, but taking care of yourself and letting yourself have help/support is equally important. it's okay not to be okay, and it's okay to need breaks.

right, that concludes the Deep Discussion in zar's overly long end notes. back to the rambling.

regulus! my boy! not doing great 😃 i feel like ive said that a lot in these recent chapters. his main struggles are with water and physical contact. oh, and paranoia, plus murderous tendencies. these are things he will indeed have growth/improvement with, in time.

i better not see one person being upset with regulus (and james, because it's kinda mutual, honestly) for not immediately falling into a relationship. like it's sad as shit, don't get me wrong, but now is NOT the time. and, like, despite this, there's obviously more jegulus in the future. im not a monster (yes i am, this shit is gonna break all of your hearts), they're IN LOVE, they will be happy (eventually...at some point...)

plus, THEY'RE not happy about it either. do you ever think about how fucking tragic it is that the arena is the thing that brought them together, and it's now the thing that's tearing them apart?

and it's in reverse for regulus and sirius. the arena once tore them apart as brothers, and now it's bringing them back together. oh, that's so fucked up.

anyway, the whole interview thing. rest assured, regulus and james talk about it more beforehand, especially boundaries and things like that. like, yes, they have no choice but to do this to keep the people they love safe, and that's devastating, definitely a problem for them, but they figure out how to navigate it as best they can.

also just...

regulus: our chance is gone
regulus, less than twelve hours later: *gets hot and bothered bc james bosses him around a little*
me: are you sure that chance is gone? 🤨

honorable mentions:

-shoutout to pandora for handling this, as hard as it was, especially coming from a Hallow, because sirius legitimately Could Not. she's amazing. she's lovely.
-shoutout to remus "be gay, do crime" lupin being a rebellious fucker and not cowering under pandora's glare, and sticking up for james and regulus!
-shoutout to sirius, just because. poor lamb is Doing His Best.
-shoutout to regulus for throwing a tantrum, because i like when he throws tantrums. go ahead, king! stomp your feet and curse up a storm. i support you!
-shoutout to james "you're gonna do what i say" potter shutting that tantrum the fuck down, because lives are at stake! (but also he talks to regulus more and does apologize for like, telling him he had no choice, basically, even though he doesn't. the point is, they talk about it. you get my point)
-final shoutout to wolfstar being stupid and cute in the background. i love them dearly. we see more of them next chapter.

Conviction

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-references to past child death
-references to past violence
-discussions about sex
-some spice/heavily implied sexual content (i say heavily implied bc it's not exactly...explicit, if that makes sense? like, you absolutely know what's going on, sex is indeed happening, but i didn't write it out like "okay they're doing this and this is going here etc etc" and there's only light/vague descriptions of things that make you know what is happening, but without explaining in-depth what's happening. i hope that makes sense, and anyway, i will be putting a helpful little tip in the end notes for those of you who would prefer to know when/where to skip or skim read, which is, as always, very valid!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I miss Fabian," James murmurs as he tugs on the collar of his suit, his shoulder brushing Dorcas' as she walks between him and Regulus, escorting them to Sirius and Pandora.

Regulus is quiet and has been ever since he stepped out with Dorcas in the suit she chose for him. James had been left with two people to get him ready that didn't speak to him, very Hallow-esque in the worst way, in the way Fabian and Gideon never were and Dorcas still isn't.

"I know. Me too," Dorcas replies, and when he looks over at her, the gaze she pins on him is piercing. "Get into the habit of keeping that to yourself, James."

"You know what happened," James says, and he flicks his gaze to Regulus, who is frowning. "You saw our conversation in the arena. When we talked about it, I mean."

Dorcas visibly hesitates, then shakes her head. "They didn't air it, but I…worked it out."

"They—"

"Don't. Don't give me the details."

"Are you in danger?" Regulus asks carefully.

"Oh, don't fret about me, my loves," Dorcas tells them with a gentle smile, something shifting in her eyes that James thinks is solemnity. "I can take care of myself. All you two need to worry about is getting through the interview, yeah?"

"Will you be in the crowd?" James mutters hopefully, because he would give anything for a familiar face to cling to.

"No, not this time," Dorcas says softly.

They don't speak again, even when they reach the door. For a moment, they all linger there, and then Dorcas nods to James' hand and slightly reaches for it, asking for permission to touch him. He meets her halfway, expecting her to squeeze his hand in a gesture of support, but she lifts it to her mouth and presses a kiss to the back of his fingers.

"Oh," James says. "Um."

"Ask Sirius what it means," Dorcas muses as she lowers his hand, lips curling up. She *does* squeeze his hand, then turns to Regulus, reaching out as well. "May I?"

Regulus visibly hesitates, then shakes his head. Dorcas doesn't seem insulted, just accepts the refusal with a silent nod, offering him a small, warm smile. Regulus doesn't smile back, but his face is just a bit softer, and something passes between them that James doesn't quite

understand. It's fragile and sturdy at the same time, somehow, something only they can figure out that seems to have existed between them ever since Dorcas helped him get ready.

James is ridiculously jealous of it. He wants, rather fiercely, to sever whatever it is and steal it for himself. It's an ugly feeling, possessive and envious, so he shoves it down with some sort of internal disgust. This is becoming more frequent; these small changes that are so loud, the worst parts of himself rearing within him more blatantly since getting out of the arena.

When Dorcas pulls away, she leans over and opens the door, letting them inside the room before shutting it behind them and presumably leaving. Pandora and Sirius are already in the room, and they both stop whispering the moment that James and Regulus walk inside.

"Lovely," Pandora says with a fixed smile. "You both look marvelous. Come, James, sit. You have a bit of time."

"Feels better to stand," James mumbles, clicking his cane to the floor to explain. It's a strange pain to navigate, because sometimes his leg aches if he sits too long, and sometimes it aches if he stands too long. It's getting better, little-by-little, or maybe he's just getting better at handling it.

"Alright?" Sirius checks as he comes over, darting his gaze between Regulus and James with equal concern.

"Yeah, fine," James says, if only to reassure him, and Regulus doesn't respond at all.

"You have about ten minutes," Pandora announces, taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out. "Sirius and I wanted to ask, and the decision is yours, but we can go sit in the crowd during the interview if you—"

"Yes," James and Regulus say in perfect unison, absolutely no hesitation in their tones at all. Regulus swallows and looks down when Pandora and Sirius' faces soften at the same time, and James exhales shakily. "Yes, please. Thank you."

"Of course," Pandora murmurs.

Sirius clears his throat, blinking hard. "That means we have to go now. We'll see you out there, alright?"

"Where will you be sitting?" James croaks.

"Front row," Sirius assures him.

"We'll let you two…get settled," Pandora says, a reminder for what they have to do and how to act, what roles they have to play. She looks so fucking sorry about it, even as she nods at them and threads her arm through Sirius', the both of them whispering goodbyes and well wishes before they go.

It's silent when it's just them, just James and Regulus, noise so absent that it's somehow loud and echoing. It takes James a second to realize neither of them are breathing.

How are they going to do this?

James doesn't want to do this. Everything in him hates it, because he never wanted to be here again, just pretending. Forced to put on a performance. Faking it. He's overly aware that everything they're about to do won't be real, and it's not fair. They could have had something real, once upon a time. The window of opportunity for that seems to be closing more and more with each passing demand they have to fulfill.

The worst part is, James is riddled with guilt for telling Regulus that he was going to do it, regardless of what he wants, or doesn't want. It sickens James a bit, but for his parents, he'll demand it. He'll do it. He'll do *anything* to keep them safe, to keep *all* of them safe, no matter how much it hurts. If nothing else, Regulus seems to understand that.

James exhales and apologizes anyway. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," Regulus mumbles.

"No, but I—" James swallows and squeezes his eyes shut, then leans hard on his cane as he turns to face him. "I shouldn't have spoken to you like—like you had no choice in this."

"I don't," Regulus says simply. "Neither do you."

"I know, but I—"

"Stop it, James. I was—well, you were right. I was being a brat about it, just because it's upsetting, but I would have still ended up right here, doing it anyway. You just…got me to the conclusion quicker, that's all. And—and don't act like you're not going through the same thing."

"I just—hate it," James confesses.

Regulus nods slowly. "I know. Believe it or not, that actually makes all of this more bearable. If it's worth anything to you, there's no one I'd rather be in this predicament with."

"That's worth so much," James whispers, and it is, and he doesn't even know what to *do* with that. He doesn't know how to handle it. He isn't used to Regulus being…sweet? No, that's not the right word. More like he's not used to Regulus being even slightly open to the concept of *them* that he doesn't scoff and respond with derision at the mere hint.

"I'm—James, I'm scared," Regulus whispers back, looking at him with wide eyes, and despite the fact that James has seen him covered in blood, he still looks so innocent. "I don't know *how* to do this. I'm not good at this. We broke up last night partially because I *can't* do this."

Well, that's…a lot to unpack, frankly. James isn't even sure where to start with that. His mind is in an uproar. "We broke up? This is news to me. I wasn't aware we were together."

"We weren't," Regulus says, heaving a weary sigh.

"Right," James says, frowning. He tries to make sense of that, then just gives up. "Right, yeah. That's… Well, I suppose that's on brand for us. Managing to break up when we're not even together. So much for not being a great, big tragedy."

Regulus' lips curl up sadly. "Always so close, but never close enough. At least we're consistent."

"I'd prefer to shake things up a little, if I'm honest," James admits sheepishly, and Regulus snorts. "Listen, about…this, I think it'll help to remember we're in it together."

"Yes, but you know how to be…" Regulus bites his lip, his eyebrows tugging together. "I mean, you're—you're so good at loving people. You just… You do it better than anyone I've ever known." James feels warmth flood his chest when he realizes that Regulus sounds like he *admires* him for that. "But me? I'm fucking awful at it. I never get it right."

"I beg to differ," James protests, and Regulus looks at him incredulously. James frowns. "Regulus, love isn't... When I talk about love, I don't mean romantic love exclusively, you know that, don't you? Love is—it's not just romance. It's in...everything. Life. The breeze. Sunshine and snow. It's everywhere, in us and around us, even just...blood. Love can be blood, too. Blood spilt. Blood in our veins. Blood flowing in the people around us."

Regulus stares at him, his eyes a little wide, lips parted a bit. Honestly, it makes James feel ridiculously flustered. Regulus looks—well, there he is, a star, and he's starstruck.

James feels his stomach go all topsy-turvy from a sudden migration of butterflies, and he has to violently clear his throat before continuing. "What I mean to say is, no matter what the Hallows think, romantic love isn't some goal everyone should feel the need to meet. Some people don't feel that way, and that doesn't mean there's no love in their life. No one needs romantic love to be fulfilled as a person. Not everyone wants it, and then there are those who aren't ready, and all of it is okay. That doesn't mean there's an absence of love, or that you're getting it wrong. You're not, Regulus, I promise."

"I know some people don't want it—romantic love, that is—and you're right to say that's okay, and that it's not required, but I—I do want—I—" Regulus halts, swallowing harshly, and James feels like his heart splinters a little bit. Regulus shakes his head abruptly, coughing. "Anyway, that's not—I'm not even getting the whole...love thing right from *any* angle, James. I'm—I'm genuinely shit at it."

"Regulus," James says softly.

"I don't know how to make people love me," Regulus croaks, "and I don't know how to love properly in return."

"I think you're being too hard on yourself," James tells him honestly. "Love isn't just something you say; more than anything, it's something you feel. If you feel it, then you're already doing it. And you feel it, Reg, I know you do. If for no one else, then for Sirius."

"I wish I could say it," Regulus rasps. "He should hear it."

"He knows," James murmurs gently, a promise.

"Five minutes," is the warning they get, very abruptly, the door opening as someone steps out, then leaves again right after. In the distance, they can hear the crowd cheering as Rita's voice drifts out to them, invigorating everyone.

All the color drains from Regulus' face immediately, and he looks frightened in less than a second, utterly terrified, which wakes something up in James. A ruthless, protective instinct that stretches out in his chest, somehow making it easier for him to breathe, to be calm. James can do this. He can help Regulus with this, and take care of him. Just this once, he wants to take care of Regulus and get it right.

James turns his back to the door, stepping closer to Regulus so he's all that Regulus can see. That, at least, seems to help. Quietly, James says, "Can I touch you?"

"You have to," Regulus whispers.

"Not yet. So, I'm asking. Can I touch you now, when it's just us, when it's not because we have no choice?" James insists, keeping his voice low.

Regulus stares at him, then swallows. "No."

James doesn't know if he's saying it just to be *able* to say it while he still can, or if he genuinely doesn't want to be touched, but either way, James is going to respect it. He'll wait right here until Regulus is ready, until he's okay with it, the Hallow be damned.

"Alright," James says simply. He holds out his hand not on his cane. "Whenever you're ready, Regulus, and not a moment before. And that's all we'll do. Just hold hands. That will just have to be enough."

"It won't be," Regulus whispers.

James holds his gaze. "Sucks for them, then, doesn't it?"

"Kiss me," Regulus blurts out, and James jolts, his hand twitching in the air. Regulus' face promptly turns red all at once. "I—I mean, out there. I can do one kiss. A small one. Short, preferably. At least once, James. If—if you're okay with that."

"Are you okay with that?" James asks quietly.

"I think—I think you're the only thing I'm going to be okay with out there," Regulus tells him softly.

"But are you okay with it?" James asks again.

"Yes," Regulus murmurs, and James searches his eyes, finding that he's telling the truth.

"Time to go," is the announcement they get when the person comes back. Regulus swallows and closes his eyes. James doesn't budge an inch.

"Not a moment before you're ready," James reminds Regulus, lifting his hand a bit from where it fell in his surprise about the kiss request. Regulus opens his eyes and looks at him and looks, again, starstruck. Awed. Adoring. It makes James' heart *melt.*

It takes a beat, then another, and then one more before Regulus exhales all at once and steps forward, reaching out to grab James' hand.

~•~

Regulus is probably strangling James' hand as they make their way onto the stage, the room practically trembling with the ear-splitting cheers and shrieks of people that are making their admiration and approval very clear. Regulus remains at James' pace, staying by his side all the way to their seats.

Rita is beaming at them. As the shrieks of delight die down, Regulus imagines slitting her throat, then struggles not to grimace at the thought.

"Well," Rita breathes out, "I think I speak for everyone when I say it is an absolute delight to see you both again."

"The pleasure is ours, Rita," James replies, his most charming grin plastered right on his face. Regulus sees right through it, but James is still beautiful, even putting on a show. So, that's who Regulus looks at. James. Just James.

Regulus forces himself to stop thinking about how fucked up this is, because he can feel his unease and his anger starting to rise in him. That's too risky here. He can't fuck this up; he can't be responsible for inviting more danger in their lives and in the lives of those they care about. Instead, he studies the way James' eyelashes kiss his cheeks when he blinks, committing it to memory.

"And here you are, with Regulus," Rita says. "You fought so hard to get here. You both fought so hard."

"We were just fighting for each other," James tells her.

"Is that so?" Rita asks, and then there's a long beat of silence. Someone in the crowd coughs, and then Rita chuckles, which makes more laughter ring out. "Regulus?"

Blinking, Regulus rips his gaze away to see that Rita is looking right at him with her eyebrows raised. "Sorry, what?"

"You seem a bit distracted by James, dear," Rita teases.

"Oh. Well, yes, I—" Regulus glances at James again, then just keeps looking at him, because he prefers that over looking at anyone else. It's the only source of comfort Regulus has right now, just the sight of James. But he has a role to play, so he thinks about the most sickening response he could give at this moment and goes with that. "You'll have to forgive me, Rita. I find it difficult to look anywhere else when he's around."

"Well, isn't that *sweet?"* Rita coos, and the crowd makes it clear that they agree. "I can understand that. Young love, especially in the aftermath of the battle you both fought for it—of course you're enjoying your spoils. You in particular, Regulus, fought very hard. I have to admit, it surprised me how determined you were to keep James safe."

"It felt like the only thing that mattered," Regulus murmurs, and maybe that's a lie, but maybe it's a little bit true, too. He doesn't know, not really, but he is sure that it's something they're all going to like to hear. And they do.

"You know, usually, we would talk about your time in the arena, but I'd like to spend more time talking about the two of you. I'd say we're *all* intrigued by your story, because there's a lot more to it than we originally thought," Rita muses, and Regulus feels a rush of relief and fear at the same time. "So, let's get the arena stuff out of the way first. Starting with you, Regulus, I wanted to talk about Evan."

Right out of the gate, no hesitation, not pulling punches—and Regulus hates her. He hates her for this, because he's not—he isn't ready. He doesn't want to talk about Evan. He wants to talk *to* Evan, but Evan isn't here, and it hurts. It still hurts.

"Evan," Regulus croaks, his voice thick against his will as he finally turns his gaze away from James, just slightly. He finds Sirius in the front row, Pandora right next to him, and they both look completely neutral, as if—at any second—someone might look to them to see their reactions.

"Yes, Evan," Rita says, her voice gentle, but it's all faked. She doesn't care, not really. The saccharine lilt to her voice grates on all of his nerves. "You got close with him, and he helped you and James as well. I believe it broke all of our hearts when he died. It clearly broke yours."

"He was my friend," Regulus whispers, and even from here, he can see the strain around Sirius' eyes, a mixture of pain for what Regulus went through and fear for what he's going through now. Regulus swallows thickly and drops his gaze to his lap. "He was my friend, and I—I will never forget him. His sacrifice will remain in my heart forever."

The worst part is that it's true.

"You carved something into the tree next to him," Rita says, and Regulus feels his heart jump, because it's—it's not good. It's fucking dangerous. He shouldn't have, but a part of him still doesn't regret it. *"Hallow is Hollow.* What does that mean?"

You know what it means, Regulus thinks. *You all know what it means. All of you are hollow, carved out and empty, just shells of human beings, placeholders for all of those who deserve to live when most of you don't. Evan should be here. You should all be dead.*

That isn't what Regulus says. He's been instructed on what to say, which is, "His loss was felt by all, I'm sure. The Hallow was hollow without him, as soon as he was gone that night. I know you all were grieving just as I was. As hollow as I felt when he died, I know you were all with me."

It couldn't be farther from the truth, and again, Regulus thinks *I'm sorry, Evan, I'm so sorry.*

"Very well put. It was tragic for us all," Rita declares, and the crowd makes soft, sympathetic noises of agreement. None of them have earned the right, and it takes genuine effort not to respond explosively. James grips his hand harder, like he's holding him still, reminding him to remain steady. "There are other moments in particular I'd like to talk about, as far as the other tributes. Mulciber, for example. You chopped off his hand, and I have to ask, what pushed you to do that?"

"He made James flinch," Regulus replies simply. Rita's eyebrows fly up, which makes him very uncomfortable, but he doesn't let it show "I told him what would happen if he did that. He was warned."

"Well, you're not wrong," Rita agrees, looking delighted. "And what about Irene? There was a moment, you know, when she was telling James you were jealous of her. Were you?"

"While you were carrying the bridge and I was walking back with her," James explains, when he's been quiet for too long, purely out of shock. Irene died in pain; he killed her out of mercy and sat with her until she was gone, and they care about if he was fucking *jealous* or not?

Regulus has to take another second to keep from shouting at everyone, but he plays it off with a cough, trying to tug a sheepish smile on his face. "Yes, well, jealousy is a bit of a character flaw, I suppose. I'm not immune to it."

"So, some part of you must have relished in being the one to officially kill her, yes?" Rita asks.

"I—" Regulus struggles with this, genuinely stunned. He knows what they want to hear, but he just—he can't do it. He can't. "No, I—I think, by the end, I was just…"

"He knew deep down that she posed no threat to our relationship," James swoops in with ease, and Regulus squeezes his hand in thanks. "He has nothing to worry about in that regard. No one else even compares."

Again, the crowd eats this up with *relish.*

"Yes, but you *did* seem to flirt with her," Rita points out, flicking her gaze between them like she's trying to poke holes through their relationship. "After all, when she insinuated that you two would have *fun* together, you agreed, didn't you?"

"I did," James admits calmly, "approximately five seconds after informing her that I wasn't interested, because the only person I'm interested in is Regulus."

"A loyal man. We love to see it," Rita comments with a sharp smile, and Regulus has to go back to looking at James so he won't just fucking lunge for her. Humans are so frail, really. He could snap her neck in seconds. "Why don't we talk about you now, James? Let's start with Vanity."

Regulus feels James go rigid next to him. His smile is frozen on his face, and there's pain blooming in his eyes that can't be hidden, and Rita… Oh, Rita…

Rita's days are fucking *numbered.*

~•~

"Vanity," James breathes out, trying to shove down the urge to vomit. He doesn't want to do this. He doesn't want to be here anymore. He never wanted to be here. He can't do this. He—

Regulus abruptly lays his head over on James' shoulder, pressing closer and quite literally just snuggling up to him while the whole world is watching. He's squeezing James' hand over and over, and James gets a brief moment to breathe as the crowd responds happily to their display of affection. It was more than James was expecting from Regulus, and he knows Regulus is doing it to try and help. James is so grateful for it.

Rita lets it happen, even if it seems to agitate her, and James forces himself to take control of the situation before *she* can.

"Yes, Vanity was a hard loss," James announces, and the crowd dies down immediately. "I can only hope that, in her last moments, I brought her a sense of comfort. Knowing her for the short amount of time that I did was one of the best things that's ever happened to me, and like Regulus with Evan, I'll never forget her and I'll carry her in my heart forever."

James tries to figure out if that's true or not. A part of him feels like it is, because he doesn't regret knowing Vanity, but at the same time, he's still so fucking devastated by her death. He wishes he could have saved her. He wishes…

"It was so sad that Hodge killed her. A boy she fancied, too, which makes it so much more tragic," Rita muses, clicking her tongue. "Is that why you killed him, James? To avenge her?"

James has had a gut wound that hurt less than hearing those words. *Is that why you killed him?* James killed him. A fourteen year old boy, a day before his birthday, and James killed him. *I didn't mean to,* James thinks desperately, his eyes stinging as he feels the tears start to gather in his eyes. *I never wanted to. I never wanted to kill him, or kill anyone, and it wasn't my fault, but it was, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.*

"Hodge was just in the wrong place at the wrong time," Regulus says softly, stroking James' hand with his thumb. He lifts his head and heaves a sigh. "Just a boy running with the wrong crowd. What happened between him and Vanity *was* tragic, but I don't doubt that having James with her at the end made her feel safe, and loved. He's good at making people feel that way, no matter what's going on. I would know."

"Wrong place, wrong time. Yes, I'd say so." Rita nods and folds her hands on her crossed legs. "I can tell you're eager to talk about the love between you. Don't worry, not too long

now. There's one more I'm eager to talk about. Peter."

"Peter," James repeats, feeling numb.

Rita hums. "See, you and Regulus didn't get to witness everything Peter did, not as the audience did. Not only did he betray all of you, which led to so many people dying, but he actively sought out Bernice and Axus after the rule change. You may not know this, but he went to *them.* He chose to be a death eater."

He just wanted to go home. He was just trying to survive, James thinks, a lump in his throat. He wants to say it. Even now, he wants to believe the best in people. Maybe Peter wasn't a person who did the right thing under circumstances that put strain on him, that led him to a brutal desperation for survival. Maybe he was a traitor—to James, to Bernice, even to himself at the end. But, if he wasn't there, if it wasn't about survival, would he have ever done anything wrong? He never liked violence. He was afraid. He just wanted to go home, and he never thought he would, and then he didn't.

James has horrible, messy mixed feelings about Peter, because as much as he wants to believe in him, he's also so fucking angry at him. He *did* betray James. He betrayed them all. James would have never done that. He would have died first.

But he was always willing to die for the right reasons, wasn't he? Peter… Well, James thinks he never was.

James hates him.

James misses him.

"He couldn't kill me," James says, finally. His voice is hard, unforgiving like steel. This is all he can say. "When it came down to it, he didn't have it in him to be the one to kill me."

"Do you think, if Bernice had killed you, he would have been able to live with it?" Rita asks.

"Yes," James croaks, because he does. He thinks that if it hadn't fallen on Peter to give the killing blow, if it was him and Bernice sitting up here now, he would have carried on. Would he have mourned James?

James still doesn't know.

"What do you think, Regulus?" Rita turns to him, curious.

"I think…" Regulus squeezes James' hand again, and James doesn't know how he knows, but he can tell it's a warning this time. Telling him to brace himself. Telling him he's not going to like this response. James holds his breath. "I don't care. All that matters to me is that James is here, and I'm here with him. Everything else…it doesn't matter. I don't care."

It's such a horrible, cruel thing to say—and James doesn't believe it for a second. There's no way Regulus doesn't care. You don't get to go through all that they have and be blessed with indifference when you come out the other side. Not caring would be easier. It would hurt less.

But. Well, there's something important about the fact that they do care. Even after everything, they still have it within them *to* care, and that means something. All this anger, this pain, this trauma—they have to feel it, because people matter, and those that are gone deserve to be cared about. All of them, every single one, twenty-two people who would still be here if the world wasn't what it is, if the world was what it *should be.*

"Ah, well, love does have that effect," Rita agrees, chuckling along with the crowd. "Alright, alright, we'll get to the good parts, then." As if those that have died are just on a checklist that she rushed through, because no one cares, not really. It makes James feel sick. "I want to talk about your history. You two were holding out on me! Imagine my surprise when learning that James was your *first love,* Regulus."

"My only love," Regulus is quick to correct, his voice soft and sweet, and the crowd goes ballistic immediately.

Rita grins. "Your only love, then. Very sweet. You two are just *adorable,* truly. Go on, give us the scoop. Tell us more."

"Well," Regulus says slowly, "it's like I said in the arena. I used to have a very embarrassing crush on James, for about five years. I took one look at him and…honestly, I never stood a chance. James…could tell."

"You were very obvious, love," James teases.

Regulus flashes him a quick smile, but his gaze is sharp, which makes it clear that this is still a sore subject for him. James doesn't think Regulus has any reason to be embarrassed, but of course Regulus doesn't see it that way. "I know. Looking back, it was really mortifying, actually. I was *besotted."*

"Did Sirius know?" Rita asks, always the one with the hard questions. Oh, she's evil. James does *not* like her.

"About my crush? I don't know. Sirius, did you know?" Regulus calls, leaning forward to look out at Sirius, who slaps on a grin as soon as all eyes turn to him. Well, that's one way to handle that question. Let Sirius handle it. Sure. James didn't even *consider* that, but Regulus has the mindset of a little brother, so James figures that makes sense.

Sirius chuckles and gives a lazy shrug. "I suppose I knew, at least in the beginning. I just sort of assumed you'd grow out of it. I didn't know it was…as deep as it was. It was cute, though. You blushed *a lot* when he was around."

"Alright, thank you, no more input from you," Regulus says, making a show of rolling his eyes, and laughter spills out over the room. James helplessly chuckles along with everyone else.

"But, from what I understand, you *did* grow out of it," Rita continues, arching an eyebrow. "In fact, you made it quite clear that you spent the next ten years hating him."

"Just in time for me to fall head over heels for him, too," James says with a put upon sigh, trying to give Regulus more time to find a response to that. "I suppose that's fair. I wasn't exactly the *nicest* about him having a crush before that, you see. I sort of teased him about it, actually. Not maliciously. I was just so young and couldn't even see what I had right in front of me."

"Well, it all worked out in the end," Regulus murmurs. James' heart clenches, because no, no it did not. "The truth is that sometimes, feelings persist, and sometimes you don't even realize it. I thought… I really did think that I had grown out of it, had grown to hate him, even, but when it came down to it, that wasn't the case. It was always love between us; it's always going to be love. We have fifteen years of proof of that."

"Your love is so special," Rita says softly, and James can hear people out in the crowd weeping. "It's so strong that neither of you seemed willing to live without each other." She leans forward and gazes at them, faux sympathy in her eyes. "I know this will be hard for both of you, but let's revisit that moment when the rule changed for the second time. Regulus, you walked right into a river for the man you love. James, you were planning to die if he did. Tell us about that."

"I just—I didn't want to be without him. All I could think about was getting him back," James whispers, and a few people gasp softly. "Nothing else mattered but him. Having him again. The thought of losing him—" His voice helpfully cracks in his throat, and he lets it. He gives into the fear, the desperation, letting everyone see it. "I couldn't bear it. All I wanted was to be with him, for us to be together."

"Of course, James. Of *course,"* Rita agrees gently, her gaze turning to Regulus. "And you?"

"I felt the same way," Regulus says, and it comes out so earnest that it almost circles back around into performative. James presses his leg into Regulus' a little more firmly. More. There needs to be more. Regulus doesn't bother to disguise the way his breath shakes on his exhale, and then he gives them more. Plenty more. "It felt like I was dying because he was. I just wanted him to be okay. I—I realized then that there was no home without James. He's my home, so I—well, I would never have a home if he died. I didn't want to go on without him."

The crowd is a mixture of soft sighs and soft sobs, but James swivels his head to look at Regulus, who is already looking at him. James doesn't mean to, but he finds himself

searching Regulus' eyes—those eyes of his. James knows them so well, and he can see the truth in them. Regulus wasn't lying.

James lifts his hand carefully to cup Regulus' jaw, and Regulus doesn't hesitate to turn his face up into the kiss that James very gently brushes over his mouth. It's innocent. Sweet, really. Barely even there, and it only lasts seconds. The crowd still goes wild.

Rita draws back, looking pleased. "Well, you two are just lovely, aren't you? We love your love, don't we?" She laughs and looks out at the crowd, everyone absolutely losing their minds in support and delight. It baffles James that they could be so invested in romance, so moved by love, yet so indifferent to death, to pain, to all that's wrong in this fucked up system only they benefit from. Rita quiets the crowd, then focuses back on them, beaming. "So, I suppose my next question is one we're all eager to know. What's next for you two?"

Regulus' voice is soft, so soft, when he says, "I think we'll go home and share a bookshelf, and dance late at night by a fire, and make up for a lot of lost time…"

James' eyes flutter shut as he listens to Regulus describe the other life they never got to have, the one where they're not a great, big tragedy. For one second, he lets himself pretend that's what they're going to do, wrapping the comfort of it around him like a blanket, even though that's not what's next for them. It should have been. They deserve that, after everything. And yet, it's not.

Just because it's not what comes next doesn't mean it's not in their future at all, though. Maybe, one day, they'll get there.

Maybe.

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Sirius heaves a sigh as he slips into the suite, the tension easing out of him as soon as he sees Remus and Pandora sitting in the main room, heads bent together. He glances around, but James and Regulus are nowhere to be found.

"They're in their rooms. Just needed some time," Pandora explains. "How did it go?"

"Everything is handled," Sirius murmurs. "We leave early tomorrow morning. I need to—I have to talk to them, but—"

"Go," Pandora cuts in firmly. "You know how this goes. I'll see you off in the morning. No point in saying goodbye tonight."

"I'll wait for you in your room, if that's alright," Remus says quietly, standing up and not quite meeting Sirius' eyes. His tone is heavy, and so is Sirius' heart.

Sirius can only bring himself to nod, following Remus down the hall and watching him slip into his room as he continues on, stopping by James' first. He knocks gently and pokes his head in, finding James sitting on the floor against the wall beside his bed, his cane propped up next to him.

Cautiously, Sirius moves over and carefully sits down across from James right there on the floor, leaning back against the bed. Even with being in his direct line of sight, James still doesn't seem to notice Sirius at all. His gaze is unfocused, and he's staring down at his limp hands in his lap.

"James," Sirius says, getting no response. Swallowing, Sirius takes a deep breath and tries again. *"James."*

That time, James gives a violent blink, lifting his head just as a tear falls from his eye and slips down his cheek, almost like an afterthought. He absently dashes it away like he doesn't even realize it's there, giving Sirius a small, bemused smile. "Oh, Sirius, I didn't hear you come in."

"That's alright," Sirius murmurs, his heart clenching. He hesitates, not entirely sure if he should ask why James is crying or not. That's the thing, isn't it? There are countless things

James has to cry about. Sirius knows what it's like not to want to talk about them. Before he gets the chance to figure it out either way, James speaks.

"Was it enough? The interview, I mean."

"I'm quite sure that it was, yes. You and Regulus did good, James. You did everything right."

"Did we?" James whispers, his face twitching, and then he waves his hand like he can swat the implications of that question away. "Nevermind. So, it should be okay?"

"It should be," Sirius confirms, because he's quite sure that it will be. Everyone *adores* James and Regulus, their love story, their happy ending. It's all anyone can talk about, just that they loved each other so much that they refused to live without the other—and if they're talking about that, then they're not talking about how James briefly had the entire Hallow by the throat without even knowing it, without even trying.

"We go home tomorrow, don't we?" James asks hopefully, like he's eager, and Sirius can't blame him for that. He no doubt wants to see his parents again.

"Yeah, we go home tomorrow," Sirius says softly.

"That's it? It's done?"

Sirius hesitates, feeling cramped on the inside, like he's just going to—overflow. The guilt crawls under his skin, and he wants to rip it right out. "James…"

"It's not done," James corrects glumly. He looks at Sirius for a long moment, then releases a hoarse laugh. "Oh. Right. The fucking victory tour six months after. Tell me about that."

"Right." Sirius swallows. "Well, you know how it works, because we've had victors in our district every year. So, you and Regulus will have to… You'll stand on a stage and give a

little speech about the fallen tributes from each district."

"A little speech," James repeats flatly.

"Don't worry," Sirius says softly, "Pandora and I will write something out for you both. It's—it's important that you and Regulus are a united front throughout this, and it'd help if you two would be affectionate on camera as well."

"Sirius—"

"No, okay, I know. James, I *know* it's fucked, and I'm—I'm so sorry. I'm really sorry. You—you have no idea how sorry I am."

James sighs. "I'm not blaming you, Sirius. I just don't think that Regulus will…do that. He and I—well, we broke up. That's what he said, in any case."

"You were together?" Sirius asks, startled as well as a little offended that he wasn't at least notified. When the fuck did this happen?

"No, not at all. This was news to me, too, don't feel bad." James shakes his head and throws up both hands, a mixture of fond and wry and exhausted. "To tell you the truth, Sirius, I haven't a fucking clue what's going on in your brother's head half the time. But, you know, apparently we broke up, so that's just… Well, it's shit, isn't it?"

Sirius opens his mouth.

"You have to agree and be here for me because I'm your best friend and I've been dumped without even being in a relationship, which is so sad and pathetic that I don't even know where to begin, so you are contractually obligated to feel sorry for me," James interrupts before he can ever speak.

Sirius closes his mouth. He pauses, adjusts, then gives a firm nod and says, "Yes, it's shit, and I'm very sorry. I'm… James, honestly, I *am* sorry."

"It's…fine," James mumbles, sighing again. He gives a pained sort of smile and looks away. "But, my point is, I don't really think that Regulus is going to…"

"I'll talk to him," Sirius assures him. "When the time comes, I'll handle it. You don't have to worry about any of that now, James. The most important thing is that as soon as tomorrow afternoon, you'll see your parents again."

James relaxes a little. "Yeah. That's… Yeah, thank you."

"What're you thanking me for, honestly?" Sirius asks, utterly exasperated.

"Because, if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be seeing my parents again at all," James tells him bluntly, and even as horrible as that sentence is, he manages a sincere smile. "You saved my life, Sirius. You saved Regulus' life. You saved us both."

"I think we all had a hand in saving each other," Sirius says softly, and James nods. They stare at one another for a long, long time, not saying a word, so much sitting between them that it's hard to see past it. But they're here. For a moment, they both bask in the absolute gratitude they feel to just get to exist with each other again.

"You should go see Regulus," James says, eventually.

Sirius nods, shifting to lean forward, and then he pauses and holds up his finger. "Ah, wait, I have something for you." He reaches into his coat in the pocket lining the silk, drawing out James' glasses with a small smile. "I spoke with Dorcas after the interview, just checking in with her and saying goodbye, and she made sure to get these back to you."

James stares at them, then swallows thickly and reaches out to grab them with shaking fingers. He slowly looks up at Sirius and whispers, "Will you help me take my contacts out?"

"Absolutely," Sirius replies instantly, then shuffles over to do just that.

It's a bit of a process that somehow leads them both to laugh quietly when Sirius makes faces at James from up close, or when James accidentally pokes himself in the eye, or when Sirius speaks to James' eyelashes like they're sentient. Between the two of them, they do eventually manage to get the contacts out—more advanced Hallow shit, the kind that James never had to change, and could sleep with—and then James is slipping his glasses on his face while blinking rapidly.

Sirius stares at him.

"Do I look stupid?" James blurts out, sounding absurdly anxious, more insecure and nervous than Sirius has ever heard him. Sirius remembers when he got home and was so afraid his leather jacket wouldn't fit the same way before he went into the arena; he remembers crying profusely when it did.

"No, James," Sirius whispers. "You look like you."

James exhales slowly and reaches up to push his glasses up his nose, chewing on his lip. "They don't feel as strange as I was expecting them to."

"You've been wearing them your whole life." Sirius reaches out and taps the corner of the circular frames fondly. "No matter how it may seem, the arena and the Hallow and all of this isn't going to erase everything. It can't. Even with me, it never could. As much as it can take from us, there are some things that we'll always have."

"What's yours?" James asks curiously. "What's the one thing it never managed to take?"

Sirius smiles at him, gently. "You."

"I'd never leave you, not really. Even if I was—" James stops, then reaches out and presses his balled up fist to Sirius' chest, right in the middle, right between his lungs. He doesn't press hard, but Sirius feels the pressure anyway, and he welcomes it. It settles him. "I'm always with you, Sirius, no matter what."

"Fine, yes, I'll marry you and have your babies," Sirius says with a put upon sigh, breaking out into a grin when James is startled into laughter, dropping his hand as his eyes light up.

It's the first time James laughs—really laughs—since returning from the arena, and Sirius just soaks it up, letting it warm him all the way through. It's not that he forgot how nice it is to see joy on James' face; it's just that he hasn't seen it in so long. He's missed it, he really has.

"Oh, it's my dream come true," James teases, playful, his eyes sparkling. "I mean, *both* Black brothers? You know—"

"Why did you have to make it weird?" Sirius groans, scrunching up his face, though it doesn't last long when James laughs again, loud and hard and happy, like maybe he's just as eager to do it as Sirius is to hear it, and that's why he's making jokes, doing a bit, trying and trying and always trying.

James laughs so long and so fully that he just slumps over on his side and curls up on the floor, apparently needing to take a minute to catch his breath. "Oh, fuck, I needed that."

"You and me both," Sirius murmurs, lips curled up. He didn't really laugh that much, too caught up in his relief of seeing *James* laugh, but the statement still stands. "Come on, get off the floor, you freak. At least lay on your bed, for fuck's sake."

"Feels too soft," James mumbles, "and I—I don't want to sleep alone. I—"

"I'll come back after talking to Remus," Sirius offers immediately.

James bolts upright, jaw clenched. "You will do no such thing. You can come after Remus is gone for the night, but not a second before. I'll be fine waiting."

"James—"

"No. *No,* Sirius. I will be *fine,* and you—you deserve to spend time with him, okay? He deserves it. Just—I don't know—have sex with him or something."

"Have—" Sirius rears back, eyes bulging as he sputters in disbelief. "Sorry, *what?"*

"Oh." James bites his lip. "Are you two not there yet?"

Sirius blinks at him. "I mean… We—okay, well, we almost…you know." It's mortifying, but Sirius can feel his face getting hot, his ears burning. He feels stupid, like a modest little prude who starts squirming the moment anything hinting at sex comes up, which is ridiculous because he's never like this in front of… Well, he's only like this in front of the people who know him, *really* know him, and what he presents to everyone else—that's not real. It's a facade. A performance. This, in all his blushing, flustered glory, is Sirius Black at his most honest.

"You almost had sex?" James asks bluntly. Unlike Sirius, he has no such issues. He's a total whore. Sirius loves that about him.

"Sort of. A…form of it? We stopped before it went anywhere, and we didn't even get out of our pants," Sirius admits, covering his face with his hands.

"Ah, frottage," James says fondly, releasing a wistful sigh, and when Sirius peeks at him, he's got this look in his eyes like he's remembering something in vivid detail.

"You better not be thinking about my brother right now."

"I'm *absolutely* thinking about your brother right now."

"James," Sirius groans.

Chuckling, James grins at him. "What? I should have never kept it from you, really. I should have told you that same morning that it happened. I was so *guilty* that I didn't."

"Look, just—keep the details to a minimum, please," Sirius says, strained. "Broad statements are more than enough. In fact, the less you say, the better I feel. You *really* don't have to tell me all about it. He's my little brother, for fuck's sake."

"Well, you know, not much happened anyway. He didn't even get off," James says sadly. He pauses, his eyes glazing over a bit. "He got *me* off, though, which was—"

"Okay, enough," Sirius cuts in, waving his hands frantically back and forth through the air. James blinks at him, then huffs out a soft laugh. "I—really didn't need to know that. What I *do* need to know is unrelated to my brother at all."

"Sure, fire away."

"Um. Sex."

James raises his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"How?" Sirius asks weakly.

"Remus, you lucky bastard," James chokes out, laughing, and his gaze is bright with humor as Sirius' entire face explodes with heat. Delighted, James folds his uninjured leg up and leans forward, bracing his elbow on it as he props his chin in his hand. "Alright, settle in, it's time we had *the talk."*

"I am twenty-six years old, James. I'm not oblivious to the process. I'm an *adult."*

"Then what are you asking?"

"Um. Tips?" Sirius mumbles, making a face.

"Sirius, honestly, I think it'll be fine because you two like each other and want to be together. That's more important than technique anyway, and *that's* what will make it good—how you feel for each other, the emotion, above all else."

"Right, yes, but I'd like to be good at it."

"Oh, well, I'm sure you'll be brilliant," James assures him encouragingly, then snorts when Sirius glares at him. "You know, I can't really tell you what to do. It's different for everyone. We all like what we like, and that's not always the same, and it's—it's special to learn that for yourselves, to learn each other. Only do it because you want to; that's the first step. Everything else? Just do what feels right and don't be scared to communicate."

"That's not—helpful," Sirius complains.

"It is. You just don't know it yet. You'll see." James winks at him, but his smile is soft. "Go on, go get your spine realigned."

Sirius' hand flies to his throat instinctively, like a woman clutching at her pearls, staring at James, utterly *aghast* as he wheezes, "Get my fucking *what?"*

"Or, you know, realign *his* spine," James muses, thoughtful, his eyes gleaming with laughter. "Whatever suits your fancy, and his, I suppose."

"You're *filthy,"* Sirius hisses as James laughs again, covering his mouth with his hand. "You're a dirty, dirty man, Potter, and I—I do *not* want you anywhere near my baby brother."

"Oh, the first chance I get, I'm going to let him snap my spine directly in half," James declares, lifting both hands and tipping his fists apart while making an obscene crunching noise in the back of his throat. The look of pure horror on Sirius' face makes James bust out laughing all over again.

Sirius makes a big show of being disgusted for a bit longer, just to keep James laughing, but the moment eventually passes, and James seems—lighter, just a bit, at least for now. It's probably a lot of different things, getting to laugh, knowing he'll see Effie and Monty tomorrow, even just the knowledge that Sirius is probably having sex for the very first time because he *wants to,* because he's at a place that he's comfortable, because he trusts Remus enough to do it.

"Speaking of my brother," Sirius says, once James has calmed down, "I'm going to check on him now, but I'll be back later."

"If you can walk," James teases.

"Slag," Sirius grumbles as he stands up.

"Prude," James shoots back. He pauses, then tilts his head a little bit. "Hey, you saw Dorcas, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"She told me to ask you. She, um, kissed my hand? She said you'd know what it meant."

"Oh, yes, that's a thing. It's common in the Hallow to kiss someone's hand if you hold them in high regard. It's a sign of admiration," Sirius explains.

"Oh," James says, blinking. "That's…strangely lovely?"

"It can be," Sirius agrees, lips curling up.

"Right," James murmurs. "Thanks. Now, go on, the sooner you leave, the sooner you get off. I expect *all* the details."

Sirius shakes his head fondly and stifles laughter as James calls after him suggestively all the way out the door. For a moment, he just has to pause out in the hall and breathe, letting himself feel good about the fact that he walked in on James crying and he's now walking out on James laughing. Sirius has never really thought about it, but maybe he makes things better for James the same way James does for him. It's a comforting thought.

Next stop is Regulus' room, and he knocks before poking his head in, wholly unsurprised by the fact that Regulus is out on the balcony. Sirius knocks on that door as well before easing out, and Regulus slowly relaxes when he sees him, which is something that causes a tender flare in Sirius' chest every time. It's good to know that he's—safe, for Regulus. It's been years since that was the case. Sirius has missed it.

"Did we fuck it up?" Regulus asks warily.

"The interview? No, you and James did perfectly," Sirius assures him. "I'm—I wanted to—to apologize again for—"

"Don't," Regulus cuts in, shaking his head. "It's not your fault, Sirius. I don't blame you. I know James doesn't."

"Everything in me wishes I could have stopped it," Sirius confesses. "All of it, Regulus."

"I know," Regulus says softly, looking away.

Sirius clears his throat. "James tells me you two…broke up?"

"We were never together, never got to be, but…yeah," Regulus replies with a heavy sigh. He glances over at Sirius and shrugs a little helplessly. "I know he's your best friend, so you must have a lecture for hurting him lined up, but I—"

"No," Sirius interrupts firmly. "No, I don't. There's no lecture. No threats, or warnings, or—or anything. Not for either of you. Whatever happens between the two of you, that's…" He swallows and gives a bitter smile. "That's yours and his, no matter what. I have no control, do you hear me? I can—and will—be here for both of you about it, about *anything,* but I'll never get involved otherwise, not again."

Regulus blinks at him. "Oh."

"Yeah," Sirius mumbles, ashamed, still so fucking upset about how he had to manipulate their relationship for their survival.

"So, this is you…trying to be here for me about it?" Regulus asks dryly, arching an eyebrow.

Sirius smiles sheepishly. "If you need me to be."

"It's not—" Regulus halts, then looks down and chokes out a laugh that has no humor in it. "Well, I'm used to it, really."

"Reggie," Sirius says quietly, utterly stricken.

"Everything and nothing has changed. I want him and I hate him. He wants to try and I'm not willing to. Always so close, so fucking *close,* but never…" Regulus whispers, squeezing his eyes shut and then lifting his hands to cover his face as his shoulders heave. The muffled sob breaks Sirius' heart.

"Hey, hey, can I—" Sirius launches forward to kneel down by Regulus' chair, hands hovering over him, and it's taking quite literally all the strength within him not to just snatch Regulus into his arms and hold him. "Is it okay if I—"

Regulus doesn't let him finish, just sort of spilling to the side and bumping directly into Sirius' chest, ducked down and curled over in on himself like he's trying to fold himself up until he's just gone. He's so small. He's five, he's fifteen, he's twenty-five and Sirius' little brother. Always his little brother.

Sirius wraps his arms around Regulus and holds him.

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Remus looks up when the door opens, his heart jumping and sinking all at once as soon as he sees Sirius, somehow trying to shrivel up and expand at the same time. Sirius is here, and tomorrow, he'll be gone.

"Hi," Sirius whispers as he shuts the door.

"Hi," Remus whispers back.

Sirius swallows, the column of his throat rising and falling as he takes a tentative step forward. "Maybe this is unfair of me to ask, but can we—not say goodbye tonight? Can we have just one night where nothing is wrong? Can we—Remus, can we save all of that for tomorrow and just…have this, us, now?"

Remus exhales slowly, because he's relieved, so inordinately relieved to put it off for just a bit longer. He's not ready yet. He doesn't want to lose this yet.

"Yes, of course we can," Remus murmurs.

"I—I want you to know that I—" Sirius takes a deep breath and gives him a small, sad smile. "I have been through the unimaginable these last two weeks, and the only thing—the *only* thing, Remus—that made any of it the least bit bearable was you. I would not have known a hint of relief, or a slice of joy, if I did not have the pleasure of knowing you."

"Well, that certainly sounds like a goodbye," Remus scolds, his voice thick with the lump in his throat.

"I just want you to know that, perhaps I was the one to insist you take off the mask, and perhaps I was the one to grant you the space to live with the basic human rights anyone and everyone should always have," Sirius croaks, "but in truth, Remus, it was *you* who freed *me."*

"Stop," Remus rasps, because he really—he can't do it. He feels dangerously close to tears, his eyes prickling with heat, and he doesn't want to cry. He doesn't want to waste one second with Sirius in mourning when he hasn't even lost him yet. He can cry later, alone, when there's a reason to.

But, right now, Sirius is here. He's still here, and Remus loves him dearly, dreadfully, with a defiance that makes his heart sing. It is only fitting that he would love so deeply what he cannot keep, and it is a selfless, gentle sort of passion that will haunt him, an echo of an empty house he doesn't have the promise of ever getting back to, one he will always crave the comforts of all the same. He looks at Sirius and wishes to cook a meal and fold laundry with him, lock the door behind them as they lay down to go to sleep, ignore the storm that rattles the bones of the house because, eventually, they will break.

Just not yet.

Please not yet.

"Oh, oh, please don't cry," Sirius breathes out, moving forward instantly to reach out and cradle Remus' face, tilting it up as he stands in between Remus' legs where he's settled on the end of the bed. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean it. No, I did, but I—oh, I can't take it."

"Sorry," Remus rasps. "I wasn't—I was trying not to. I just—"

"Shh, no, of course you can," Sirius mumbles, his thumbs swiping away the tears with a tenderness that sends a fresh wave right down Remus' cheeks. "I mean, it's completely breaking my heart, admittedly, but you have every right to. You have the freedom to do even that, and I'll wipe every tear away. Can I cheer you up? Can I try that? Would that be okay?"

Remus huffs out a weak laugh, lips tugging up at the corners. Sirius is visibly frazzled, borderline desperate, and it's oddly cute. He's coming to the rapid conclusion that Sirius gets frantic when the people he cares about are hurting; it's a trait that he shares with his brother. Remus can't really put his finger on why, but there's something both adorable and tragic about that. Just that they're so acquainted with pain themselves that they're a mess the moment they realize someone that matters to them is the one dealing with it.

"Give it a go," Remus says softly.

Sirius promptly and without warning pushes Remus back a bit and proceeds to crawl right into his lap, settling down on the platform of his thighs as he strokes Remus' cheeks and brings their faces so close together that their noses nearly bump. Remus automatically and instinctively wraps his arms around Sirius' waist to make sure he doesn't fall. To be completely honest, Remus feels cheered already.

"Don't cry," Sirius coos, lips curling up as he leans in kisses under one eye. "Your tears control the tides, you know." He kisses under the other eye. "Why don't we have a calm ocean tonight? No shipwrecks. Nothing worse than a sunken ship."

"But that's where all the treasures are," Remus teases, smiling along helplessly, and Sirius looks pleased instantly.

"You're a treasure, Remus Lupin," Sirius murmurs, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth. "My treasure, the treasure I found in this sunken ship of a city. You glinted in the dark like the moon lights the sky, and I found you."

"So, I'm yours, then?" Remus whispers, eyes fluttering shut as Sirius brushes their mouths together. Really, he shouldn't be so enticed by the idea of belonging to anything or anyone, considering his position, but the mere idea of belonging to *Sirius* shoots a thrill through him.

"Mine," Sirius agrees. "All mine."

There's something heady about Sirius' tone, the undercurrent of possessiveness in it, something resolute and set in stone, indisputable, and Remus believes it. Something within him surges up in wild agreement, and it's true. The Hallow can't have him; *Sirius* has him. Remus is *his*.

Remus has nothing. Has had nothing for five years. No possessions and nothing to claim, so he can't be blamed for losing his breath when Sirius leans in and whispers in his ear, "And I'm yours. I'm all yours, Remus, only and always."

The Hallow can't have Sirius either, not when Remus does. It's good to belong, like this, when it's safe and wanted, when it's a choice, when it's a discovery they're happy to have made. Sirius rocks back and kisses him, slow and soft, and Remus thinks he would let Sirius own him.

He thinks, in the best possible way, Sirius already does.

It doesn't scare him, not one bit.

He's never felt so free.

The feeling emboldens him, and he slips his hands around to slide them up Sirius' chest, pushing his shirt up slowly. Sirius helps him, carelessly flailing to send it flying, and neither of them even notice it on the floor. It doesn't matter, nothing matters, all that matters is this. Them. Sirius making a quiet sound into their unbroken kiss as he snatches a little frantically at Remus' shirt, trying to yank it off.

"I'm not picking that up," Remus declares a little breathlessly as he backs off enough to let Sirius peel him out of his shirt and launch it clear across the room.

"That's fine. That's—it's fine," Sirius groans, biting his lip as he slides his hands down Remus' chest. "If you wanted, I would pick it up and bring it to you with my *teeth."*

Remus tries not to let that go to his head, but it promptly goes right to his head. He blows out a deep breath, willing himself to remain calm. It's not working, but he feels he deserves an award for at least trying. "Sirius, you shouldn't say things like that. It—it does have an effect, you know."

"Oh, in that case, I'll just continue," Sirius says, his words tumbling out of him in a rush, "because the goal is to have sex. Very good sex, hopefully. Just—you know, naked. Us. Being naked. At the same time. For—sex."

"Sirius," Remus replies, working very hard not to laugh, because Sirius is so red that it looks *painful.*

"That was a very bad way to suggest sex. I am *so* sorry," Sirius announces, looking mortified. "That's not—I didn't want to say it like *that,* but…I don't even know how to say it. I mean, I just said it, but I meant to say it in a way that at least *sounded* good. What I mean is, we should—well, if you wanted to, we could—um, you could *absolutely* realign my spine."

Remus' eyebrows fly up, and Sirius immediately chokes out a horrified noise before ducking his head and burying his face into his hands. Rather against his will, Remus bursts out laughing, and needs a second to calm down while Sirius shakes his head from side-to-side and releases muffled curses into his palms over and over. Remus reaches out and peels Sirius' hands away, grinning at the deep blush on his face.

"Oh, I *can,* can I?" Remus teases.

"This is all James' fault," Sirius whispers mournfully.

Remus snorts. "What does James have to do with this?"

"I went to him for sex advice, and he said you were going to realign my spine—probably as a joke, I think—and then he said you might want me to realign *yours,* and—and I would try, if that's what you want, but to be honest, I have no idea what the fuck I'm doing," Sirius tells him, visibly frazzled.

"You look so pitiful right now," Remus admits, and Sirius sighs and just nods glumly, which only adds to the whole pitiful look of him. Remus wants to *bite* him. "Fortunately for you, I *do* know what the fuck I'm doing, and I know precisely how to cheer you up."

Sirius clears his throat. "Yeah? How's that?"

"Well, I doubt I'll realign your spine, but I can promise to make you feel good, at the very least," Remus muses.

"And you?" Sirius asks, sounding oddly anxious.

Remus chuckles and reaches out to wrap both arms around him. "Oh, don't worry about that. Everything's good when it's with you, Sirius."

"Well, that's reassuring," Sirius breathes out, and it really seems to be, because he relaxes all at once, in just enough time to release a yelp as Remus stands to his feet and hauls Sirius up with him at the same time. Sirius stares at him in disbelief, even as his legs naturally wrap around him so he won't fall.

"Don't look at me like that. I've got you," Remus mutters, rolling his eyes as he turns to walk around the bed.

"You're so strong. It's maddeningly attractive," Sirius blurts out, hands gripping Remus' shoulders tight. "Wait, disregard that. I didn't agree to be carried around, Remus! That was *not* a part of the sex plans!"

"You need better plans. This only adds to the ambiance," Remus tells him, pausing next to the bed. "Besides, you're mine, yes? That means I can do what I like with you."

Sirius sucks in a sharp breath, looking dazed by the casual comment, his mouth forming a perfect circle as he gapes at Remus, stunned into silence. Remus' lips twitch, and then he dumps Sirius right onto the bed with no warning whatsoever.

"Yes," Sirius chokes out, belatedly, still looking dazed. He's sort of limp on the bed, staying exactly where Remus dropped him. "Yes, absolutely. You—anything. Whatever you like."

Remus hums. "Noted. Quick question, do you have anything? For the *being naked at the same time and realigning one's spine* sort of sex, I mean."

Sirius groans again and flings his arm over his face, but he dutifully points towards the nightstand by his bed. "Pandora got it for me *just in case."*

"Kind of her," Remus says mildly, stifling a laugh as Sirius apparently tries to smother himself with his own arm out of pure embarrassment. He digs around in the drawer to find what he needs, sending a mental thank you to Pandora, then gazes fondly at Sirius. "You shouldn't be embarrassed, you know. There's nothing embarrassing about pleasure."

"Fuck you, it's *so* embarrassing," Sirius counters.

Remus chuckles and bends over to crawl up the length of Sirius' body, waiting for him to lift his arm before dipping in to kiss him. Sirius eventually settles into it, distracted fairly quickly, forgetting all of his embarrassment right around the time Remus licks into his mouth and draws a moan out of him.

"Still embarrassed?" Remus asks, dragging his mouth away to kiss along Sirius' jaw. Sirius is panting beneath him, loudly.

"Oh, fuck, not even a little bit," Sirius says, his voice cracking, and he tips his head back as he wraps his arms around Remus' shoulders, hands sliding into his hair.

"I know this was your plan, but if you want to stop—"

"Don't you *dare* fucking stop, Remus."

"Sweetheart, we haven't even gotten started," Remus tells him as he pulls back to gaze down at him, amused.

Sirius blows out a deep breath. "Shit, we're not even out of our pants yet."

"There's no rush," Remus murmurs, leaning in to kiss him yet again, addicted to it. When he pulls back, Sirius chases his mouth, his eyes glazed. "Just let yourself feel good, Sirius."

"I don't really have any other option when you're around," Sirius croaks, his eyes fluttering shut as Remus dips in to start kissing down his chest. "I—you make everything feel so fucking *good* all the time. Like—like so good that it can only be a crime, that's how good it is."

Remus laughs softly against Sirius' stomach, pressing a kiss to the faded scar there. A star in his galaxy. He tips his head up to look at Sirius, who's looking down at him with his bottom lip caught between his teeth. "Sirius, I should remind you, this *is* quite literally a crime."

"Worth it," Sirius blurts out, wide-eyed.

"My thoughts exactly," Remus agrees, and it is. It is *so* fucking worth it; every moment with Sirius, every single one, is worth the risk, the danger, the possibility of future death, or torture, or worse. If that's what's waiting for him, he wouldn't regret one moment of any of this that led him there.

This, too, is worth it. Making Sirius feel good. Coaxing him away from his own shame. Letting him accept pleasure like he deserves. Every loud moan, every hitched breath, every time Sirius' mouth shapes around Remus' name. It's all worth it.

It's easy, really, like most things are with them. Remus doesn't rush it, as if they have all the time in the world. He doesn't let this exist like an exchange for what tomorrow will bring; it's only now, it's only them, it's something and everything and most certainly not nothing.

Sirius is a mess throughout. A lovely, stuttering mess that Remus is fortunate enough to hold in his arms, to have claim to, to keep in every way except for one. That doesn't matter, here, not when Sirius squirms against him and yanks on his hair and gasps into his mouth, chanting his name like a fucking prayer and *begging,* so far gone that he's shameless, and Remus can't deny him anything. Doesn't even want to.

Remus has been with people before, of course, but nothing could have prepared him for the intimacy of it. He's never been in love before, and he knows that now, because it's different. It's immediately different with Sirius, the whole world seeming to shape around him until nothing else exists but his fevered eyes and slack mouth and where their bodies meet. It's dizzying, feeling so much all at once, feeling good and feeling love and feeling completely, utterly free.

"You—Remus, you have to move," Sirius whispers, the words placed in a perfect sequence for it to be an order, but sounding only like a plea.

But I want to stay here, in this forever that we've made, Remus thinks, a little delirious and dazed, desperate to exist in this moment that feels caught in amber, everlasting.

Nonetheless, Remus *does* move at some point, and then he can't believe he ever waited. He can only fold forward and press his face into the bend of Sirius' throat, groaning as he slides his hands up Sirius' arms to tangle their fingers together and press them to the bed above their heads. Sirius clings to Remus' hands for dear life.

Sirius is loud. Very loud. It maybe drives Remus a little insane, but that's alright, he's sure. People can probably hear, and Remus does not give one ounce of a fuck. *Let them hear,* he thinks. *Let the whole fucking Hallow hear.* He hopes they do. He hopes the entire city hears

Sirius and knows that he's not theirs, and knows that they can't have him, and knows that no one—ever—will be able to do to him what Remus does.

The only issue that comes about is that Sirius wholeheartedly protests any bit of space between them, which is only a problem because Remus would very much like to get him off *first,* and that requires leaning back to use his hand. Sirius is not having it. He practically throws a fit the moment Remus tries to let his hands go and lean up.

"Don't you dare. Don't you—don't stop. Please, *please* do not stop," Sirius chokes out, arching beneath him to try and press them closer, though they're already flush together as it is.

"I wasn't going to," Remus gasps out, squeezing his eyes shut as he tries to keep himself together. It's very difficult to do when Sirius, despite all his earlier reservations, is meeting his every thrust like a man possessed. "I just—I'd really like to see you first, Sirius, and as close as you may be, getting off on cock alone without even being touched doesn't always happen."

"It doesn't?" Sirius wheezes. "Are you *sure?* Because I'm—I'm really quite sure it's about to."

"Well, you can't until I tell you to anyway," Remus informs him, and then Sirius lets loose a string of vibrant curses before his jaw unhinges, and if Remus thought he was loud *before*—

"Oh, oh, fucking shit, I'm sorry," Sirius blurts on a whimper, his eyes fluttering open as he stares up at Remus, face flushed and chest heaving. He's pliant and relaxed beneath Remus, boneless, and even his words are slurring.

Remus shakes his head, huffing out a startled laugh, slowing his hips to a leisurely, easy roll that's not too much. Sirius shudders, his lips parting as his eyes fall shut again. "Why are you apologizing, Sirius? Literally for *what?"*

"You said I couldn't, and then I did," Sirius mumbles.

Remus has to kiss him for that, truly. Sirius hums happily and squeezes his hands, kicking up his hips in encouragement, and Remus doesn't come up for air until he's gasping for it. Too busy falling apart as everything good and perfect in the world hooks around the base of his spine and lurches forward until his ears are ringing and the only name being chanted now is Sirius', steadily spilling from Remus' mouth in reverence.

It takes them a bit to recover, admittedly. Love tends to have that effect, especially when you're making it.

~•~

"So?" James asks as Sirius crawls into bed with him.

"Yeah," Sirius breathes out.

"Spine?"

"Realigned. Absolutely, unequivocally realigned."

James busts out laughing, and Sirius grins even through his blush, folding forward to press his face into James' shoulder, feeling like he's floating, feeling so good that he barely even knows what to do with it, feeling love sweep through him as he thinks, rather helplessly and with immeasurable joy, that Remus came into his life and realigned that, too.

Chapter End Notes

to those of you who want to skip the watered-down sex scene: after remus tells sirius that what they're doing is technically a crime, and sirius blurts out, "worth it." just scroll from there—and it's fairly brief after that anyway!!!

to everyone else:

starting from the top, dorcas my beloved <3

then james and regulus' discussion pre-interview. first, okay, sorry i have to laugh bc regulus is just throwing around the fact that he and james "broke up" like it's fucking FACT, and james is like: wait, we were dating??? why wasn't i informed??? HELP 💀

also, that discussion about love!!! very, very important as well. i got a comment a bit ago talking about how the narrative that romantic love is, like, greater than anything else and is the only way someone can be fulfilled in life is harmful!!! and yes, it really is, and it was something i had wanted to address, specifically in this world where james and regulus' "romance" is treated the way it is. to that commenter, when i said it comes up, this is when i was talking about.

whenever i talk about the importance of love in fics, it's something i feel is important across all forms of love, be that between lovers, friends, family, etc—but also just love in life. like the love you can find in the world, because i do genuinely believe that in a world full of so much that hurts us, there's also so much love to be found as well. ya know, like a pretty sunset, the giggle of a child, a happy dog getting pets, a stranger offering a kind word on a hard day. that's all love, in its own way, at least to me. or maybe it's just something i desperately want to believe in, because isnt that just—so comforting? to me, it's comforting.

anyway, the point is, love as a broad topic—especially in my fics that deal heavily with love between lovers, between friends, and especially the love between sirius and regulus—well, it's important to me. special. and i always try to portray that through my writing. i hope it comes across the way i want it to

as for regulus and james, im sorry, but it's so cute to me that regulus was just staring at james like a lovesick idiot basically every time he said anything kind/insightful, especially when it was helpful to him, in particular. his issues with blood, for example, and james unknowingly spinning it in a positive light??? regulus is so in love. he's SO in love yall

terribly sad though that regulus is worried he doesn't love people the right way. like, he genuinely thinks he does it wrong, isn't enough, etc etc. i wanna hug him :(

the interview... yeah, that was rough. but they did indeed smash it!!! rita can choke tho <3

okay, now, sirius... THIS BABE!!! oh, how i love him. the fact that james was the first person to get sirius to laugh after he got back from the arena, and now sirius is the first person to make james laugh after HE gets back from the arena.... BRB SOBBING

no, they're so cute, they're besties!!! lmaoooo sirius going to james for sex tips GOODBYE 😭 james is so funny pls. he was like that mom off of mean girls like: do you need anything? snacks? no? okay, you two have fun! be safe! he's so supportive <3

and like, there is nothing embarrassing about pleasure, but there is a great amount of people out there that do indeed get embarrassed about it for various reasons. just the fact

that it's not seen as a bad thing, or treated like someone being embarrassed/flustered is bad or wrong or a joke—that's important to me. like, yes, they tease and laugh, sure, but no one shames sirius for it, and they give him the space to, like, grow into being more comfortable with it. that's as equally important as not shaming someone for being shameless.

just the wolfstar in this chapter holds a special place in my heart because they love each other soooo much, which makes me want to chew on concrete and bite my pillow. this line: "my treasure, the treasure I found in this sunken ship of a city. you glinted in the dark like the moon lights the sky, and i found you." is probably one of my all-time favorite lines ive ever written in any fic EVER. idk why. i was just really proud of it.

honorable mentions:

-JAMES MFING POTTER GETTING HIS GLASSES BACK!!!! FUCKING FINALLY!!! yes, his glasses are A Thing in this fic
-james teasing sirius about Having Impure Thoughts about regulus
-pandora being a queen who cares about sirius having safe sex and providing him what he needed to do that
-sirius getting off and immediately apologizing bc remus hadnt told him he could 😭😭😭
-regulus plotting rita's murder as we speak
-regulus hating to be touched but letting sirius comfort him

yeah that's about it. lemme wrap up and say thank you to everyone for all the support and kind comments. it means so much to me, you don't even know <3

Goodbye

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-ptsd/ptsd-responses (nightmares, paranoia, things such as that)
-mentions of blood
-references to past death
-references to torture (heavily implied, but not discussed in detail)
-references to dissociative amnesia (it doesn't occur, just briefly discussed)
-references to past child abuse (mostly implied and very vague, so you may not even notice, but still)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Well, so much for climbing."

Regulus turns his head and heaves a sigh when he sees Evan shaking his head at him. "Oh, get fucked. You *know* how I feel about climbing, Evan."

"I do know," Evan agrees, winking as he points down. Regulus reflexively follows the gesture, immediately dizzy when he can't see the ground, and he clings to the sturdy branch beneath them as he curses under his breath. When he looks up with a glare, Evan only laughs at him. "Really, the view at the top makes every bit of climbing worth it. That's where we're all trying to go, you know. Just trying to get to the view."

"I'd rather be on the ground," Regulus grumbles.

"You say that as if every glimpse of the top doesn't steal your breath," Evan challenges wryly. "Being on the ground only means you can't get lower. Trust me, getting higher is exactly where you want to be."

Regulus scoffs. "I'm fine here, thanks. But you go on. Don't let me stop you if you're so eager to get to the top."

"Ah," Evan says, his face softening into a sad smile. "Well, unfortunately I can't go any higher than this. I'll never see the top, I'm afraid."

"But you can climb," Regulus mutters, confused. His face scrunches up. "You're, like, the best climber."

Evan breaks out into a grin and bats his eyelashes as he waves his hand as if to say *oh, pish-posh.* "You flatter me." He chuckles and shakes his head, then tips his head back and smiles softly. "Even the best climbers can fall, lover boy."

"Yes, which means the *worst* climbers are even more likely to, hence the reason I will be refraining from climbing at all," Regulus declares. "Can't I just stay down here with you?"

"Just because I can't climb any higher doesn't mean you shouldn't," Evan says, jerking his chin towards the sky. "I mean, who could begrudge you that view?"

Regulus tips his head back, his breath punching out of him when he sees James and Sirius perched on a branch high above them, so high that they're framed by a magnificent sunrise impossibly dotted with glowing, glimmering stars. They're kicking their legs happily and grinning, and somehow, Regulus can hear their laughter like it's in his head.

Instinctively, Regulus calls out for them, but they either can't hear him from here, or they don't care to acknowledge him at all, and he really can't tell which it is. He blows out a deep breath, deflating in on himself as he stares up at them with some kind of inner distress. They're so *high.* There's absolutely no way he could ever reach them.

"You could get there, if only you'd try," Evan murmurs, sounding oddly solemn, and Regulus glances back towards him, only to feel his stomach lurch when he sees a spear driven right through Evan's middle.

"Evan," Regulus chokes out.

"You're closer than you think, Regulus," Evan tells him, lips curling up like he doesn't even notice the spear embedded in his stomach. "All you have to do is climb."

"Evan," Regulus repeats, his voice coming out sharp with a restless, frantic panic that makes his heart race. He stares wide-eyed at the spear. "You… Evan, you—you—"

"It's okay," Evan whispers. "Falling isn't as bad as you think. In a way, it's a bit like flying."

The branch beneath them that seemed so sturdy before gives a devastating and sudden *crack,* and Evan grants him a faint smile, soft and sad around the edges, before promptly tipping backwards with his hand outstretched. Regulus instantly lunges forward, crying out his name, but he doesn't manage to save Evan the way Evan always saved him, every time.

Their fingers only just brush before hands clamp down on Regulus all over from behind. Cold hands. Clawed hands. Cadaverous hands, dripping with blood, his blood as his skin is ripped into. He screams and fights and calls for Sirius and James to come save him, begging them, but they don't look down, they don't care, they don't stop *laughing*—

"—okay, shh, I promise you're okay." The words break through, snatching him right awake with an abruptness that startles him, and he automatically tries to lash out, but he's being held down. It only makes him thrash harder, flailing and fighting against the grip. "I know, I know, I'm sorry. Just—just breathe. You're going to hurt yourself if you don't relax. As soon as you relax, I'll let you go, I swear."

It takes a bit for those words to actually register and even longer for Regulus to digest them. When they finally do take shape in his brain in a way he can process them, and make sense of them, he slowly settles down, breathing hard as the world comes back into focus. His vision is blurry from tears, gritty from lack of sleep, and there's a light bathing the room in reality, assuring him that he's here, and not there.

"Regulus? Are you—do you want me to let you go now?"

"Yes," Regulus rasps. "Please."

Sirius does instantly, rolling away quickly like he might need to get out of range, just in case, and Regulus can't even blame him for that. Regulus doesn't do anything, though. He just sits up, panting as he scoots back to press his back against the wall and draw his legs up to his chest, wrapping his arms around them. Clumsily, he wipes his tears away and takes a long moment to calm down, to breathe.

Sirius settles down across from him, watching him with tension around his eyes, looking very, very tired. "It was just a nightmare, Reggie."

"I know," Regulus says quietly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Sirius asks.

"Was I calling out for you?" Regulus mumbles, and Sirius nods carefully. "James, too?" Another nod, and Regulus heaves a sigh as his shoulders slump. "It's not—I don't even really dream about either of you. Not exactly. It's—it's this recurring nightmare. Evan is always there. We're in a tree."

"You fall?" Sirius guesses.

Regulus swallows. "Evan does. I can never save him."

"That's not your fault," Sirius declares firmly. "What happened to Evan wasn't your fault, Regulus. *Nothing* that happened in the arena was your fault, but especially not that."

"I made him laugh," Regulus whispers. "No one ever thinks to look up, not until there's a sound, and I made him *laugh.* He would still—he'd be alive if—"

"Regulus," Sirius cuts in, pained, his throat rising and falling as he slowly shakes his head. "He *wouldn't* be, regardless of how he died. It's a brutal truth, but it *is* the truth."

"He could have won," Regulus croaks.

Sirius' lips press into a thin line, but he takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. All he says is, "I'm sorry, Reggie."

"Yeah," Regulus mutters, dropping his gaze, "me too."

"He didn't blame you. He wouldn't," Sirius murmurs.

Regulus huffs out a weak laugh and lifts his gaze, finding Sirius as sincere as Regulus has ever seen him. "You didn't even know him. *I* didn't even know him, Sirius, not really."

"Alright, maybe not, but…" Sirius purses his lips, then looks at him gently, like he might shatter. "I know what it is to have a best friend—a really good one, in fact—and they tend not to blame you for the things you can't forgive yourself for."

The thing is, Regulus *might* actually shatter after hearing that, because it somehow stings and soothes him all at once. What falls out of Regulus' mouth is a choked, "It's not fair," because it's not. It isn't fair that everyone else gets to have what he can't, what he's lost, what he doesn't have the will to take.

"I know it's not," Sirius agrees, his eyes sad. "I know."

And that's the thing, isn't it? Sirius *does* know. The games took plenty away from him, too, even if Regulus didn't see it all. He knows for sure now anyway. He even knows that all the games after that he mentored for, especially *this* one, took things from Sirius as well. He even lost *his* best friend, briefly, along with his brother—getting them back can never fully make up for that, and Regulus knows it.

He's not so sure that it ever will for him either.

~•~

Pandora cooks breakfast, for which Sirius is thankful, because he desperately does not want Remus to be too busy doing that to spend time with him. It's something light and quick they're all probably better off eating together in a group setting, but Regulus has been off since his nightmare and isn't ready to leave his room, and James has—for no apparent reason—taken three showers back to back and can't be convinced to abandon his fourth. James *and* Regulus, along with Pandora, have insisted that Sirius spend his morning with Remus, and he can't stop himself from giving into the urge to do so.

They've sequestered themselves away in Sirius' room, and Sirius is draped over him dramatically, randomly releasing fussy, garbled noises of displeasure like he may be dying. Every time, Remus snorts fondly into his hair and massages his scalp until he shuts up again.

Sirius would like to spend his morning with Remus having vivacious, messy sex made of desperation, because that feels very suitable for their dreadful predicament, but Remus had vetoed that option with immense and undeniable regret. Sirius has checked *twice* to see if Remus has changed his mind, but Remus insists that it's best if they don't. He swears up and down that it would only make them feel worse, and the sex itself would be drenched in loss and them preemptively missing one another, which would only add to the pain.

So, Sirius lets it go. After all, Remus is more experienced with sex and such, and it's not like he would insist on it anyway if Remus is saying no. He just wants Remus to know he is very down for instant gratification, even if it leads to him getting his feelings hurt more than they are already.

They've both been quiet, but Sirius has kept an eye on the clock, his stomach dropping out from underneath him every time he checks it to see more time slipping away. They're running out of time, and Sirius doesn't know what to do. He doesn't think there's anything he *can* do, though not for a lack of internal debate and mental plans drawn up that had to be repeatedly discarded because they wouldn't actually work.

"What if," Sirius starts, very carefully, but he doesn't even get to voice the full thought before Remus interrupts.

"Won't work."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Something about you packing me in your bag and carrying me out of here, or just sneaking me away, or kidnapping me and hoping no one notices," Remus says.

Sirius lifts his head and rests his chin on Remus' chest, squinting at him suspiciously. "Can you read my mind?"

"Every dirty, naughty, shameful thought," Remus quips immediately, lips twitching. "Every time you see me, it's a steady stream of: *okay, okay, remain calm, there he is, be normal, just be normal, fuck, how do I be normal?"*

"Um." Sirius blinks at him and raises his head up, genuinely feeling a little uneasy. "Wait, can you *actually* read my—"

"Fuck's sake, *no,"* Remus cuts in with a choked laugh, his eyes lighting up. "Is that what you think? Genuinely?"

"Pretty much," Sirius admits, his face getting hot. Remus looks so fond. "That, or some version of it that's close, basically. I can't help it. You make me feel like I'm going to *explode."*

"I told you, I like you just as you really are, Sirius," Remus murmurs, tugging his hand from where it's buried in Sirius' hair for the sole purpose of working it back in there, scratching gently at his scalp. There's a faint smile on his face, a little nostalgic. "Do you want to know something?"

"Yes," Sirius answers immediately.

"I actually had to work up the courage to touch your hair the first time that I did," Remus informs him. "I was—nervous. I wanted to very, *very* much, but I was still relearning how to let myself have the things I wanted, so I started out slow, with just the very ends, working up to winding a few strands around my finger, and then, finally, I just—went for it. Even just that felt like an act of rebellion. I was scared, and thrilled, and then the only thing that mattered was how it felt to touch you. Every time, Sirius, you matter more."

Sirius swallows harshly, his eyes stinging. He blinks rapidly and whispers, "I'm going to miss you so fucking much."

"Every time you do, every time I cross your mind, take that as a reminder to treat yourself with care," Remus whispers back, his eyebrows furrowed. "That's just me being there to tell you to be kind to yourself, to eat if you haven't, to rest if you need it, to slow down and do it one-day-at-a-time. That's all it is."

"You'll think of me, too, won't you?" Sirius asks.

Remus snorts weakly. "Constantly, I assure you."

"Then *I* assure *you,"* Sirius mumbles, "that's just me being with you as a reminder that you deserve better than what you have. Never forget that, Remus. Never forget that you deserve good things, and I so desperately want you to have them."

"Deal," Remus croaks.

"I'm—" Sirius takes a deep, shuddering breath, his stomach cramping with fear. "I'm scared I'll forget. I won't mean to, but what if—Remus, what if I—"

"Sirius—"

"What if I get it—all of this with you—mixed up? What if I invent memories we never had, or forget the ones we do have? I don't want to do that. I don't know how to stop it. I don't—"

"You won't," Remus cuts in. "And, if you do, that's okay. It's okay. Any memory you lose, I'll hold onto. Any memory you invent is just—it's real in some other life, how about that? And—and you can ask James or Regulus for help, you know. I'm aware that you're determined to take care of them, but don't be afraid to let them take care of you, too. They want to, okay? That means something."

"Okay," Sirius rasps. He bites the inside of his cheek, trying to stave off the devastation creeping in like a vice around his throat. "You're sure I can't just steal you away?"

"Sadly, no," Remus tells him, sighing. "I have a tracker in my thigh, and it would send out a notification if I cut it out. Don't think it hasn't crossed my mind, because it has, but—" He swallows. "I'd never get far. They'd come for me. I'd be dead before I ever made it out of the Hallow. And—and my dad… Sirius, he's still alive. They could kill him if I—if I even *dared* to—"

"Okay, hey, okay, I'm sorry," Sirius interrupts quickly, trying to soothe the rising pitch of distress in Remus' voice. He reaches up to cradle Remus' cheek, smiling at him softly. "It's okay, Remus. I understand. I'm—fuck, I'm so sorry."

"I used to think about it a lot, you know. I used to come up with plans on how to break out and get away. I was—well, I was rather obsessive about it, actually, and then I just…stopped doing it. I don't even know when. Just, one day, I realized I had essentially given up and given in," Remus explains, and Sirius doesn't think he's ever heard anything more tragic in his life. It doesn't feel right, the mere concept of Remus Lupin giving up and giving in to anything. "I don't know when I lost hope, Sirius, but I know exactly when I got it back. The precise moment I met you."

"I'll remind you as many times as you need," Sirius murmurs, his throat feeling thick. "I meant what I said. I have to come back here every year, and whatever it takes, I will make sure I see you again. I promise, Remus."

"If you can't," Remus starts.

"There is no *can't,"* Sirius says sharply. "I *will."*

Remus' face softens. He smiles slightly. "Okay."

Sirius relaxes a little. "Okay." They stare at each other for a long beat, and then Sirius exhales explosively. "What's going to happen to you? I mean, do you just…stay here?"

"No," Remus says, grimacing slightly. "Servants who aren't on assignments are kept in Azkaban. It's a prison where we reside until we're chosen and approved for assignments. Only a few servants never go there, those that are on assignment full-time at Riddle's castle. The rest of us have to remain there."

"What's it like?" Sirius asks cautiously. "Azkaban, I mean."

"It's…" Remus falls silent, tension threaded throughout his body, something blocked in his neutral expression that makes Sirius almost sure Remus won't tell him. There are a lot of things Remus doesn't feel comfortable talking about, and Sirius doesn't want to push, even if he *is* curious. Still, in the end, Remus surprises him. "It's cold. So cold and—and *hollow.* It's dead silent in the cells, because—well, because we have to keep on our masks, even there, and the silence is… It makes it impossible not to hear the screams from the lower levels. That's where they, um, experiment and—well. Yeah."

Sirius feels his heart sink just thinking about Remus being there. Remus clearly has said as much as he can, so Sirius forces himself not to ask further questions, and maybe there's a part of him that's terrified to know more. The thought of Remus in those conditions makes his skin crawl and every cell in his body scream out in protest.

"Will you have any assignments?" Sirius asks, strained.

"I don't know," Remus murmurs, and he heaves a sigh when Sirius' eyes sink shut. His fingers scrunch in Sirius' hair, giving him a gentle shake, encouraging him to open his eyes. When he does, Remus is smiling, just a bit. "Don't worry about any of that, Sirius. Let's just…be here together, yeah?"

"Yeah, okay," Sirius rasps, darting his eyes towards the clock and instantly feeling a wave of tears assualt him when he sees how much time they have—or don't have, really.

"Sirius," Remus says softly.

"It's too soon," Sirius croaks. "I—I don't want to go. For the very first time, I don't want to go, and it's entirely your fault, because I don't want to leave you."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Remus whispers.

"We didn't have enough time," Sirius chokes out, squeezing his eyes shut as he buries his face down into Remus' chest, helpless to the sobs that wrench out of him.

Remus strokes his hair, and that is all.

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James has had six showers. Every time he got out, he'd last maybe ten minutes before getting right back in. The steam had worked wonders on his leg, and it's the only thing that has been able to work the chill out of his bones. He'd dreamed of Vanity last night, trying to keep her from freezing, but he hadn't been warm enough, and she'd frozen before shoving her icy fingers right into his chest. He's been shivering ever since.

Still, the showers did help, and he doesn't have a seventh, mostly because the pads of his fingers have gotten wrinkly in a way he doesn't like. He goes out to the kitchen instead, trying to let Pandora's chatter warm him up. It does, a bit.

"Not too long now, James, and you'll be home," Pandora tells him from where she's sitting next to him at the table. She made him a steaming cup of tea, which he's been sucking down, letting it warm him from the inside out.

"Will I ever get to see you again?" James mumbles.

Pandora gives him a gentle smile. "Well, you'll see me for the victory tour, of course, and you'll see me every year for the reaping. I arrive a little early, so there'd be no harm in stopping by to say hello, if that's something you'd like."

"Yeah, I—I think I really would," James tells her, completely sincere. He smiles at her weakly. "You're my friend, Pandora."

"I… Well, I know that may come as a surprise, considering my position, but I want you to know that I am truly honored to be your friend, and Regulus'," Pandora says softly. "You're more than Victors, to me. Please never think differently."

"I couldn't," James says simply, because he really couldn't. Pandora has made sure of that. He reaches out and grabs her hand, hesitating only for one moment before lifting it and pressing a careful kiss to the back of her fingers. He smiles at her sheepishly when he lets go. "I only just learned what that meant last night, but I really do admire you and all that you've done for us, so I think it's fitting that you're the first person I ever do that to. Thank you, Pandora, for everything."

Tears flood Pandora's eyes pretty much instantly, and James' smile drops as his eyes bulge, but she chokes out a wet laugh and flaps her hands, sniffling. "No, it's—don't look so worried, I'm just very—I'm emotional, I suppose. You mean so much to me, James. You and Regulus. Sirius as well. You all—you can't possibly know what all of you mean to me."

"I think we have an idea," James murmurs gently. "You're important to us, too."

That sets Pandora off all over again, and she stands up swiftly to swivel around the table, waiting only long enough to get his permission before hugging him while he's still in his chair. He leans into her, helplessly fond. She still smells like lemons.

When she lets him go, Pandora laughs and mutters under her breath about needing to go fix her makeup, squeezing his shoulder before sweeping off. James thinks she just needs a moment, so he watches her go with a soft smile. She's right, he didn't expect to care for her as much as he does, but he's never been more grateful to be wrong.

It's special, what Pandora represents for him. Her and Dorcas. Gideon and Fabian, too. Though the Hallow may be hollow, there are still Hallows with so much life and *goodness* inside them that it fills him with this unrelenting hope that he's more than happy to cling to. This is what he means about believing that there's good in people, in this world, even *this* world that has so much pain and horror in it that finding a hint of good seems impossible. But it's not, and that's important to him.

James sits at the table and finishes his tea, but he doesn't linger for long. Sirius is with Remus, as he should be, and James thinks he would literally die before interrupting them. They deserve their time together. He's still restless, though, not particularly wanting to be alone, and of course there's always a part of him that wants to be near Regulus.

He hasn't seen him since the interviews. The moment they made it back to the suite, they separated and didn't find their way back to each other. That's sort of their thing, isn't it?

Really, James supposes it's fitting that he's the one to seek Regulus out again, to keep trying in spite of all the reasons there's no point. If anyone knows how to weaponize optimism, it's him. He's still…him, even after everything. Somehow, that makes living just a little easier.

Taking a deep breath, James uses his cane to help haul himself out of his chair, shuffling down the hall and pausing briefly outside of Sirius' door. He doesn't listen. He just stands there, feeling a wave of protectiveness wash over him, his fingers itching with the need to shelter Sirius—and Remus—from the loss they're enduring. He wants to, but he can't.

Swallowing, James continues, stopping only once he's outside Regulus' door this time. His stomach wriggles around with nerves, but he gathers his courage and knocks. "Reg? It's, um,

James. I mean, obviously you know it's me. Are you…there? Well, you might be on your balcony, so you probably can't even hear me, but I just—"

"I'm here," Regulus calls, his voice muffled like he's not close to the door this time.

"Oh." James blinks, genuinely startled that one, Regulus isn't out on the balcony, and two, he's actually willing to respond to James at all. Clearing his throat, James fiddles anxiously with the handle of his cane. "Would it be alright if I came in?"

There's a long, *long* beat of silence that stretches on so much that James is pretty sure it's going to be a no, which he would respect, but Regulus surprises him by saying, "Yes, okay."

Hesitantly, James eases the door open and slips inside, shutting it behind him. He immediately figures out why Regulus sounded so far away. He isn't out on the balcony, but he's standing in the doorway of it, leaning against the open door and looking outside, his back to James. He doesn't turn around, and neither of them speak for a long moment.

Finally, James tentatively asks, "Saying goodbye to the view?"

This, for some reason, is the wrong thing to say. He hears Regulus' sharp intake of breath and sees his entire body go stiff with tension, and he doesn't know what he's done wrong. He always gets it wrong with Regulus, no matter how hard he tries. Every single fucking time.

"Yeah," Regulus says, clipped, "something like that."

"Sorry if I—sorry. I don't know what I said, but I'm sorry," James mumbles wearily, his shoulders slumping.

"Don't worry about it," Regulus responds, the tension slowly draining from his shoulders. His voice still has an edge to it, though. "Why are you here, James? What do you need?"

James feels his heart drop when he realizes that Regulus is doing this, allowing James in, only because he thinks that James needs something from him. And James doesn't want that to be what this is about. He doesn't want Regulus to ignore his own discomforts in the endeavor to take care of him, regardless of what he actually wants.

"Don't—do that. You don't have to do that, Regulus," James says with a frown. "You don't have to prioritize my needs over your own, *especially* when they clash with your own."

"Shut up, James," Regulus replies dismissively. "I can't give you anything else, but I can give you this. This is something I can do, so I'll do it. What do you need?"

You, James thinks. *Sirius. My parents. Gideon, and Fabian, and Peter. Irene and Mathias. Vanity and Hodge. World peace.*

"I just…" James trails off, because obviously Regulus can't give him any of that, and James doesn't expect him to. "I don't know. We're going home today. Soon. I just—I suppose I wanted to talk to you before we left, that's all."

"Took a lot to get here, didn't it?" Regulus murmurs.

"Yeah," James says quietly. "Yeah, it did."

Regulus heaves a sigh. "It'll be nice for you. Seeing your parents, I mean."

"It will," James agrees carefully, even as his heart jumps and his fingers tingle with the reminder that he'll be seeing his mum and dad again today. But Regulus… Well. "Er, what about you? Are you, um, excited to…see yours again?"

"Ecstatic," Regulus says flatly, and James winces. Regulus has a very complicated relationship with his parents, James knows that, so he isn't entirely sure how to navigate this conversation with him. With *Sirius,* it's easier, because Sirius hates their guts. Regulus, James knows, doesn't. At least not entirely.

James bites his lip. "Will they…be angry with you? For…our…"

"Love story?" Regulus asks wryly. "Yes, most likely. They won't care that we did it to survive. They won't care that we didn't have a choice. They really despise you, you know."

"Yes, I know. I take it as a compliment." James pauses, then coughs. "Er, no offense."

Regulus releases a soft, quiet laugh that doesn't last very long but still lights James up from the inside out anyway. "None taken, I promise. It *is* a compliment, I suppose. In any case, I don't really—care. I just don't have it in me to care what they're going to think or how they'll act. If I'm disowned the same as Sirius, then so be it. If not, well, sure. Their opinion has never seemed more meaningless than it does now."

"Is that…a good thing?" James checks cautiously.

"It's…" Regulus pauses, then hums. "No, I don't think so. I don't think it's a bad thing either. It just…is."

"Right," James says. "Well, is there anyone else you're the least bit excited to see?"

"Barty," Regulus replies instantly, no hesitation, a low note of yearning in his voice that makes James instinctively grind his teeth. He shoves the reflexive response of jealousy down as far as it will go, because even if it *is* Barty, James is grateful that Regulus has someone he's eager to get back to. He doesn't have anyone else, not even his fucking parents, so James smothers his jealousy and decides to be grateful for Barty instead. "I can practically hear you fuming back there."

James clears his throat. "No, that's—it's good. I mean, really, it's good that you have him."

"Trying to be the better man?"

"Trying to be *a* better man. It's a choice that I never want to stop trying to make. It's—harder than it should be sometimes. Harder than it used to be."

"You're a good man," Regulus says softly. "Better than most, even without trying. It's okay if you don't get it right every time. It's like you said, they can never take who you are away from you, and I promise you, you are good. Never doubt that."

"I love you," James blurts out, the words sort of just tumbling from his lips, because he feels so—so *full.* Just so full of so many things, good and bad, and that's how it comes out of him. Love. Every time, it's always love. Regulus can't say things like that to him, things that make him want to fold in half and fucking *cry,* and not expect this response.

Regulus ducks his head forward, his shoulders pulled taught, and James can hear him taking in a measured breath before slowly releasing it. He doesn't reply. He doesn't say anything at all.

"I'm—I'm sorry. That was—I'm sorry," James stutters, shaking his head as he squeezes his eyes shut. "I just—I only said it because it's true, not because I expect anything from you. I don't, Regulus, not even when we get home."

"When we get home," Regulus rasps, "I think we're both going to need…time. And space. I think it's best if we don't—if we—"

"I won't push," James cuts in firmly, eyes snapping open. He sets his shoulders, because he needs Regulus to hear this, to know it. "I promise I won't push, okay?"

Regulus deflates a little, exhaling all at once. "Thank you," he whispers. And then, "Just—I know that's not enough, but that's all I've got, and I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry that I—"

"Stop. Regulus, stop," James cuts in, his chest feeling tight, because he can see how much Regulus is struggling with this, with all of it. "That's enough. It's more than enough. *You're* enough, okay? Hey, look at me. Can you look at me?"

Regulus is silent for a beat, breathing again for a long moment before stepping back and shutting the balcony door. He still hesitates, and the moment of hesitation absolutely breaks James' heart. But, inevitably, Regulus does turn to look at him, and his expression immediately fractures as soon as their eyes meet, his breath hitching as he goes very still.

James forgets instantly what he was going to say, because Regulus is looking at him with wide eyes full of pure wonder, something reverent in his gaze. "Reg? What? What is it?"

"Your glasses," Regulus says, and his voice cracks. James' hand not on his cane flies up automatically to touch the corner of his frames, startled slightly to remember that they're there, perched on his nose like they never left. They still feel the same. "You got your glasses back."

"Yeah, I—" James never really gets to finish, because Regulus closes the distance between them ridiculously fast and has James' face in his hands in seconds, kissing him like it's the very first time, and the last, and maybe it is.

It doesn't take James very long to shift gears, immediately and wholeheartedly on board with this, everything else ceasing to exist pretty much instantly. His cane clatters carelessly to the floor as his arms fly up to slip around Regulus' waist, dragging him closer. Regulus goes stiff against him instantly, and James hastily drops his arms, not touching, which allows Regulus the space to relax, to sink into him. He does, in increments, making a small sound into the kiss, something weak and desperate that makes James tremble.

Regulus is kissing James so fiercely, so deeply, that James can feel where his glasses press against his face, going a little wonky from the force of it.

It lasts as long as it takes for James' leg to buckle, which is not nearly long enough, in his opinion. He doesn't even give a shit about the rising pain in his leg, because he's felt worse, and it's so muted—a dull throb in the background—that he can literally ignore it. Well, he can until his leg apparently decides it's done holding all his weight and just—gives out.

James curses sharply as they break apart, because he stumbles and nearly falls; the only reason he doesn't collapse is because Regulus catches him quickly, holding him up with a

grunt. It's artless and messy as they trip towards the bed, James letting out a long stream of furious expletives the whole way there, utterly *raging* about his predicament.

He's not sure what's pissing him off more; the fact that he has the injury at all, or the fact that his leg is failing him when he's trusted in it his whole life, *or* the fact that a kiss that *they* started on their own, in private, got interrupted with a reminder of what they'd both rather forget.

"Are you okay?" Regulus asks as he helps James ease down on the edge of the bed, staring at him with wide eyes.

"I'm *fine,"* James snaps. "Just fucking grand."

Regulus swallows. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"No, no, you *absolutely* should have," James corrects quickly. "In fact, if you wanted to, you could—"

"I'm getting your cane," Regulus cuts in firmly, not quite meeting his gaze as he draws back to do exactly that.

James throws his hands up and mimes strangling some invisible entity towards the sky, or the universe, because there *has* to be some deity out there getting a kick out of fucking with him and making him miserable. He groans and flops back on Regulus' bed, fighting the ridiculous urge to kick and flail and scream at the top of his lungs. Oh, he's so fucking *angry* about this. They were kissing. It was—they were—

"James," Regulus mutters, nudging him with his cane.

James snatches it away and tosses it over the side of the bed as he bolts right back up and grits out, "Please, *please* do not let my leg get in the way of what we were just doing."

"I'm not," Regulus mumbles, then heaves a sigh when James presses his lips into a thin line. "I swear I'm not, James. There are countless ways we could do—what we were doing, and more, that wouldn't be an issue for your leg. It's *not* that."

"So, what is it?" James asks wearily.

Regulus swallows. "I shouldn't have done it to start with. It doesn't—nothing has changed, alright? I still can't. Fuck, I couldn't even let you touch me. I shouldn't have done that. It was wrong. I'm sorry."

"Why did you?" James murmurs.

"I couldn't help it," Regulus admits, a strain in his voice as he reaches out and gently touches the side of James' glasses. His face softens as he straightens them on James' face, and he looks so adoring that James' heart fucking *riots*.

James leans closer, looking up at him. "I'm not upset that you did. Far from it, in fact. If you want, we can just kiss, and I won't touch you. We can—I mean, it doesn't have to…mean anything."

"James," Regulus says flatly, arching an eyebrow at him, but James remains stubborn. Regulus sighs. "I *know* you, you idiot. Of course it'll mean something, especially to you, and…" He holds James' gaze, his voice a lot quieter as he exhales and confesses, "It'll mean something to me, too. It'll mean too much, and it'll hurt, and aren't we hurt enough?"

"Yes, exactly. It *already* hurts, so this won't change anything," James whispers. "I know it doesn't change anything, love, and I don't expect it to. I don't need it to."

Regulus closes his eyes, flexing his fingers before drawing his hand away from James' glasses. "It'll only be good for as long as we're doing it, and then you'll regret it."

"Will I?" James murmurs. "I don't think I will. I think I'll be grateful that we did, even if it doesn't get us any closer to what we want. If you don't want to, that's one thing. If you're holding back because you're trying to protect me, that's something else entirely."

"Obviously I want to," Regulus snaps, as if insulted by the insinuation that he doesn't, which is a far cry from all the times he denied wanting James at all. It's still so shocking to see him being upfront and honest about his feelings, but James is realizing that Regulus was never lying to him before. He genuinely didn't know. "I just…"

"You want me? I'm here. I'm right fucking here, love," James breathes out. His heart thumps heavily in his chest, because Regulus tips himself forward, as if he's slowly being reeled in. "Use me. Have me, then discard me. Hurt me. I don't care, Regulus. You can do anything to me, and I'll thank you for it every time."

Regulus' breath audibly hitches, and he sways forward, his fingers twitching restlessly. There's so much restraint packed into his frame that it's almost painful to look at, and James, perhaps foolishly, wants to pluck at that restraint and bite down on it, worry it between his teeth, and relish in the taste when it finally snaps. Every part of him craves it, wanting so badly for Regulus to, in so many words, just fucking lose it and stop holding himself back, regardless of consequences.

Distantly, James knows that Regulus holds back for a *reason,* because he has trauma to navigate, because he can only go so far and give so much before they're stranded with nothing, no closer to what they ache for, never close enough. But that's—okay. Well, it's not, but James has made his peace with it and will continue to, and this… He just wants whatever Regulus will give him. Whatever Regulus *can* give him. James will take it, anything, and never demand more.

James took it when it was ignorance, and James took it when it was derision, and James took it when it was confusing, and James will take it when it hurts, gladly. Regulus has held a dagger to his throat, and some part of James had hoped he'd use it, just to have that from him, too.

"I don't want to hurt you anymore," Regulus whispers, and despite his words, he's moving closer like the temptation is too hard to resist, which maybe goes to James' head a bit. He keeps forgetting that Regulus actually *wants* him, that he has any allure to Regulus at all, and rediscovering that is a rush every single fucking time.

"I want you to," James admits bluntly, utterly breathless, gazing up at him in awe. "Hurt me. Just fucking ruin me."

"James," Regulus mumbles, as if in disapproval, but he's still not stopping his slow approach, so James figures he has no need to be ashamed of what he's saying.

"Think about it, love. A slap across the face is just a hand cradling a cheek with too much force," James says, his mouth dry. "I can take it. I swear I can take it. I might even like the way it stings, so long as it's your hand that leaves the mark."

Regulus swallows. "You deserve better."

"Oh, trust me, this will do for now," James assures him, his entire body singing with anticipation as Regulus braces his knee on the edge of the bed next to James' thigh.

"What if I can never give you better?" Regulus asks, still hesitating, his gaze guarded.

"You're the best I'll ever have, however I can have you, however briefly," James whispers, keeping his hands flat to the bed, fingers shaking. "And what about you? Don't you deserve this?"

"No," Regulus replies instantly, sounding certain.

"You do, you absolutely do, and you'll have it. If you want it, you'll have it," James declares, meaning that down to his fucking soul, and then his soul is alight because Regulus seems to give in, his hands reaching out to frame James' face.

"I'm sorry," Regulus rasps.

"I'm not," James whispers, craning forward as far as he can go, groaning helplessly when Regulus meets him halfway and kisses him.

And there it is. The snap. Regulus' restraint shrivels into ash with a sizzle James swears he can hear where Regulus' palms cradle his cheeks. It's pretty much instant, as if his resistance has been on a slow boil for a long time now, maybe a decade. The mere thought makes James' head spin with a mixture of delight and relief and *yes, yes, yes.* Regulus clutches at his hair and *pulls,* yanking James' head back to rise up slightly and kiss him from a higher angle, like a benevolent god breathing life into James' lungs.

He doesn't stop. He *isn't* stopping, and James feels like he's levitating as soon as it really hits him that it's actually happening, that they're actually doing this. He knows it's a bad idea; he just doesn't care.

Regulus turns out to be quite the needy thing, much to James' internal delight. He's fucking *clingy,* and he's demanding, even when they're just kissing. It's messy and desperate between them, Regulus steadily trying to get closer and kiss him deeper, a low whine escaping him every time James dares to separate even an inch for a small sip of much-needed oxygen.

"Okay, okay," James chants breathlessly, flexing his fingers into the bedsheets, not really having much of a choice but to tip his head to the side so Regulus can latch onto his throat, because apparently pulling away from James would be a crime of some sort. "Is this—it's just kissing, right?"

"Just kissing, just this, and don't—don't move, James. Stay just like this," Regulus mumbles into his skin, like a warning. "I want you right here. Right here..."

Dazed, James chokes out a laugh and wheezes, "Yeah, alright. Whatever you want, love."

"You are so—" Regulus doesn't even finish, because he's made his way back to James' mouth, and he seems more preoccupied with that than talking.

James feels simultaneously drunk and intensely clear-headed, lost in the sensation of Regulus all around him and still mentally capturing every moment to hold onto forever. Regulus cards

his fingers through James' hair, tugging roughly enough that James' entire body prickles. A shudder ripples through him, and he clenches his fingers on the sheets, feeling like an engine seconds from combustion, seconds from bursting into flames.

They don't slow down, they don't stop, they just let the world wash away from them, regardless of how much it's going to hurt when it inevitably crashes back down on them once more.

It'll take a while, but later—much later—James will look back on this and wonder, sadly, if it was a parting gift, too.

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Remus has seen Sirius in various states of despair, but this is somehow much worse. Maybe it's because all of the things that were wrong before ended up mostly working out; he got his brother and his best friend back. But this?

There's no happy ending to this.

Frankly, Remus finds it particularly crushing that he's so familiar with Sirius' despair, even more so than his joy. By a wide margin, Remus was far more exposed to Sirius' pain than his happiness, and it doesn't feel fair to him. He's thankful for every bit of Sirius that he got to have, but he'll always ache for the fact that he saw more tears than smiles.

"Why—Remus, why are you grabbing that?" Sirius croaks, watching him with wide, watery eyes as he picks up his mask from where he originally sat it down on Sirius' stand. Usually, he keeps it in the kitchen, but he'd come straight to Sirius' room as soon as he got in this morning, barely remembering to take the mask off at all before he went in.

"Sirius," Remus says softly, "I'll have to put it back on when you all leave. I have to wait here for them to come retrieve me to travel back to Azkaban. I don't know exactly when that will be, so I have to wear it as soon as you go."

Sirius' lips press into a thin line, and then he looks away as he blinks hard, swallowing thickly and taking a deep breath. He gives a jerky nod, then squeezes his eyes shut, looking pained.

"Come here," Sirius croaks, opening his eyes and waving him over, his face blotchy and red in a way Remus takes no delight in at all. He's a mess, even like this, and still beautiful, but Remus wants the blush he loves, the sweet one. Sirius isn't in the state to give it to him as he outstretches his hand and wiggles his fingers. "Let me hold it."

"My mask?" Remus murmurs, admittedly a little bewildered even as he shuffles over to pass it to Sirius.

"The mask. Not *your* mask," Sirius corrects sharply, and Remus tucks his lips in, thinking it's best that he doesn't mention that this mask is quite literally his, because it's fitted to his face, built and made for him and him alone.

"What are you doing?" Remus asks, stiffening as Sirius brings the mask up to his own face. He immediately hates the sight of it framed on Sirius, his stomach lurching.

Sirius doesn't answer him, but he thankfully doesn't try to fully put the mask on. No, he just brings it to his face and proceeds to—kiss the inside of it. Like, a loud, smacking smooch that makes Remus blink at him.

"There," Sirius declares decisively, giving a firm nod as he holds out the mask again. He catches Remus' gaze and says, without a hint of shame or embarrassment, "This way, every time you have it on, I'm giving you a kiss."

Remus stares at him, his chest pulsing with a strangled mix of fondness and pain. Oh, how he loves this man. Swallowing, he croaks, "Quickest way to make me never want to take it off."

Sirius releases a hoarse laugh that seems to scrape out of him, and the tears are building in his eyes again. They're rimmed with red and puffy, his eyelashes clumped together. Remus reaches out to take the mask, and as soon as he has it, Sirius is colliding into him and wriggling into his arms, not for the first time, but possibly the last. Remus wraps his arms

around him, holding onto his mask behind his back, and he presses a kiss to Sirius' cheek as he burrows in closer.

"I have to go," Sirius chokes out.

"I know," Remus says gently.

Sirius holds onto him for a bit longer, then gives a quiet and rather adorable sniffle before shifting to lean on Remus, apparently determined to stay attached the whole way out the door. Remus adjusts, keeping one arm around him as they shuffle along, heading out into the main room.

Pandora, Regulus, and James are already there, waiting by the door. James is leaning on his cane, looking at Regulus with unabashed focus, like that's all he can see. Alternatively, Regulus is looking anywhere *but* James, so he sees the moment that Remus and Sirius come in. Remus finds himself oddly warmed by the sympathy that flashes in his eyes.

"Right," Pandora declares loudly, her voice shaking a bit. Her gaze is so fucking sad. "I have to go ahead to—to let them know to get the train started, and I won't be traveling with you, so this is—this is…goodbye."

"Ah, come here," James mumbles weakly, waving her over with a soft smile, and she instantly shuffles over to sort of just sag into his arms.

"Regulus," Remus says quietly, "can I have a word?"

"Um." Regulus blinks at him, darting a glance towards Sirius, who is frowning, mostly likely from the displeasure of having to let go, because that is what Remus is insinuating, yes. A beat later, Regulus gives a careful nod.

Remus' lips twitch faintly when Sirius huffs in mild protest at the fact that Remus genuinely does detach away from him, but as always, he lets Remus do as he wishes. It's nice the way

he turns away and shuffles over to murmur to James and Pandora, who seem to be checking on him, while Remus and Regulus cross the room to get far enough that they won't be overheard.

"I'm not going to say anything, but I don't think I really have to," Remus says quietly, holding Regulus' gaze. He briefly breaks from it to look over at Sirius, and Regulus follows his glance before meeting his eyes again. "You know what I'm asking, don't you?"

"Yes," Regulus whispers.

"So, you will?" Remus checks, wanting confirmation, even though a part of him already knows.

Regulus swallows. "I'll…try. If he lets me, I will, but that task is usually granted to James, and James only."

"I'm not asking James. I'm asking you. James—I don't have to ask. But you…" Remus sighs. "You're a lot like Sirius about these things, thinking of the act of taking care of people like it's currency, and you can go bankrupt; or like an obligation, a task that you can fail. That's not what it is. It's a choice, Regulus. I'm asking you to make it."

"Okay," Regulus rasps, blinking a little rapidly and nodding carefully. "Yes, okay, I will."

"Good," Remus murmurs, "because that means something, and it'll mean a lot to both of you if you let it. He deserves that, after everything, and so do you."

"I—thanks," Regulus blurts out, stilted, cringing a little bit as soon as it falls out of his mouth. "For—thank you for—"

"I know," Remus cuts in, because Regulus is *struggling*. He gives him a faint smile and nods, because he does know that Regulus is thankful for him taking care of Sirius.

"And for the—when you, um—you know, what you did while I was—when I couldn't—" Regulus falters, then just seems to give up, looking genuinely dejected that he can't figure out how to properly express his gratitude for Remus helping with his fear of water. It's somehow sad and amusing all at once.

"Well, what are friends for, right?" Remus says lightly, and Regulus sort of just gives a weary nod, but Remus takes it for what it is. He hums. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go kiss your brother until he has to leave."

Regulus doesn't even protest, complain, or wrinkle his nose, which is how Remus knows this is a solemn moment for them all, but especially himself and Sirius.

Remus stays true to his word, though. The second he's within range, Sirius sneaks right back to his side, and Remus cups his jaw to kiss him. He doesn't care that the other three are close by. Some part of him is strangely grateful that this moment is seen by others, known, bared to the light so it's more real. If Sirius ever needs to ask, James and Regulus will know.

They do break apart when Pandora clears her throat, assuming she wants their attention, but that's not it at all. She's focusing on Regulus, so much affection and sadness in her eyes, all at once, that it's genuinely heartbreaking. Regulus is visibly wary, but even he caves under the force of The Pandora Effect.

Regulus slowly, cautiously, reaches out to grab Pandora's hand, his touch delicate like he might snatch it away quickly, but he doesn't. He brings her hand to his mouth and presses a careful kiss to the back of her fingers.

Pandora beams at him, watching him kiss her hand so tenderly that it somehow makes them both look more fragile, like they're being so careful because they're more likely to break. Regulus is softer with Pandora than Remus has ever seen him with anyone, which—he thinks—is why Regulus has tried so hard to keep her at arms-length. But that's The Pandora Effect. She wriggles her way into your heart every single time, just the same as she cradles you in hers.

Regulus drops her hand immediately after, but Pandora looks so fucking pleased anyway.

"You don't even have to let him go," James announces, walking forward and legitimately just dragging both Remus and Sirius into a hug with one arm unprompted.

Remus isn't expecting it to hit him as hard as it does, honestly, but it slams right into his chest and nearly barrels him over. All he can remember is how James spoke to him every day from the very beginning, treating him with such kindness and warmth, like a friend he was delighted to make even though Remus never had anything to offer him but himself. For James, that was enough. Just Remus was enough.

James is warm against them, and he smells strongly of eucalyptus shower-gel and shampoo. Remus holds his back with one hand, the other around Sirius' waist, and Sirius' free arm wraps around James' back, too. Their fingers overlap between James' shoulders, even their pinkies holding onto each other, not ready to let go.

"Okay, I have to go," Pandora says, sounding choked-up. James draws back, and she's right there, waiting. "Can I…?"

"Yes, come here," Remus replies, keeping his arm held out and waving her closer with his hand.

She doesn't make Sirius let go either, not that anyone really could; she just sinks into them both and holds on for a long moment. Remus has never really noticed until now, but he practically swallows her with his size, making it easy for him to rest his chin on the top of her head. She squeezes them, then takes a deep breath and lets go.

Pandora doesn't linger, giving out a last round of goodbyes and rushing out to go handle what she needs to, regretfully informing them that they have maybe twenty minutes before they need to follow. Sirius stays latched onto Remus' side, and regardless of whatever issues they may have, Regulus and James sort of drift off to give Sirius and Remus their privacy. They're not talking or looking at each other, just sort of standing next to each other with so much tension between them that it's like a third person joining them.

"They're hopeless," Sirius mutters with a heavy sigh, shaking his head and turning in Remus' arms to face him like he doesn't even want to look at them.

"They'll figure it out, eventually," Remus says quietly.

"You think so?"

"I think…that's the law of average. It's all about balance, you know. There can't be too much of one thing, not even bad things. Someday, somehow, good will come."

Sirius' lips curl up. "Optimistic of you."

"Well, I have my proof, don't I? All the awful shit I've dealt with, and then one day, with no warning, there you were," Remus murmurs, gently stroking up and down Sirius' back.

"I'll be back. I'll—I'll see you in a year," Sirius croaks, his hands sliding up Remus' chest slowly.

"Okay," is all Remus says, because he doesn't want to argue with Sirius about this. He doesn't let himself hope for it, or expect it, because he knows better. "You know, a lot can happen in a year."

"I know," Sirius whispers, flexing his fingers on Remus' shoulders before slowly grappling his way down Remus' arms. He gives a tight smile as Remus arches an eyebrow at him in blatant curiosity. "Like you said, a lot can happen in a year. I could forget the shape of you, the smell of you, the way your hair falls and the shade of your eyes. I want to memorize you."

Remus' heart clenches. "That's not exactly what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

"I just… Sirius, I want you to know you're under no obligation whatsoever to wait for me in any capacity. You—"

"Remus," Sirius cuts in, an edge to his tone.

"You could meet someone," Remus insists, his voice low and fervent. "And, if you do, that's okay. That's—" He swallows down the bitter taste of jealousy and envy. "Just don't hold yourself back from anyone or anything, certainly not for me. Don't hold yourself to the standard of savior, because you're not, Sirius. You're not my savior, and I don't need you to be."

The muscle in Sirius' cheek twitches from where he's visibly clenching his jaw. "There won't be anyone else. You already know that I—I don't feel that way about people."

"You can accept pleasure," Remus reminds him. "There's no shame in it. That's yours, remember?"

"No, you don't—" Sirius grimaces and shakes his head, heaving a sigh. "Perhaps I wasn't clear before. I mean I *literally* don't feel that way for people. Sexually, I mean. I—I didn't even feel that way for you, not at first. It took a bit of time, and it took trust. The sex part of it, at least. And I still don't—well, I never want to have sex to have sex. I only want sex because it's with you. Does that make sense at all?"

Remus sits on that for a second, then nods. "Yeah, it does. That's okay," Remus tells him, because it is. It's not his job, or anyone's job, to tell any other person who or how they're allowed to want, or not want. "Just—if there is anyone that you click with in the next year, I don't want you to—"

"Remus, I know what you're trying to say, I really do, and it's very noble of you," Sirius interrupts, "but you're the only one I want, alright? It's as simple as that. I'm going to think about you every day. I'm going to miss you." He exhales shakily, blinking hard. "I will miss you *so much,* all the time. There's no space for anything else, because I want our something. And I will wait for it. I'd wait forever, if I had to."

"Well, in that case, a year is nothing. It's a blink," Remus whispers, his voice thick as he leans forward to press their foreheads together, eyes drifting shut.

"A year. We can do a year," Sirius whispers back, and Remus tries to convince himself to agree, because they have no choice either way. They're going to spend a year apart regardless, and maybe even longer, because even now, Remus doesn't hold onto the hope that they will see each other again.

So, if this is all they have, then Remus intends to make the most of it. He draws Sirius closer, holding onto him as he brings their mouths together, kissing him slow and sweet and steady, cherishing each second of it. The kiss drags out as if they have all the time in the world, and Remus pours every bit of the love he feels for this man into it, unable to say it. He refuses to say it just because he's scared he'll never get another chance; some rebellious part of him insists that, if he doesn't say it, then he'll *have* to see Sirius again just to tell him.

They kiss, unhurried and unhindered, and then they break apart to cling to each other. Remus squeezes his eyes shut and buries his face into Sirius' hair while Sirius tucks his face into Remus' shoulder. In silence, they breathe, and that is all.

And then, inevitably, they have to let go.

Neither of them want to, that much is clear, but they have no other options. Sirius wavers the second they split apart, swaying forward again like he's going to fall right back into him. Remus swallows thickly and steps back, hungrily studying Sirius' face even as he backs up towards the door.

"Bye, Remus," Sirius says softly, so soft it's a mere breath.

"Bye, sweetheart," Remus murmurs, his voice thick and his chest aching and his eyes stinging.

Sirius takes in a shuddering breath, face red in the worst way, from strain, from hurting. He looks away, then ducks his head and whips around, swiveling past James and Regulus to reach for the door like he's rushing to escape all at once.

Remus watches them go, feeling as if his chest is splitting open. The door opens, then shuts. Sirius hadn't looked back.

Slowly, Remus turns and walks to the side of the room, standing one step in front of the wall, unobtrusive and nothing more than a shadow. He raises his mask and puts it back on, clipping it to his face, where it seems to strangle him more now than it ever has. He blinks the tears out of his eyes, puts his hands behind his back, and ducks his head.

And that is all.

~•~

The train ride home is long, and silent.

Regulus isn't speaking, and neither is Sirius, so James doesn't either. He doesn't break the silence; he doesn't really know how. There are tarts on the table, and James doesn't look at them. Just two weeks ago, he rode a train into the Hallow and found it in himself to smile, to invite laughter and warmth in the heavy reality that had draped over all of their shoulders then. He remembers it, teasing Regulus, laughing uproariously when Regulus tossed a tart at Sirius' head.

It feels like a lifetime ago. James feels like all of those people are gone. He aches for them, for the people they were before all of this started, and he doesn't think they'll ever get them back. They are still them—James, Sirius, and Regulus—just as they have always been, because nothing can take that from them, but they have been altered, they have been shaped by cruel, capricious hands; for all that they are still them, they can never again be the same.

The thing is, that is what life is, in reality. Life is just death and rebirth, consistently, over and over in small capacities that build into something noticeable over time. It's supposed to be gradual; you are not the same as you were the year prior, or ten before that, or as you were when you came into this world, but you are you in your ever-changing shape, growing and learning and living. Even stagnant, there is a shift within you, something you don't always realize until you think to look back and see how far you've come, a constant journey.

It's not supposed to be like this. Yes, everything can change in a split second, and you with it, but it isn't something that's ever meant to go to depths such as these. Two weeks, only two weeks, and they're unrecognizable to who they were, in the way people are only supposed to be after years.

Some things remain. There is comfort in that. There is comfort in knowing that some things can never be changed, or taken away, no matter what else is.

The passage of time feels unreal. James genuinely struggles with it. He knows how much Sirius struggled with his memory after returning from the arena. For James, he thinks his struggle is with time, and his own placement in the world. There are moments where he doesn't know where he is, lost in himself and immediately going right back to the arena, needing to be drawn back here and the flow of time.

He feels that way when the train stops, not entirely sure how much time has passed, not entirely convinced that they haven't just arrived in the Hallow, where he'll have to prepare to go into the arena and fight to get Regulus home. He doesn't know. He can't be sure, not completely.

"I have to go speak to the mayor," Sirius rasps as they all stand up, each of them moving cautiously as if none of them can fully believe this is real. "I'll get everything in order for both of you to receive your winnings as Victors, and you'll both be assigned houses of your own in the Victor Village. You don't have to be there for it, so if you want to—"

"Can I come with you?" Regulus cuts in. He looks Sirius right in the eye, holding his gaze. "I don't want to see them yet."

"Yeah, Reggie, that's fine," Sirius murmurs. "We'll, ah—if you want, I can—I'll go with you."

Regulus nods carefully. "Thank you."

"You don't have to come," Sirius says, looking directly at James now. "You should go see your parents. They'll probably be waiting for you at the gate."

"You'll—once everything is handled, you'll come, right?" James asks, feeling ridiculously guilty for it, his gaze darting towards Regulus, who is staring down at his fingers.

"Yeah, of course," Sirius whispers. "Come on, James, let me help you off the train. You get off first, Regulus."

So, that's what they do. Regulus walks ahead of them, heading for the doors and disappearing through them first. James and Sirius are much slower to disembark, because James has been sitting without moving for *hours,* and his leg is not very happy with him. It's frustrating, because his leg hurts if he uses it too much, and it hurts if he doesn't use it enough.

It's stiff and aching, causing him to lean on Sirius and his cane hard as they make their way down the aisle of the train. It had been a bitch getting on the train, though Sirius hadn't let him fall, and it's equally difficult getting off. Again, Sirius doesn't let him fall; he helps James to the bottom step, gets off first, then stands on the edge of the platform to hold his hand out to James, keeping him steady as he makes it over. It causes a spike of pain in his leg that has him grinding his teeth and pausing as he waits for it to dull again.

When James looks up, his stomach drops right out from underneath him, because he loses time and gains too much of it all at once, nothing making sense.

It's snowing.

There's snow on the ground, and there are flurries gently coming down, and how is that possible? It was snowing when they left. Shouldn't it be spring? Has winter come and gone and come back around? It doesn't make sense.

It takes him a moment to piece it all together. Spring is on its way, and this is still the winter he left behind. It's hard for him to fathom how so much could have happened, so much change in and around him, but the season is still the same. It's only been two weeks. Winter is still here.

Regulus has snow in his hair, and he's beautiful. He's standing in front of them, waiting, and there's snow in his hair just like there was on his fifteenth birthday. For a second, James feels like he goes in and out of time, yanked back and forth between the past and the present; Regulus flickers in front of him, fifteen and close, twenty-five and never close enough.

"You'll be alright?" Sirius asks, drawing his attention. "Do you want us to walk you to the gate?"

James shakes his head. "No, I've got it. You two go on."

Sirius nods warily, and after a moment, he lets go. James adjusts to his cane, nodding back before slowly making his way forward. Regulus joins Sirius; they have to go the other way, up the path. James looks back, unable to help it, and he feels his heart lurch and give a gentle keen when he sees Regulus looking back, snow in his hair, holding James' gaze with lovely eyes. Those eyes of his.

Together, all at once, they look away.

The walk to the gate is slow and arduous. The snow isn't quite sticking to the ground, just a soft dusting that blankets it, but he feels unsteady despite that. He doesn't want to fall, and he's worried his cane might slip out from underneath him with only slush on the ground to brace against. Every stilted step is measured and careful, and he doesn't rush.

The gate isn't open when he gets there, but he only has to press the buzzer on the side he's on once before it swings open. It's framed by a large brick wall, and the gate itself is made of metal with no way to see through it or around it. He waits patiently on the other side, his heart racing, and then he chokes out a harsh breath the moment he sees his parents standing eagerly on the other side.

Some part of him had been afraid that they wouldn't be.

But they're there.

Right there.

James doesn't even get to take one step. As soon as they see him, Effie and Monty are rushing right for him. He gets to suck in one deep, gasping breath before they're on him, wrapping him in their arms from either side, holding him up as he instantly sags into them both. He clutches at them desperately, and when he exhales, it comes out as a sob.

They hold him, and he is home.

Chapter End Notes

starting from the top:

hiiii, evan <3 NO LET ME STOP THATS SO CRUEL 😭 he's dead, and i still found ways to keep him around lmaoooo. honestly, you'd miss him otherwise. trust me on that.

sirius comforting regulus about evan and using james "the best best friend" potter to do it>>>>

pandora my beloved <3 getting hand-kisses of admiration, as she deserves!!! she is so, so special to me. The Pandora Effect is real

let me go ahead and talk about jegulus really quick.

so like, james and regulus making out. regulus MEANT he was Kissing That Man as soon as he saw him in his glasses again 😭 he really said: My Trauma Is Just Gonna Have To Wait. he's so valid for that, actually. that kiss was EARNED, he's been missing james in his glasses since CHAPTER TWO. he deserved that. they both did, honestly.

that being said, the kissing doesn't...change anything. like, they're still not in a good place, so that was just. self-indulgence. that was them literally coming to the decision to hurt together, because the other mattered more to them than the chance to avoid more pain. oh, they're so in love, im SICK

now, onto the wolfstar. oh, this wolfstar angst RIPPED ME TO SHREDS, because this entire time they've been sweet and—well, not happy, but very healthy and so incredibly in love. it just HURTS 😭😭😭

and look, i know a lot of you were hoping that there would be some way that they could help save remus from the hallow, but that's just. not realistic. for right now, dorcas

doesn't even know remus EXISTS, and she would be the only one with a true way to help him escape. remus wouldn't have escaped anyway, because that would have gotten his father killed. the hallow—riddle especially—has no qualms about using people they love to keep someone in line.

so, yes, remus was left behind. it fucking sucks, but it is what it is. that does NOT mean that remus' presence in this is just gone. it's not. we actually have a remus POV next chapter, and we learn more about his backstory in chapter 33. but yes, you'll probably miss him, which is purposeful, because sirius also misses him. we are all holding hands and missing remus lupin rn.

for those of you who do just want the reassurance (even though it's probably obvious), SPOILERS AHEAD, sirius and remus do indeed see each other again and get to reunite, i promise <3

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-james blurting out "i love you" bc he Feels A Lot
-regulus literally being unable to resist james, which is so valid of him, bc i would ALSO fold like a lawn chair for that man
-sirius saying "i want to memorize you" and the layers of that, knowing his memory issues
-the return of "lover boy" and evan still being a little shit, even when dead lmaoooo
-sirius asking about azkaban, oh the irony
-remus returning the favor and asking regulus to help take care of sirius
-regulus just agreeing that he and remus are friends (and also trying so, so very hard to thank him, that poor man, he was STRUGGLING)
-james reuniting with his parents <3

this wasn't as rambly as usual, but im kinda tired, so it's all ive got. i do want to take the time to thank you all for your supportive comments and feedback. i do read them all and adore each one!

Three Months Later

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past deaths
-implied spice 🌶 (fade-to-black)
-descriptions of a needle being used (briefly, but explicitly)
-depictions of torture/experimentation (overall brief and skippable, but explicit nonetheless)
-mentions of blood

i will be putting an in-depth warning for those of you who want/need it in the end notes, which is valid!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lily hits the mat with a grunt, all the breath getting pushed from her lungs all at once from the impact. Kingsley stands over her, eyebrows raised.

"You don't fight fair," Lily complains.

"Yes, well, war isn't fair either," Kingsley reminds her.

Lily purses her lips. "I just asked where you got the earring. You could have just said you didn't want to tell me."

"On your feet, Red," Kingsley says, holding his hand down towards her. The earring she's referencing glints in his right ear, gold and glimmering under the overhead lights. He didn't have it yesterday. Lily has her suspicions on how he got it.

"You know, Sybill will like it," Lily points out lightly as she reaches up to grab his hand, letting him haul her to her feet.

Kingsley just hums, expression neutral.

"Has she seen it yet?" Lily tries again, bouncing on the balls of her feet as they shift further apart. Kingsley doesn't answer her; he just shakes out his arms. "She'll think it's sexy."

"Lily," Kingsley says, his voice low and smooth, but there's a tiny smile twitching at the corner of his mouth.

Lily laughs. "What? She *will."*

"You're in a good mood today," Kingsley notes, bringing his hands up loosely in front of him.

"Mm, well, your earring just gave me good news," Lily says, breaking out into a grin as she brings her hands up as well. Kingsley heaves a sigh, and she rushes him.

Despite all the training Lily has done the last three months, she still can't beat Kingsley, though not for a lack of trying. Lily takes training very seriously, rarely—if ever—goofing off and always focusing rigorously. This isn't a game; this is preparation for what's to come, and she's not taking it lightly. Kingsley is her main trainer, but she's done a lot of work with Poppy, especially with the medical side of things in mind. It's hard and draining, but satisfying, too.

It gives her purpose.

Though, every time her back hits the mat, Lily does find herself ever so briefly wondering what the fuck she's even doing. Sometimes she asks herself that just to remember her answer, the same one each time. For Remus. For her family. For the war, so that one day—someday—everyone will know peace, and everyone will be free.

That's love, in its own way, she thinks. Love for things that she does not actually have, so it cannot be taken from her. All that she fights for is a strength, not a weakness.

Just how Dumbledore likes it.

"Better," Kingsley praises when Lily, after hitting the floor, immediately rolls to her feet with no pause, still at the ready.

"I know," Lily says, holding herself still as he gets closer, waiting for the opening. Kinglsey never gives her one; his form is perfect, and there is no doubt in her mind that he is the best fighter compared to literally anyone else within the Phoenix. He keeps a cool head, too, even in a fight, which likely makes him invaluable to Dumbledore as well. There's a reason Kingsley has such a high position within the Order.

"You're thinking too much," Kingsley murmurs. That's his thing. He's always calm, always focused on whatever task he's been given, duty-driven and goal-oriented. Nothing gets to him, no matter the situation. Nothing.

"I can't help that my brain is always working, King," Lily replies, exasperated. "But I am improving, right?"

Kingsley nods. "You are. Even today, you've shown signs of improvement. Do you want to stop and head to the range?"

"Yes!" Lily blurts out immediately, perking up.

"I thought you would," Kingsley says, a fond smile flashing across his face as he drops his hands.

"So, the earring," Lily muses, raising her eyebrows at him as they head out of the training room.

"Let it go," Kingsley mutters.

Lily squints at him. "Absolutely not."

Kingsley doesn't reply, his hand coming up to tug at his earlobe as they make their way through the compound, heading down to the lower levels. His fingers curl around the earring, blocking it from sight, but Lily realizes with rising interest that he drops his hand as soon as Sybill comes into view. She has her suspicions about *how* he got it, but she now has her suspicions about *why* he got it. She was teasing before, about Sybill, but maybe…

"King!" Sybill gasps in delight as soon as she notices. Her eyes brighten immediately as she rips away from Wren—who she was walking down the hall with—to rock forward and gape at Kingsley's ear. She rears back, staring at him in disbelief, as if she's never seen him before. "Is that an—"

"Shh," Lily hisses quickly, shooting her a look and glancing around. They'll just take it from him if they find out about it, and Sybill isn't exactly being quiet.

"You're so sexy," Sybill informs Kingsley, just as Lily knew she would. "I want one. Did you do it yourself? Will you do me?"

"Oh, I'm sure he would *love* to do you," Lily says in wry amusement, because she knows that look in Kingsley's eye, and yeah, her suspicions are correct. She wonders how long… Her heart gives a small pang. She hopes it hasn't been a long time, at least not before her training started, because that would mean he had to see Lily and Sybill together.

"Lily and I have to go," Kingsley announces smoothly, darting a look towards Lily that tells her to keep her mouth shut. She does. Kingsley's a grown man; he can handle this himself. He flashes Sybill a grin, the kind that makes knees wobble. "I can come by your room after, if you want."

Sybill beams at him. "That'd be lovely."

"What about you, Evans?" Wren calls out, giving her a slow look up and down the length of her body, her intentions very clear. "You need a room to come to after?"

Lily chuckles. "Not this time, Wren, sorry."

"But we miss you," Wren complains, laughing through a groan as she pretends to stomp her feet.

"It's true, we do," Sybill confirms, reaching up curiously to poke Kingsley's ear, still enthralled with the earring. Kingsley holds very still and lets her do what she likes. "Miranda and Ember are about to start climbing the walls."

"Ah, sorry, you know how busy I've been," Lily says with a grimace of apology. It wasn't a joke when she said that the women she sleeps with—or used to—would be disappointed if she stopped. They are. Lily hasn't had time for any of them the last three months. "Here's an idea, just a thought, but have any of you considered, you know, fucking each other?"

"No one does it like you, Lily," Sybill says cheerfully.

Lily winces slightly, stealing a glance at Kinglsey, who remains remarkably neutral through hearing that. It's possibly not that big of a blow purely because Sybill looks like she wants to bite his ear at the moment, though *that* is surely because of the earring. She's so strange. Lily finds her delightful.

"Right, well uh, we have to go." Lily coughs and gives out half-hearted platitudes while Sybill and Wren call after them to beg off their duties and stay a little longer. Despite the temptation, Lily and Kingsley remain strong and continue on.

They're silent for a bit, and as soon as Lily opens her mouth, Kingsley says, "Not a word, Red," so Lily closes it again and does her best to stifle her laugh.

Lily focuses again when they enter the gun range, because this is where she excels. This is her bread and butter, so to speak. With practice, she's become very efficient with guns, which may have something to do with the fact that she uses her own free time to get better with them. Sometimes, when she leaves the infirmary after her shift, she comes here. She pulls guns apart and puts them back together, over and over and over. She reels back the target and shoots until she never misses, no matter what gun she's holding.

She'd worried she would be afraid of guns, because she's been shot before, but she's not. Or maybe she is, and the obsessive way she's been about guns is how she controls that fear.

Kingsley doesn't speak to her as he sticks up the paper with the vague silhouette of a person on it for both of them, reeling each of them back until the numbers almost aren't visible. He chooses the gun she'll work with first, and they separate to go to their own stalls, a divider keeping them apart.

"Right hand, left shoulder, head—in that order," Kingsley calls out.

"You got it," Lily says, then lifts her gun, not even hesitating to pull the trigger. It's quick, three shots back-to-back before Kingsley can make it through his, even though they started at the same time. He finishes only seconds after her, but those seconds matter when it's life or death.

Lily doesn't miss one shot.

It continues like this for a while, Kingsley calling out orders and Lily completing them faster than he can. They cycle through various guns, Kingsley replaces the target paper multiple times, and then—towards the end—Lily is taken to a table and timed on reloading each and every gun.

"Alright, you're done for the day, at least until your shift at the infirmary," Kingsley says.

"Yeah, alright." Lily sticks around to help him lock the guns back up anyway, then sort of blocks him before he can quickly escape. "So…"

Kingsley heaves a sigh. "Don't make a big deal out of it."

"You *like* her," Lily says, grinning. "King, you actually—I mean, you *really* like her. You got an earring for her!"

"I—" Kingsley's face twitches, and then he sighs as he lifts a hand to shield his eyes, as if embarrassed. "Oh, that's so stupid. This was so stupid. *I* am so stupid."

"No, no, no," Lily rushes to correct. "It wasn't stupid. It was *cute.* It's—it's really cute. You're not stupid, Kingsley."

"I don't even know if she likes men," Kingsley says wearily, dropping his hand.

Lily nods quickly. "She does. You *absolutely* have a chance, okay?" She reaches out and knocks her elbow into his, catching his gaze. "How long have you…?"

"Lily," Kingsley says, strained.

"Oh, fuck, you've fancied her even while I was sleeping with her?" Lily blurts out, distressed. She stares at him with wide eyes, but he just looks away. "Fuck's sake, King, why didn't you *say something?* I would have—"

Kingsley grimaces and mutters, "Look, I'm not proud of it, but that's how I figured it out, alright?"

"What?" Lily asks, confused.

"I, uh, didn't know," Kingsley explains, heaving a sigh. He shrugs at her a little helplessly. "I mean, Sybill and I have been friends for years, and sure, I always thought she was brilliant, but I also used to think she was really fucking weird."

"She is weird," Lily points out.

"Yeah, I didn't know I was into weird until…" Kingsley frowns and gestures to her. "It took me a bit, honestly, because I couldn't figure out what bothered me about it so much."

Men, Lily thinks in despair. She shakes her head, fighting a smile at the bewildered look on his face, like it still baffles him a bit. "Alright, but why didn't you say something? It was bothering you, yeah? If I would have known…"

"I have no say in who Sybill is with, or isn't, just because I like her. I didn't figure it out until it was too late, and that was on me, not you or her," Kingsley says simply.

"Yeah, but I still…" Lily sighs. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, it didn't mean anything."

"Yeah, Red, it never does with you, does it?" Kingsley murmurs, eyebrows furrowed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lily asks with a frown, admittedly a bit betrayed that Kingsley seems to be turning the conversation to her…issues, or whatever.

Kingsley arches an eyebrow at her. "You know what I'm saying. Nothing means anything to you, not with anyone. And I don't just mean romance or sex, because that's your prerogative to navigate how you wish; I'm talking about how you don't let yourself get close to anyone. You don't—care. Not really."

Lily purses her lips, looking away. She knows Kingsley is worried for her, because of how distant she is, but she doesn't really care. It's better for her not to care. She likes Kingsley, sure, but they're not friends. That's not what this is.

Really, Lily *likes* plenty of people in the Phoenix, or affiliated with them, but not enough that it would be a blow to lose them. If Kingsley was running with her, chased, covered in blood, and he shoved her away to tell her to keep running, she would. She wouldn't hesitate. She wouldn't look back. She wouldn't break down and let herself get shot.

Not like she did with Remus.

As if he can read her mind, Kingsley quietly says, "I know that what happened with Remus was—"

"Don't talk about him," Lily cuts in sharply, so sharp that Kingsley instantly stops. His eyes are sad, and she hates it.

He was there that day, five years ago. He gunned down Aurors to pick her up off the ground, to save her, and her tears weren't for the gunshot wound in her shoulder, but for Remus. She had been chanting his name, begging Kingsley to go save him, and he promised he would try as soon as he got her to safety. And he did. As soon as she was safe, he left to go try, while she was carted off to the Phoenix by the team he was working with.

Kingsley never found Remus. Dumbledore told her that day in the infirmary. When she demanded to know if he had been captured—refusing to stay at the Phoenix if he was, fully intending to claw her way into Hallow right by herself to save him, if she had to—Dumbledore regretfully informed her that Remus had been executed, as had her family.

Kingsley, who was in the other bed with a gunshot wound to his leg, had watched her weep in silence. He told her that he had tried, and he was sorry, and she thanked him. It was the last words she spoke for a long, long time; when she did speak again, it was to ask Kingsley for help on getting outside, because she couldn't take it anymore, couldn't stand feeling smothered underground anymore, and Kingsley got her a radio and told her to do what she had to do.

Lily and Kingsley have a lot of history. He was the first person she was actually comfortable with in the Phoenix, and perhaps that was because he saved her, because he actually put in the effort to at least try and save Remus. He's a good man, and though she doesn't allow herself to get too close to him, or anyone, she has unwavering respect for him.

"You don't talk about it," Kingsley says quietly. "You never talk about it, what happened that day. Sometimes I think you never moved past it, Lily."

I haven't. How can I? Lily thinks, her stomach twisting like gnarled roots at the base of an overturned tree. She doesn't know how she could ever move past it, when it ended the way it did. It was their fault—hers and Remus'. He could never stay out of trouble, and she could never leave well enough alone.

They were a recipe for disaster from the very beginning, her and Remus. Chaos twins, but in the worst way possible; quietly. No one saw them coming, until they did.

"Dorcas is here, isn't she?" Lily asks abruptly, holding his gaze as she brazenly and carelessly changes the subject. He narrows his eyes, and she hums. "She gave you the earring, then?"

Kingsley stares at her for a long moment, but she doesn't look away, making it very clear that —as always—she won't be leaving well enough alone. He sighs. "Yeah, she's here."

Lily grins.

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Dorcas tracks Slughorn all the way through the room as he beats a hasty retreat, finally released by Dumbledore. He's been unable to meet her eyes, constantly fidgeting every time she speaks, freezing in fear when she addresses him. She made him squirm throughout the meeting. She enjoyed it.

"I must ask," Dumbledore says softly, drawing her gaze to him as the door shuts, "whatever did you do to frighten him so?"

"He didn't say?" Dorcas asks.

Dumbledore shakes his head. "I imagine he was too afraid to."

"Well, that's satisfying," Dorcas admits, mildly amused. "I told him that he had two options; either come here, or get his brains blown out. I may have implied that I would have been disappointed by him choosing the first. Or, rather I told him I would, because I didn't feel the need to lie to him about it."

"Recruitment is meant to be a choice, Ms. Meadowes. We don't threaten the lives of our allies."

"He wasn't exactly an ally at the time, now was he? Besides, don't pretend that you never operate under the rule that the ends justify the means. Was it not you that told me the risk of recruitment was necessary to win the war, regardless of what losses we would face along the way?"

"That may be so, but coercion is not a burden I have ever asked you to bear," Dumbledore murmurs.

Dorcas rolls her shoulders lazily. "It's not one too heavy, I assure you. Quite light, actually."

"You blame him," Dumbledore notes.

"I blame them all," Dorcas corrects.

Dumbledore hums. "Resentment addles the mind more than you know, Ms. Meadowes. Keep a clear head."

"Don't question my methods, so long as I get things done. If you don't like it, find someone else," Dorcas informs him sharply, and he doesn't respond. "Ah, but you can't, can you? No one does what I do as effectively as I can."

"You have made yourself quite useful," Dumbledore agrees, almost sounding fond.

Dorcas ignores that. "How is Molly?"

"Adjusting well," Dumbledore says. "She's an asset to the infirmary and seems to get on delightfully with Arthur, though she does insist upon joining the war efforts more… forwardly. She would like to be in the field."

"Will you let her be?"

"No."

"You mentioned a new field medic. Not her, then?"

"Lily Evans."

"Ah," Dorcas murmurs, working to keep her expression neutral. She inclines her head. "Wise choice, sir."

Dumbledore smiles. "Yes, I thought so, too."

"I want to know what happened to them," Dorcas demands, leaning forward on her elbows as she holds his gaze over his desk. "Gideon and Fabian. Where did it go wrong?"

"You're assuming I know?" Dumbledore asks.

Dorcas scoffs. "Of course you know. You always know, and honestly, half the time I don't care to know all that you do. I only care to know what I need to. But this? I have to know this, and you're going to tell me."

"I fear that this knowledge is too great for you to bear."

"I don't care. *Tell me."*

"I can't risk the progress your position provides for this war," Dumbledore says simply. "I won't."

"I have been in this for *years,"* Dorcas hisses, slamming her hand down on the desk. He doesn't flinch. "I have given it my all since Alastor Moody recruited me, and I have never, not once, questioned you or my orders. My *position* is not at risk, not unless you continue to refuse me now."

"Ms. Meadowes—"

"Answer me, or I walk away."

Dumbledore regards her for a long moment, his eyes clear and calm. "You are in far too deep to walk away now."

"You underestimate me," Dorcas replies coldly. "I won't be manipulated. Keep your thinly veiled threats; we both know what's at stake here. You need me. If I walk away, I don't get far. Don't make the mistake of thinking that will stop me. I'm not above coercion, but I refuse to fall prey to it."

"Have you considered that I wish not to tell you for your own sake?" Dumbledore asks, almost gentle about it, but she doesn't soften a bit. He sighs. "If you insist."

Dorcas leans back. "Go on, then."

"The Prewetts were tasked with gathering very important intel from one of my informants. The information allowed us to intercept and obtain a shipment of biological warfare only the Hallow has ever had access to," Dumbledore explains. "It included the history and the formula, which was something we could not afford to pass up. In doing so, it notified Tom Riddle that the information had somehow been leaked. He knew it was a Hallow, seeing as only Hallows have access to the city, as far as he knows. Unfortunately, the loyalty of the Hallow is so great that it's quite noticeable when there's disloyalty, specifically when it is bold disloyalty."

"No," Dorcas whispers.

Dumbledore holds her gaze. "You're very bold, Ms. Meadowes."

"No," Dorcas chokes out, her whole body feeling like it's numb, like maybe she's floating somewhere beyond it. Her eyes are prickling with heat and building tears.

"You were a suspect," Dumbledore murmurs, "but, as I told you, I cannot risk the progress your position provides for this war."

Dorcas glares at him through her tears. "You—you made them take the fall for me, because I'm worth more to you than they were. You—you *killed* them. You—"

"Fabian and Gideon Prewett knew the risks, just as you do," Dumbledore says softly. "They were willing to fight and die in this war, just as you are. You and all that you provide this cause were at risk, as was my informant, and so I did what had to be done to keep you both alive. To lose either of you would be a blow to our efforts that we desperately did not need then, now, or in the future."

"You're at severe risk of losing me now," Dorcas croaks, balling her hands into fists.

Dumbledore shakes his head. "I'm not. Though you are hurt and grieving, it's as you said; you do not fall prey to coercion, and that means you are here because you believe in this. You don't need to blame yourself. You are not at fault."

"No, *you* are," Dorcas snarls.

"The greater good unfortunately builds itself on the foundation of sacrifice," Dumbledore says quietly. "You can't see that right now, and I don't need you to. All I need is for you to do what you always have. Get things done."

"And if I don't?" Dorcas rasps.

"You will," Dumbledore tells her.

Dorcas swallows and blinks hard, taking in a deep breath before it shudders on the way out. She looks him right in the eyes and says, "Fuck you."

"You're dismissed," Dumbledore murmurs, turning his head to gaze at the painting on the wall, the one that's been there for as long as Dorcas has been around to see it every time she stepped foot in his office. A portrait of a young girl, her eyes a twinkling blue that matches Dumbledore's. Dorcas wrenches to her feet and heads to the door without looking back, only pausing with her hand on the handle when he calls out to her. "Oh, and Ms. Meadowes?"

Dorcas doesn't grant him with a response, standing in place with her shoulders tense, grinding her teeth.

"I will be in touch soon," Dumbledore says, and Dorcas squeezes her eyes shut before turning her head and giving him a jerky nod, then exits the room and slams the door shut behind her on her way out.

For a long moment, Dorcas can only stand there and breathe, and exist with this knowledge, and wrestle with the reality that she can do nothing about it.

There are no good people in war, Dorcas knows that. She has never dared to claim that *she* is a good person, especially in the midst of this war that she's planted herself firmly in the middle of. There are a lot of things that sit heavy on her heart, things she will never be free from the weight of, but Gideon and Fabian… They were good men. They were her friends.

Dumbledore is not a good man, and Dorcas has never fallen for the illusion that he is. Riddle is worse. That's the horrible reality of it; the lesser of two evils. At least, regardless of what it takes to get there, Dumbledore wants the world to be a better place. That's what sets him apart from Riddle, who wants the world to stay just as it is, at its worst.

When Dorcas joined the Order of the Phoenix, she did so with the knowledge that Dumbledore would do whatever was necessary to get what he wanted—what they all want—and she wants the same thing, so she appreciated this about him. It has never affected her so starkly until this moment, until Fabian and Gideon, and now it leaves a sour taste in her mouth.

Riddle is careless with lives. Dumbledore weighs them. Dorcas is briefly, viscerally grateful that they are against one another, rather than working together. She's thankful now more than ever that Dumbledore was not born a Hallow.

Sometimes, Dorcas wonders if being a Victor in his own games long, long ago shaped him into the person he is today, the person who can and will choose who lives or dies, if a situation arises where the choice needs to be made. She doesn't know his full story, only what she learned over the last few years, but she knows that he won his games, and she knows he killed Gellert Grindelwald, the Master of the Hallow at the time.

She knows, now, that he is responsible for the death of Fabian and Gideon. She wishes, fretfully and desperately, that it was enough to make her walk away, but it isn't. To do that would be to live on in ignorance, choosing to do nothing when she can actually make a difference. To walk away from him and all that he stands for would be to walk right to Riddle's side, and she will never, never do that. She can't.

Not that Dumbledore would let her get far if she tried, honestly. Dorcas is smarter than that. If she is not with them, she is a threat. After all, she knows far too much, and putting the cause at risk is not something Dumbledore stands for. She could possibly make it as far as the train to board it, but she has no doubt that she wouldn't make it home. Maybe that should scare her, but it doesn't.

Sighing heavily, Dorcas sets her shoulders, swipes her face, and starts making her way through the compound.

People in the Phoenix are used to her by now. There aren't that many Hallows in the Order. Shocker. Dorcas is one of the few; most of everyone else either escaped from their districts, or were born in the Phoenix and have been living here their whole lives. The latest Hallow to join up—even through coercion—is Slughorn. She catches sight of him in the Great Hall as she goes through, chattering merrily to a few people sitting with him at the table, laughing and drinking.

The sight makes her blood boil, honestly, but she doesn't engage or interrupt. Slughorn has clearly adjusted to his place in the Phoenix, though some people had implied that it wasn't a simple process. Apparently, he was shunned for quite a bit for some of the stupid shit that fell out of his mouth, all coming from a place of privilege and entitlement—the Hallow special, if you will. Dorcas knows these people, and she knows many of them well by now. She doesn't doubt that Slughorn was put in his place and had a very, very rude awakening waiting for him.

Dorcas stops by the infirmary to at least see Molly—and Arthur, technically, since he's here as well. It's fortunately quiet when she comes in. There's a child on one of the beds, coughing pitifully in his sleep as his mother—Dorcas assumes, at least—gently strokes his hair, looking worried.

"Dorcas!" Molly says brightly when she sees her, and then she's bustling over to pull a startled Dorcas into a hug.

Tentatively, Dorcas returns the gestures, her heart sinking as she realizes that she doesn't deserve it. Dumbledore may have made the choice to throw Fabian and Gideon under the bus, but he did that so *she* wouldn't be run over; her and his secret informant. Dorcas didn't make the call, but she's at least partially responsible, though she always has been. After all, it was her that recruited them in the first place.

Molly seems better than the last time Dorcas saw her. Frankly, Dorcas is a little surprised that Molly seems so pleased to see her, considering Molly *did* once threaten to kill her and fully intended to carry through on said threat. Dorcas doesn't really blame her for that. It came from a place of grief and pure desperation. She even apologized afterwards, which was nice.

Dorcas is also quite sure that Molly draws comfort from her because she reminds her of home as another Hallow. Molly can never go home again, at least not before the war is over; she knows too much now, and as close as she was to Gideon and Fabian, she would be at risk.

"Hi, Molly," Dorcas murmurs as they break apart. "I just wanted to come check on you and see how you're adjusting."

"Really well, all things considered," Molly tells her, taking a deep breath. "Don't much like being underground, if I'm honest, but I'm…getting used to it. Arthur's been a gem."

Dorcas glances at the man in question, who smiles and waves as soon as she catches his eye. He's filling out some sort of paperwork, so she just waves back and focuses on Molly again, who looks at him fondly. "That's good. I just—I wanted to say I'm sorry that I missed the funeral held for Fab and Gid."

"I'm sorry you did as well," Molly murmurs. "It was lovely. Dumbledore was so kind; he gave a speech, you know, and everyone was so—just so respectful about them."

"It's nothing less than they deserved," Dorcas croaks, swallowing past the lump in her throat. Just the thought of Dumbledore talking about them… It makes her sick to her fucking stomach. "Molly, I want you to know that if I had the choice—if I had been given the choice—they would still be alive. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Molly blinks rapidly, her eyes misty, and she squeezes Dorcas' hands with a wobbly smile. "I know, Dorcas. You meant a lot to them, please never forget that."

"Right," Dorcas whispers, giving a pained smile. "Ah, as lovely as it is to see you, I was also hoping to speak to Poppy. Is she in, by chance?"

"She's in her office," Molly says, nodding towards it. "Go on, go see her. I have to get back to work anyway."

Dorcas lets Molly squeeze her hands one more time, then pulls away to head towards Poppy's office. She knocks, waiting for the call to let her in, and then she slips through the door. Poppy looks mildly startled to see her, but pleased.

"Ah, Dorcas, when did you get in?" Poppy asks.

"Early. I've been in a meeting with Dumbledore," Dorcas explains, sitting in the chair in front of her desk.

Poppy nods. "And Minerva?"

"She's here. Waiting for you in your room, I imagine. Probably sleeping, honestly, because she was dead on her feet when we got in," Dorcas says with a grimace.

"Ah," Poppy says with a sigh, shaking her head in clear disapproval. "She never rests properly, that woman. She's such a stubborn thing, you know. A bit stupid, really."

Dorcas' lips twitch. Only Poppy would dare to insult Minerva in any way, because most people know better. Poppy is the only one who can get away with it. "Well, no offense, Poppy, but you're hardly one to talk, are you? How long have you been in the office this time?"

"Anyway," Poppy says, pursing her lips, "what can I help you with, Dorcas?"

"Uh huh." Dorcas stifles a laugh, shaking her head fondly when Poppy narrows her eyes at her playfully. "I'm glad you asked. Like I said, I had a meeting with Dumbledore. He brought up biological warfare shipments the Order stole underneath Riddle. I'm assuming you were there."

Poppy straightens up, serious in seconds. "I was."

"Biological warfare," Dorcas says slowly. "That implies a virus, doesn't it? But weaponized. Is that what it is?"

"It's a bit broader than that. Basically, it's the use of biological toxins or infectious agents such as bacteria, viruses, insects, and things such as that—usually to kill masses of people on a large scale," Poppy clarifies. "In this case, it's specifically involved with insects, particularly Hallow-made. I've never seen anything like it before. It doesn't get worse than this."

"What *is* it?" Dorcas asks.

"One second." Poppy rolls her chair back and stoops over the safe behind her, cupping her hand around the keypad to shield it. There's a long sequence of beeping—very long—as she puts in the code, then the safe opens with a hiss and a click. She pulls something out and shuts the safe again before rolling back to the desk and sitting down a vial of—

Dorcas blinks, her lips tipping down as she stares at the vial, feeling a tug in her mind that insists she *knows* what that is already. It takes her a moment of staring at the shimmering liquid in the vial, thick and green, and then it clicks. Her eyes dart up in alarm. "Horcrux Hornet venom?"

"So it is," Poppy confirms with a sigh. "We found it in various forms; both inside the hornets and extracted from them, and we collected a formula indicating that Riddle has plans to have it made into a gas with the same deadly, infectious agents. It is the quickest, most violent form of biological warfare that the world has ever seen."

"I don't—but *why?"* Dorcas blurts out in shock, just in knee-jerk disbelief that anyone would willingly do that. Who the fuck would *want* to do that? Well, Riddle, obviously. She doesn't know why she's so surprised.

"It baffles us all," Poppy declares wryly, her lips twisting in distaste. "Slughorn has informed us that Riddle has a fascination with them—the Horcrux Hornets, and their venom. Apparently, Riddle is immune to them, because he doesn't experience fear, and they only respond to fear."

Dorcas scowls. "But he's weaponizing the venom outside of that. That's a risk, is it not?"

"One doesn't just create biological warfare to this extreme without creating a failsafe, if they're smart. We found notes implying it, but something that important—it's being handled in the Hallow. District one was tasked with weaponizing the Horcrux Hornets, but the cure, or whatever immunity he intends to create, he wouldn't risk it falling into the wrong hands. We know it's happening, but not what it is, or how it's made, so we can't replicate it. Not yet, anyway. I'm working on that now, or trying to. So far, I have…nothing."

"Right, but what is the *purpose* of having something like this as a weapon to begin with?"

Poppy sighs. "Well, in liquid form, he could easily use the biological toxins in the venom to infect a district's water supply, for instance. It would be the quickest, most efficient plague in history. In gas form, he could just release it in a district, or let it be used in future games, especially if he works out how to contain and control it. He could easily and *swiftly* kill masses with this, should he feel the need to."

"Lovely," Dorcas croaks as a bolt of fear shoots down her spine. "And—and we know nothing about the cure? Or immunity? Or…both?"

"Nothing yet," Poppy murmurs wearily. "I'm doing my best."

"No, of course you are," Dorcas says quickly, swallowing as she stares at the vial, goosebumps breaking out along her skin. "I don't doubt it. Thank you for telling me."

"If you hear anything—"

"Don't worry, I'll let you know if I do."

"Thank you." Poppy nods and scoops up the vial, watching Dorcas stand. "Heading out?"

"Can't stay long," Dorcas murmurs. "I have a few things to handle back in the Hallow anyway. Minerva is staying for a bit, though, so don't worry about that."

"Who's taking you back?" Poppy asks.

Dorcas shrugs. "Edgar, I think. Not fussed either way. Minerva needs her rest as it is."

"You're damn right," Poppy agrees sternly, then continues to grumble under her breath about Minvera's apparent lack of regard for her health, fussing even as they say their goodbyes and Dorcas takes her leave.

The information she just learned weighs on her all the way out of the infirmary and towards her room, the last stop she'll make to grab her bags before she goes. It's a frightening thing, knowing what sort of power Riddle has, knowing what his plans are. He doesn't care about risks; he never has. It scares her, but she thinks he's preparing for war. What scares her more is the lengths he'll go to in the endeavor to win.

Dorcas is tired and emotionally drained and tense, so she can't be blamed for the yelp that rips out of her when she walks into her room and is immediately swept into a pair of arms. She gets one second to see Lily's sparkling green eyes—not so different from the Horcrux Hornet venom, actually—and her broad grin before she's being kissed.

Instinctively, Dorcas kisses her back, because she has always kissed Lily back. She even sinks to it with a floodgate of relief crashing through her, because it lets her mind empty out

of all the complicated, painful things that fill it. Lily's always been good at that, drawing her out of her own head.

Though, really, Dorcas knows it's an exchange between them, both of them getting lost in each other so they don't have to be lost in the things that plague them, at least for a little while.

So, it's easy to get caught up in it. Easy to slide her hands in Lily's hair, tugging her closer as the kiss deepens. Easy to back up when Lily walks her up against the wall. Easy to moan, to arch closer, as Lily nips her bottom lip and slides cool hands under her shirt, fingers flirting with her hip bones.

"Tell me you brought cigarettes," Lily says breathlessly as soon as they break away from each other.

Dorcas huffs out a weak laugh. "You know, I'm starting to get the idea that you only have anything to do with me because I supply your habit."

"Our habit," Lily teases, "and no, that's not the only reason. You're also full of fun information I just so happen to want."

"Oh, I have nothing for you this time, so don't even try it. I can't stay long anyway," Dorcas mutters.

Lily clicks her tongue. "Pity. Suppose we'll have to make this quick, then."

With that, Lily dips down to catch Dorcas under her thighs and haul her up in her arms, turning to carry her off to bed. Dorcas admittedly gets caught up in kissing her again, because it has been a while now, and it feels good.

It's not until Lily is laying her out on the bed and settling between her spread thighs that Dorcas has a passing thought. One that's like a smack to the face. Just a quick flash of a

memory, blonde hair instead of red, the last person Dorcas was with before this. *Marlene.*

Dorcas does her absolute best to smother the thought, the reminder, because it shouldn't matter. It *can't* matter. She's not doing anything wrong, obviously, and yet the mere thought of Marlene makes her chest clench and completely takes her right out of the moment.

That may have something to do with the fact that Dorcas never got to say goodbye. She went back and forth on seeing Marlene off before she left, after the end of the games, an inner battle she couldn't figure out how to win. It would mean something, she thought, and they had agreed to be friends, just friends, nothing more; they could never be more, because it would put Marlene at risk. Gideon and Fabian are proof of that. Maybe after the war, if it's ever over, maybe then…

But no, Dorcas didn't get to say goodbye. She decided it was a bad idea, and then still ended up running to the train station, only to arrive too late. Marlene was already gone.

That was probably for the best.

"What?" Lily murmurs, drawing back to look down at her with her eyebrows furrowed. "What is it?"

"Nothing." Dorcas clears her throat. "Nothing, I'm fine."

"Your enthusiasm just evaporated, so clearly you're not fine. If you don't want to, Dorcas, that's okay. It's—"

"No, no, it's not—that. It's not you. I just…"

"You…" Lily raises both eyebrows and searches her face, and then her eyebrows raise higher. "There's someone else? You met someone? Oh, fuck, Dorcas, tell me *everything."*

Dorcas heaves a sigh as Lily scrambles up and beams at her with excitement dancing in her eyes, looking delighted. "Oh, stop it. I'm not—yes, I met someone, but we're not together or anything, obviously."

"Obviously," Lily allows, nodding. "A Hallow?"

"A Victor," Dorcas says. "Marlene McKinnon. You were here when she was in her games. Did you…watch?"

Lily squints thoughtfully, then nods. "Yeah, I think I saw some of it, maybe. Blonde girl? Threw someone into a fire?"

"That's the one."

"She's fit."

Dorcas bites her lip. "You have *no idea."*

"Ooh," Lily says with a laugh, grinning, "did you two…?"

"Yes. It was amazing. We—" Dorcas sighs and looks down at her fingers. "We got close, I suppose. She's—she's really brilliant, Lily. I mean, *really."*

"Caught feelings, did you?" Lily asks quietly.

"So many feelings. All of the feelings." Dorcas groans and drags her hands up and down her face, then drops them miserably, not even caring if she's smeared any of her makeup. She looks up to see Lily watching her sympathetically, because she already understands. Of course she does. "We agreed to be just friends. Or, well, she sort of left it open-ended, like the option to be more was there, but I—I refused. I had to. We can only be friends. I can't drag her into all of this, Lily. I won't."

Lily's lips tip down into a frown, and her eyes visibly dim as she sighs. "Fuck, Dorcas, I'm sorry. That's—shit."

"Yeah," Dorcas agrees glumly, and they don't say anything else for a while. They don't really have to.

That's the thing. It's easy with Lily, because this has never been an issue for them. The truth is, a part of Dorcas does love Lily, and will always love Lily, but she knew from the very start when they first fell into bed together that it was a love that could only grow to a certain point and go no further. They're both of the same mind on that, all too aware of what risks come with getting too close to someone else.

It's sad, really. Lily's far worse than Dorcas is, honestly. She won't even let herself care—or she won't admit to herself that she does. Dorcas *knows* she does. For someone trying so hard to be removed from basic compassion and connection, Lily loves so loudly anyway. It bleeds out of her and coats all those around her, and she doesn't even see it. Lily does everything in her power not to care, not to love, like if she does, it will cause her to shatter. But she can't stop it. She can only repress it, and Dorcas knows that's only going to hurt her in the long-run, if she continues to find safety in that.

But Dorcas isn't much better. She doesn't fool herself into thinking she doesn't care, or that she's not allowing herself to love, but she's all too aware that she can't let that matter. It can't be more important than her responsibilities. She can love and care as hard as she wants, but she can't allow it to go anywhere. It won't save anyone. It just endangers them.

"Well, if it cheers you," Lily muses, "I have good news."

"You mean that you're training to be a field medic?"

"Yes. Isn't it brilliant?"

Dorcas frowns. "It's *dangerous,* Lily. Very fucking dangerous."

"The whole world is dangerous no matter what we're doing, Dorcas," Lily retorts. "At least this way, what I'm doing actually fucking matters."

"I just—" *don't want you to get hurt,* Dorcas doesn't finish. Can't finish. Even just thinking it scares her, like it's adding to the possibility. Lily may not admit that she cares, but Dorcas has no such issues. Of course she cares about Lily. They may not be in love, but they have a bond. It was built on the exchange of cigarettes and swapped information neither of them were supposed to know, as well as stolen kisses and sneaking to the surface to blow smoke and wait for a better world. "Just be careful, Lily. Who else is going to smoke with me in the Phoenix when I stop by if you're not around?"

"I could say the same to you," Lily murmurs. "Your position is no less dangerous, Dorcas."

"No," Dorcas says softly. "No, it's not."

A long, tense silence stretches between them.

"So…" Lily coughs and scratches at her eyebrow, a sheepish smile curling her mouth. "About those cigarettes…"

Dorcas busts out laughing, almost against her will, and Lily's smile stretches into a full grin. She's so beautiful. Truly, truly gorgeous. Emerald eyes and flushed cheeks, thick-thighed and wide hips, broad shoulders with a tattoo of a flower in between the blades—a pink petunia, specifically. Dorcas asked why once, but Lily didn't answer, and Dorcas only had to ask one time to know never to ask again. Secrets and chilling stories live in Lily's eyes sometimes, and Dorcas often wants to coax them out of her, just to know, just to get closer.

Lily looks pleased, and she perks up as Dorcas rolls off her bed and stumbles to her bag, digging around to pull out two cartons of cigarettes. Twenty packs. It should keep her stocked up for a while, and really, it's the least Dorcas could do.

"Worship me, Evans," Dorcas declares.

Lily snatches the cartons like they're made of gold, then lifts her gaze to Dorcas', her mouth parting a little as she touches the very tip of her tongue to her top lip. "Take off that pretty little outfit, and I'll do just that."

"I really can't stay long, Lily."

"Oh, you know I can be quick and still make it good. You can tell me about Marlene, if you like."

Dorcas starts a little in surprise, blinking. "While you're…?"

"Sure, why not? Spare no details." Lily sits the cartons aside and reaches out to grab Dorcas' wrist to reel her in slowly, her voice softening and dropping to a lower, more sultry register that does admittedly cause heat to stir in between Dorcas' hips. "Tell me all about her."

"She—she told me I was flawless, you know. Said that I'm beautiful, always," Dorcas whispers, her mouth dry as Lily tugs her in between her spread legs.

Lily's lips twitch up and she tugs Dorcas' hand to her mouth, pressing a soft kiss to her palm. There's a smile teasing at the corners of her lips. "Oh, she wasn't playing fair."

"No, she really wasn't," Dorcas agrees, a strain in her voice, her legs feeling a little weak and wobbly just from the memory of Marlene's mouth, and now Lily is doing something so irrevocably distracting and sinful, holding her gaze and wrapping her lips around Dorcas' pointer finger to scrape her teeth teasingly over the soft pad of it. Dorcas feels it between her fucking legs, and her whole body twitches.

She can see Lily's eyes light up, can practically hear Lily thinking *gotcha,* the seductive little shit. Dorcas isn't even upset, really. She'd like to be lost for a little while anyway.

After all, there's so much to get away from, isn't there?

"Come here," Lily whispers, kissing her finger and easing her right into bed, and Dorcas goes willingly, happily, because she is not immune to Lily Evans' wiles and she's all riled up just fucking *thinking* about Marlene McKinnon.

And away, away, away they go. Lost in each other.

Lost together.

~•~

"—one of the poor bastards, and it doesn't even matter which one, in any case. Don't suspect they'll survive anyway."

"Our orders weren't specific?"

"Nope. Anyone will do."

"Alright. This one, then. He's been giving me funny looks for ages. I *swear* he's glaring at me sometimes, and if I didn't know any better, I'd think he was cursing me out in his head."

That's exactly what I'm doing, you fucking cunt, Remus thinks as he raises his gaze to see two guards standing outside his cell, peering at him through the bars. He glares. Purposefully.

"Oh, he's absolutely giving you shit in his head," one of them says, looking amused.

"Well, he'll wish he hadn't." The other one reaches out with their baton-taser and knocks on the bars. "On your feet."

Still glaring, Remus reluctantly pushes to his feet, a shudder rippling through him as the cold seems to seep into his bones even deeper with movement. He feels creaky, aching all over, weak and ever so slightly faint. The cell door slides open with a clang, and the guards sweep in immediately to cuff his hands, grabbing him by one arm each to shove him out.

Remus stumbles along, staring straight ahead as he's led lower and lower through the prison, passing cell after cell on the way. Their steps echo through the eerie silence, ringing in his ears. His heart is sinking as they go lower, because he knows what this is. He knows where he's going.

The screams always drift up from down below. He usually tries to ignore them, but he has a feeling he'll be unable to ignore his own.

They take him in a room with a metal chair nailed down to the floor in the middle of it. A man is already there, sitting on a rolling stool next to it, a stand next to it as well. Remus can see a syringe and something else that looks like an oxygen mask sitting on it; he stares at it as he's led to the chair.

"Remove his mask, please," the man on the stool orders. He might be a doctor, or a scientist, or both, by the looks of him.

Remus tries not to tense up too much as the guards force him into the chair, pinning his arms down and cuffing each wrist. They cuff each ankle as well, then push his head back against the headrest and strap him into that with the padded strap that's already built in. Only then do they remove the mask on his face, and he immediately licks his dry lips, rolling his jaw and sipping in a breath of stale air.

"Got the carriage ready?" the possible doctor asks. When the guards just stare at him, he huffs. "For his body, if he doesn't make it. We lost four yesterday, and the guards on rotation held up the entire process by not having the carriage ready."

"Er," the first guard says.

The possible doctor scowls and points at the door. "Go get the fucking carriage ready. Useless bastards." The guards scowl, but they do as they're told, leaving the room while muttering under their breath. The possible doctor looks at Remus in exasperation. "Really, you think I'd have better working conditions, considering what I'm working *with.* Genuinely, they do not pay me enough for this shit."

Remus doesn't respond, of course. He's tempted to. He hasn't heard his own voice in… months, he's assuming. It's not clear, because it's not as if they have fucking clocks or calendars in Azkaban. But it's been a while, he's sure.

The possible doctor just sighs and shakes his head as he reaches out to pick up the syringe. Inside it, there's a dark orange—nearly blood-red, in fact—liquid that looks thin and swirly, about the consistency of water, even though it resembles fire. Remus automatically tenses up as the man carelessly tugs his sleeve up to reveal the bend of his elbow.

"Best not to fight it too much," he mutters wearily. "Never seemed to help the others, anyway. Hold still."

Remus doesn't really have a choice in the matter, seeing as he's strapped to the fucking chair. Every part of him screams out in protest, wanting to fight, but he can only watch with his heart racing as the needle slides into his vein.

As soon as the plunger starts pushing down, it's agony.

It's pure fire licking at his nerve-endings, eating away underneath his skin, acid burning right through his body. Remus screams. He can't help it. He's never felt anything like it in his life, a searing pain so stark that it's all he knows.

"Fuck, fuck, no, don't—"

Remus is throwing himself against his restraints in the attempt to get his hands free and rip his fucking skin off, but it's not his hands that break out. The strap on his head wasn't prepared for him to absolutely lose it and put so much pressure on it, so he flings himself forward as he convulses in the chair.

Mindless with desperation and pain, Remus quite literally just slams to the side, tilting over the arm of the chair. He clips the stand beside him—or, well, his face does, actually—but he genuinely can't feel it through the pain of everything else. All he knows is that his insides are melting and something is dripping down his face, and maybe that's just the skin sliding off his skull, because he's boiling, he's on fire, he's—

"Just. Hold. *Still,"* someone yells, and Remus knows nothing, can't make sense of anything past the flames eating through muscles and tendons and bones. Surely he's collapsing into ash. How is he solid? How—

Remus is slammed back in the chair, held in place as he thrashes, and then he can't move again. The whole world is out of focus, and there's blood in his eyes, in his mouth.

He thinks it's his.

"Let's see. Deep breath now." The words don't really make sense to Remus, and he can barely hear them, but there's a clear mask coming down to frame his nose and mouth. It's a closed dome, like an oxygen mask, and there's a black canister attached to the bottom of it with the hazard symbol on it right beside the Hallow emblem.

If Remus were in the right state of mind, he would find that fitting. The Hallow is a hazard, isn't it?

As it is, Remus can't think of anything. It's just pain. Pure torture. The mask settles around his mouth and nose, pressing in so hard that his screams are muffled. He can taste them; they're tangy and sour with fear, and anguish.

There's a click, then a strange *puff* noise, and Remus' eyes focus long enough to see a small cloud of bright green fill the mask. He doesn't mean to inhale it, he really doesn't, because he's sure it's a bad idea to do so, but everything hurts and it's so hard to breathe, and he's gasping. He's *gasping.*

Remus inhales.

The pain gets worse. So much worse. It reaches a peak that splits his brain in half, and he's dying, he's so sure that he's dying. He can only be dying, and he doesn't want to, fights so hard not to, rebelling against the mere thought because—because—

Somehow, through everything, through the pain and what must be death, Remus finds it in himself to cling to one last lucid thought before everything fades away.

Sirius, Sirius, Sirius, SiriusSiriusSirius—

Chapter End Notes

for those of you who are here to know where to skip the torture/experimentation: when it becomes remus' POV, i recommend just stopping reading or scrolling down to the comments as soon as Remus is led down from his cell. like, when he's being strapped to the chair, just call it a day, ya know?

for those of you who want the in-depth warning beforehand: remus is taken out of his cell by guards and brought to a room in the lower levels of azkaban. he's strapped to a chair, and a doctor injects him with a red liquid that really hurts him. in his pain, he tries to break his restraints and only manages to break the one at his head, hitting his face against the tray next to him. he's strapped back in and forced to inhale a green mist, and the pain gets worse. he thinks he's dying, and his last thought is of sirius.

for those of you who need the reassurance: no, remus is not dead, i promise. what happened to him was Very Necessary for the plot, i assure you.

right, let me do a quick rundown:

kingsley and sybill my beloveds <3

also, lily!!! so, we got a little more backstory from her side of things, just a teensy bit. turns out, our girl was shot. between that and being told remus and her family are dead (dumbledore... ill get to him in a second), she's quite obviously traumatized in her own ways. trying her best to keep her distance, refusing to connect with anyone, things like that. Not Good. very Not Good, honestly. and yet she's still out here killing it, being a total badass in her training. i love her <3 also it will never not be entertaining to me that she's out here singlehandedly keeping the women in the Phoenix satisfied 😭😭😭 lily, please, i just want one chance

oh, and kingsley calling her out. they're friends, your honor. but shhh, lily doesn't know that. imagine being in denial about having FRIENDS. lily, im begging you, after you give me a chance, Go To Therapy. and the sad part is, she's such a good friend too??? like, she's just so happy about everyone else being happy, and she's kind and just. god, im in love with her.

next up, dorcas!!! oh, she's an icon. the way she fed dumbledore his own wrinkly ass on a platter? queen shit. i want to marry that woman. she LITERALLY said "fuck you" to dumbledore. *starts snapping like im at a poetry reading*

now, long ago, i said that fabian and gideon's deaths would make sense, and that it wasn't just for shock value. now you know what i meant. as it turns out, dorcas was at risk, so dumbledore had them take the fall for her—and for his secret informant. that's so fucked up. it's soooo fucked up.

the worst part is that it was...necessary. like, SOMEONE had to take the fall, and it couldn't be dorcas or the secret informant (to be revealed later, but go ahead and place your bets now). fabian and gideon just got the raw end of the deal. it's horrible, but it was—in dumbledore's mind—a necessary sacrifice.

see, the thing is, there's A Lot going on with dumbledore and his history and how it plays into the story. like, we found out that he was once a Victor, and he's the one who assassinated the previous master of the hallow—grindelwald. there's a lot of questions that come with that, like what district was he from? why did he kill grindelwald? what made him rebel and run away to start the order of the phoenix? and yes, all these questions will be answered in due time.

hating dumbledore for what he's doing is valid, but it's also valid to wonder WHY the fuck he's doing it. like, i didn't just make him the Bad Guy, ya know? he's obviously doing Bad Guy shit, but it's not just because he's a Bad Guy, if that makes sense.

anyway, moving on. lily and dorcas. hm. now listen, im a dorlene guy at heart, so you don't have anything to worry about in that regard. it's just that lily is literally just that sexy and powerful. they're friends, and dorcas isn't in a relationship, so she didn't do anything wrong. don't worry, there's A LOT more dorlene in the future. also lily and someone else, though im not currently at liberty to say, for Spoiler Reasons.

finally, remus. oof. that was roooough. i really fucking hated it, honestly, because i love him dearly and never wish to see him in pain. (that's why the scene was kinda short. no way i was dragging that shit out). however, it WAS necessary for the plot. like, that had to happen, for ~reasons~ you'll find out later.

oh, and i wanted to mention the horcrux hornet venom, too. i told you it'd be important to the plot lmaoooo. it definitely plays a pretty big part.

alright, that's mostly it, i think. next chapter we see regulus, sirius, and james again and see how they're doing after time has passed. (i know some will be pissed about the time jump, but it was also necessary)

Gifts

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to/depictions of aquaphobia (fear of water)
-references to nightmares (brief and vague)
-references to violence (brief and not in present time)
-references to child abuse (walburga and orion)
-references to past deaths
-depictions of time displacement (james' issue with time, i don't know what term fits for it??? but basically he struggles to know when/where he is at times, and it's depicted in this chapter twice, though not heavily and quickly resolved)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Evan, mid-lecture about the benefits of climbing, abruptly stops to say, instead, "Wakey-wakey, Regulus."

"What?" Regulus asks, blinking at him.

"Fuck's sake," Evan grumbles, scowling. "He interrupts me *every time.* He's so fucking annoying, you know."

Regulus stares at him in confusion. "Who?"

"Come on, wake up," Evan insists, rolling his eyes, and Regulus opens his mouth to ask what the fuck is wrong with him when the tree branch snaps, making him jolt, and then his eyes split open as the whole world swirls into focus.

There's a body next to him, warm and solid. Disoriented, the first thing Regulus rasps is, "James?"

"No, still not him," Barty says, coming into view as he props up and leans over to peer down at him, eyebrows raised. He looks faintly amused. "After all these months, you'd think you would stop asking by now."

"Fuck off," Regulus mutters, reaching up to knuckle at his eyes as he shudders through a yawn.

"You were jabbering on about Evan again," Barty informs him.

"He finds you very irritating, you know," Regulus says as he drops his hands, lips twitching slightly. "I think it pisses him off that you interrupt us."

"Lovely. Genuinely, nothing pleases me more than being a thorn in the side of the hot ghost that lives in your dreams."

"Well, he dies, usually, but you keep interrupting."

Barty hums. "In that case, he should be thanking me. Anyway, you get particularly chatty before you start screaming your head off, so I know now to wake you up before then."

"Right," Regulus sighs out, pushing up on his elbows and shifting to sit on the side of his bed, rolling his shoulders. "Time for me to get up, I suppose. You, too."

"No bath?" Barty asks quietly.

Regulus shakes his head a little stiffly. "Not now. Later today, after I've gone out."

"Bad day?" Barty murmurs.

"It's fine," is all Regulus says. "I'm going to brush my teeth. You can see yourself out."

"Ah, Regulus, your chivalry knows no bounds," Barty replies dryly, but he's still amused. "I do so love when you demand I come lay beside you through the night, mistake me for another man the next morning, and then immediately kick me out afterwards. Truly, you know how to make a man feel special."

"Glad to be of service," Regulus quips back as he pushes to his feet. "Now, get out."

"Prick," Barty calls after him.

"Bitch," Regulus responds, then heads right across the hall to enter his bathroom and shut the door.

For a long moment, Regulus just stands there and breathes, flexing his fingers, and then, with a sigh, he turns on the tap and grabs his toothbrush.

His eyes crawl over to the bathtub, scowling automatically as soon as he looks at it. As extravagant as it is, he fucking hates it. Even after months, bathing is still the bane of his existence. He does it; what's a long, grueling process that always leaves a puddle of water on the floor and makes him feel like he's failing as a human being, but he does it. He is clean, by the end, and that's all that matters.

He doesn't always bathe alone, which helps on the really bad days. Well, no, he *always* bathes alone. He'll never be able to bathe with another person in the tub with him, where they can touch him, where he can feel their fingers on his skin. But someone will be there when he needs them. Barty usually sits on the toilet and chatters away, not bothered by his nudity and fully unafraid to make lewd, teasing comments even when Regulus is crying, which Regulus honestly appreciates. Sirius, for obvious reasons, doesn't come into the bathroom when Regulus is bathing, but he'll sit outside the door—much like Remus did—and talk to him the entire time, no questions asked.

There are a lot more days where he goes at it alone, where he can come in contact with water without immediately going back to the river. Those are the good days. When Barty stays over, he always tries to catch the bad days beforehand, rather than let Regulus struggle to figure out how to ask for help. Either way, Regulus has come a long way. Progress is progress, as they say.

Regulus never showers. He'll never shower again.

When Regulus resurfaces from the bathroom, his mouth fresh and changed for the day, Barty is still lazing about in his bed, the idiot. Regulus sighs.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" Regulus asks flatly.

"Yes, but I'm ignoring it," Barty says simply.

"Go to work, Barty."

"But I *hate it* there."

Regulus shakes his head and moves over to his desk to cut on his lamp and slap open his journal. It automatically falls open on the last page he wrote on, the latest flower not quite conforming to the binding pressing the stem flat. Regulus runs his fingers over the petals, swallowing, then flips to the next page and picks up his pen.

"Roses are red, my dad is a prick, don't make me go to work, I'd rather die," Barty whines.

"That doesn't even rhyme," Regulus mutters.

Barty grunts. "Poetry doesn't have to rhyme. *You* taught me that. Anyway, it's better than whatever you're writing about, no doubt. Make a note of it, would you? I'm a genius."

"Roses are red, get out of my bed, do as I said, or I'll remove your fucking head," Regulus snaps, even as he twists his wrist and writes Barry's stupid poem in the margin, signing it with *an idiot who, sadly, thinks he's a genius.*

"I fucking hate it, though, just so you know," Barty grumbles as he rolls out of bed. "He's just going to lecture me as soon as I come through the door, as if I care about making stupid hinges all day. And it's so *hot.* And my arms hurt by the end. And I don't even want to be a blacksmith, but does he care about that? *Nooo,* of course not. He's just—oi, are you even listening to me, Regulus?"

"Mhm," says Regulus, who is not.

In fairness, it's not as if Regulus has never heard any of this before. He knows all about Barty's distaste for his father, and Barty's distaste for working as a blacksmith under his father, and also just Barty's general distaste with pretty much everything. Regulus can't really blame him; he knows better than most the complex feelings one has for shit parents.

In Barty's case, his mother is the one he tolerates everything for. If not for her, Regulus is quite sure Barty would have spit in his father's face and never stepped foot to the forge again. Barty's dad may be shit, but his mum is lovely.

As Barty putters around, he continues to prattle on and complain, while Regulus tunes him out, uninterested. He no longer offers Barty money, because Barty stopped taking it when his dad began demanding to know where he got it and what he did to get it, leading to a massive argument that upset his mum. Regulus knows not to offer now, even though he has plenty and doesn't mind giving Barty enough to keep his family fed, even his sorry excuse for a father.

"Alright, alright, I'm heading out now," Barty announces.

Regulus swivels in his chair to face him. "Coming by again?"

"Not tonight. I'm going over to Casey's."

"Oh, are you now?"

Barty grins and wiggles his eyebrows. "They want to blow off some steam, and I'm more than willing to provide. You can come, if you want. They said I could bring along a friend."

"I think I'll pass. You have fun, though," Regulus murmurs.

"You need to get out more," Barty says with a sigh. "I'm not saying sex would fix all your problems, but it would at least take your mind off of them, and you deserve orgasms."

Regulus huffs out a weak laugh because Barty says it so earnestly that it's literally funny. Coming from Barty, that's genuinely a compliment and also basically an admission of how much he worries about Regulus. Wishing orgasms upon people is how Barty shows his love —oh, and *giving* orgasms, generally, but they don't do that anymore.

No, they just…sleep next to each other sometimes. It's sort of humiliating, honestly. They used to get up to all sorts of filthy things when the mood struck them, and now their thing is *laying next to each other without touching,* because it helps Regulus sleep. He struggles to do it alone after the arena, but he also still can't stand to be touched, most of the time, at least until he's really tired, close to sleep, but having a body next to him helps. Barty has learned the hard way not to touch him, especially without warning.

Four and half months have passed, and Regulus is still too paranoid to risk sleep if he doesn't have a body next to him, just so he can trick his brain into thinking he's safe. His brain believes it, too, and that's why every time he wakes up, it's James he thinks is there.

"Believe it or not, I'm doing just fine without orgasms, Barty," Regulus assures him. "You go on and have as many as you like, though. Don't let me stop you."

Barty frowns, hesitating in the doorway. "You'll be alright tonight, right? Because I can cancel—"

"Absolutely do *not* cancel," Regulus cuts in. "I'll be fine, and if not, Sirius will be around to pester me. He's supposed to stop by today. Don't leave Casey disappointed. They give me a free journal every month, so you better make it good for them. Do that thing with your mouth that you do."

"You'll have to be more specific." Barty breaks out into a grin and winks. "I do *many* things with my mouth."

"Except shut up, sadly," Regulus says, and Barty mock-glares at him before tapping the doorway and complaining about having to go to work. They exchange goodbyes, and then Barty takes all noise with him when he goes, leaving behind quiet.

Regulus turns back to his journal and picks up his pen.

There is a rabid beast in me

I am a bruise — the soft rot of a peach

Small and split open

The seam of me screams

I was once a star — but never bright

The velvet night swallowed me

It always has

I let it still

Better to be swallowed

Than to swallow

Blood

The sight of movement outside his window catches Regulus' attention, making him lift his gaze, a gentle tug in his chest that lets him know what he will see before he even looks. This is how it goes, every day; he knows this with the same steady certainty that he knows the sun

will set, and it will rise again. There is something in him that is aware, always so very aware, of James, especially when he is close by.

Regulus leans forward slightly, braced on his elbows beside his journal, holding his breath as he catches sight of James' messy head down below, where he stands on Regulus' stoop. He lingers, just as he always does, every single day, and then he comes back into view as he starts walking away. Regulus hastily sits back in his chair, picking up his pen and pretending to write, though he isn't. He's learned his lesson by now; James always looks back, unable to resist stealing one glimpse through the window. Today is not a day that Regulus feels strong enough to meet his gaze.

Carefully, Regulus peeks through his eyelashes very quickly, allowing himself to lift his head again when he sees that James is nearly at his house—right across the fucking street. James still lives with his parents, rather than moving out into the house provided for him after the games, like Regulus did. They're all still in the Victor's Village, four of the houses assigned, only three used. Regulus' parents in the house Sirius got after he won his games; James and Sirius in the house Effie got after she won hers; Regulus in his own after he won his.

As soon as James slips back into his house, Regulus slams his pen down and darts out of his chair, pounding down the stairs at, frankly, a truly ridiculous speed. He's breathless by the time he reaches the door, and he's swift when opening it just a little and darting his hand out to stoop down and grab what James left behind, what he leaves behind every morning, without fail.

The flower is blue today.

Regulus leans against the door and stares down at it, his heart hammering away in his chest—from the running, obviously, and nothing else. He drags his thumb gently over the soft, thin petals in full bloom of songbird blue, his heart swollen in his chest like it has been stung. It throbs.

After four—nearly five—months of James consistently leaving a flower on Regulus' doorstep literally every day, you would think it would stop affecting him so much. It hasn't. Every morning, it steals his breath. Every morning, it makes him ache. Every morning, it holds his heart hostage.

As always, Regulus wanders into the kitchen with his nose buried into the flower, inhaling the scent of it, the scent of earth and something sweet; inhaling like he can find a trace of James lingering underneath it all, even if he never does. He twirls it against his nose until it makes him sneeze, which is somehow satisfying, and then he drops the flower into the vase on his windowsill facing the backyard, pushing it towards the back of the banquet. Just like every other day, Regulus plucks two flowers from the front that James left for him days and days ago, then darts off back upstairs.

It's practically a routine, at this point. Regulus uses one of the flowers to replace a dying one in his previous journals that he's already filled, and the second flower goes in between the page he's writing on today. The flower—it's pink—sits on the desk as he picks up his pen again.

Another flower in bloom

It speaks for you — soft

Softer than you've ever spoken

There is strength in your voice

Loud and shameless — bright

So bright, like the sun, even now

The flowers grow towards you

I hear you — and I

Listen, listening, I am listening

I cannot drown you out

I no longer wish to try

Like the flowers in bloom

I grow towards you

I grow — if I cannot climb

~•~

James stops into the kitchen to kiss his mum on her cheek, squeezing her shoulder as he does. Effie leans into it with a smile, but she doesn't step away from the stove.

"Very quick today," Effie notes.

"Yes, well, I didn't spend twenty minutes debating on whether I should knock or not this time," James says sheepishly. He heaves a sigh. "I have to head out, so there was no time for it, really. I'm meeting Mary at the school."

"Taking Sirius with you?" Effie asks.

"If he wants to go," James tells her, shrugging. "He probably will, if he has no plans to bother Regulus today."

Effie hums. "You'll both be home in time for dinner, yes?"

"We wouldn't miss it," James teases, leaning over to rub his head all over her shoulder, chuckling when she huffs in mock offense and ruffles his hair.

A few minutes later, James walks through the house and finds his dad in the main room, chucking chopped logs into the fireplace. The sight of it makes James' heart clench, as it always does. James never chops wood for his parents anymore; Monty handles that now, even though it must be brutal on his back and knees. He does it without complaint, though, and puts the hatchet away somewhere James doesn't have to see it when he's tending to his flowers.

"Oh, I've got it," Monty mumbles when James moves over to crouch down beside him with a grimace, helping him toss the last few logs into the fireplace. "James—"

"Ah, it's fine, Dad," James cuts in quickly, ignoring the twinge in his leg and the truly grotesque pop his knee just gave when he dropped down. He's twenty-six, and sometimes his body makes noises that sound like he's much, much older. It is both horribly funny—to him,

at least—and mildly depressing (to basically everyone else, except Mary, who laughs along with him and says they can start a band, because she has a bad elbow that cracks every time she bends it).

"Thank you," Monty says graciously when the last log goes in, and then he reaches out to pass his hand over James' hair, rubbing his head affectionately. His parents are full of little touches like that, randomly reaching out to touch him as if to make sure he's really here, even to this day. James soaks it up every single fucking time.

"Come on, old man, let me help you up," James teases, then turns right around and needs his dad to help *him* up, which makes him burst out laughing when Monty looks smug.

"I am in my prime, I'll have you know," Monty declares. "Tell me, *young man,* what's your excuse?"

"Mum!" James calls. "Dad's making fun of my leg again!"

"Flea," Effie calls sharply, and James grins as Monty throws up both hands, his eyes twinkling in amusement despite the way he pretends to grumble.

James stifles a laugh as he heads to the stairs and Monty sweeps into the kitchen to appease his wife, declaring that their son is a dirty, rotten liar who only intends to drive them apart. The stairs, as always, are not James' favorite invention in the world, but he skips the fold-out seat Sirius built and installed for him that runs on a mechanism along the railing to ride him up when his leg is giving him too much trouble. It's not too bad today, and he knows his limits by now, after nearly five months of learning them.

James has a mild limp when he reaches the top, but he's walked it out by the time he reaches Sirius' room. He doesn't bother to knock, because they've never really knocked, honestly. Sirius is awake, tugging on a shirt over his head.

James wolf-whistles.

"Keep it your pants, Potter," Sirius mutters as he shakes his hair out of his face.

"I'm afraid I might not be able to. You are a *vision,"* James says mock-breathlessly, fanning his face.

Sirius' lips twitch. "Damn right I am. Hottest bitch on the block, and don't you forget it."

"Eh, well…" James bears his teeth in a grimace and tips his head from side-to-side. "I mean, Regulus is right across the street, so…"

"You're biased, Romeo," Sirius says, rolling his eyes.

James snorts. "Yeah, yeah. Speaking of Regulus, are you planning to see him today?"

"Yes," Sirius replies, narrowing his eyes. "Why?"

"Calm down, I'm not going to try and tag along," James mutters, exasperated. Sirius is fiercely territorial of any and all time he spends with Regulus, and just—territorial in general, though he never stands in the way of them seeing one another if that's what they want to do, except they…never do. "I was just asking because I'm meeting up with Mary again today, and I thought maybe you'd like to come with."

Sirius' eyes light up. "Oh, I'd love to, if I've the time. How long are you staying, do you think?"

"For a few hours, at most. I was thinking of stopping by and helping at the market again afterwards, unless Mary has some other plans I can crash," James admits.

"I'll see how my day goes, yeah?" Sirius says.

James nods. "Yeah, just thought I'd offer. Mum is making breakfast, by the way."

"Should've led with that," Sirius blurts out, then practically shoves James out of the way to rush out of the room, singing out greetings and demands for food as he crashes down the stairs and no doubt bursts into the kitchen. There's a pause of silence, then, "James, they're kissing again!"

"Euphemia and Fleamont Potter!" James bellows as he marches out of the room, hopping up onto the railing of the stairs and sliding his way down with a grin, making sure to ease himself down rather than jump when he reaches the bottom. He sets his face into a scowl before entering the kitchen, arms crossed in disapproval as he pins a scolding look on his parents, who are glancing between him and Sirius with twin looks of amusement. "We don't accept such filth in this house. All overt displays of affection are prohibited and enforced with the threat of eviction."

"Flea, be a dear and spit in my mouth," Effie says.

"Anything for you, my love," Monty replies immediately, leaning in with a grin while Sirius and James start protesting loudly and rushing forward to pull them apart.

"Rebels," Sirius hisses, squirming his way between them and shaking his head. "Absolute heathens, the both of you."

"You can't wrangle our passion," Monty says.

"Nor can you replicate it. You could only be so lucky to have what we have," Effie adds, fighting a smile.

James coughs to cover a laugh. "Sirius, I don't know how we can keep living in these conditions."

"It's torture," Sirius agrees dramatically. Effie holds out a full plate to him, and he brightens instantly. "Well, would you look at that? Suddenly, I'm so happy to be here."

"Stockholm syndrome," James whispers.

"I'm never leaving," Sirius announces, which only further proves James' point. They share a look, then have to look away so they won't dissolve into laugher.

There is this warmth and laughter and love stored in the kitchen like the familiarity of the spice rack, and James can feel it shaping itself into his mind, a memory in the making, one he will cling to when he needs to remember, when he needs the reminder.

The one thing James can't ignore is the emptiness at his side, just a little colder than every other part of him, a carved out space begging to be filled. Regulus would fit there, leaned up against him, tucked under his arm and whispering bitchy remarks in James' ear to leave him in stitches. Regulus would fit here, with James, with this family. Regulus would fit so well that his absence is felt; James feels it, always.

After all this time, you'd think he'd be used to it by now.

~•~

Sirius and James have claimed portions of the backyard for themselves, and though it goes unspoken, it's very much known that what's theirs is *theirs,* and theirs alone.

Sirius, Effie, and Monty do not mess with James' flowers in any way, and they do not knock down beehives or hornet nests, and they do not leave tools that can be picked up and used as weapons out for James to see or grab—this was all learned through trial and error. James, Effie, and Monty do not come inside Sirius' shed, and they do not move his tools around, and they do not make requests for him to build anything specific, only grateful for whatever he gives them—this also was learned through trial and error.

That's life, though. A whole lot of trial and error.

The last time Sirius was over at Regulus', he saw the pens and pencils scattered all over his desk in his room—the one that Sirius built for him—and made the mental note to build something to hold them. It's nothing fancy, not the most intricate thing he's ever built, but it will work. Just a wooden container big enough that the pens and pencils should clink into with ease, hanging out for easy access at the top, the outside carved into in nonsensical patterns because Sirius got bored. The varnish has made it all shiny and smooth.

Sirius builds things again. Makes things. Anything, really. It started with making James a cane, so he could get rid of the one the Hallow provided him with. The first one was alright, but Sirius thought he could do better, so he made a second one, then a third, and a fourth, as well as a fifth, which James is using now when he needs his cane. Sirius is currently working on the sixth, improving each time he does it, a little attached to the routine of it. James keeps them all.

In any case, making the first cane sort of broke through something in Sirius, and then suddenly it was like he couldn't *stop* making things. Clothes, trinkets, furniture—it doesn't matter, he does it all. He knits, he carves, he works with glass and plastic and clay and wood. He just…tinkers, basically all of the time. Most things, he doesn't finish. Some things, he still breaks. A few things, he finishes to perfection, then destroys before anyone can ever see it, in a fit of rage and emotion that overwhelms him. But he never stops; he always goes back to build again, and something about that soothes him.

It wasn't easy, picking it back up after ten years. That first cane he made was honestly shit, even though James used it with no issues. Maybe Sirius is just dramatic, but to him, the sight of it made him want to gouge his eyeballs out, so he'd insisted on doing better the second time around. That's pretty much how he's gotten good again, old habits and his relentless determination to expect better from himself. The sound of derision in his head that mocks his failures still takes the shape of his mother's voice, even to this day.

On the way out the door of the shed, pen-holder in hand, Sirius taps his biggest project in the corner, under the sheet. He still finds new things to do to it, and likely will until it's finally put to use. James and Regulus' bookshelf is there—the one mentioned only once, from some other life, and he's made it in this one for them to have whenever they're ready. Sirius believes they will be, someday. He dares to hope so, at least.

It's not a very long trip to get to Regulus' house, seeing as he's right across the street. Not as far from their parents as Sirius would like, but close to him, so he deals with it. He'd wanted to toss Walburga and Orion out and leave them homeless, but Regulus had asked him not to —begged him not to, really, which is the only reason Sirius didn't.

They were hard on Regulus after he got back, too hard, so it was no surprise that he eventually snapped. It had taken less than a week, just a few days of Walburga telling him to take a shower, refusing to have a son who didn't have proper hygiene, who wouldn't present himself properly; then, when Orion dared to try and drag Regulus into a shower, fully-clothed and screaming his head off so loud that Sirius heard it all the way down the street and immediately came running, everything sort of just—went to shit, honestly. Sirius had burst in on Regulus quite literally choking Orion to death, and he did admittedly consider just… letting him do it.

In the end, he didn't, because he knew Regulus would only be more fucked up from it, and honestly, dealing with the Aurors and repercussions would be a fucking chore. So, Sirius pulled him off—the only one who could, because he was the only one strong enough to, though Walburga had been making an attempt, to no avail. Regulus was lashing out and rather feral at the time, so Sirius had to genuinely drag him away. That very same day, he helped Regulus move out, and their parents haven't had anything to do with them since.

They're afraid, Sirius knows that. Afraid of their own children, which Sirius finds some sort of fucked up, poetic justice in. After all, their children were once frightened of them; now they know how it feels to be on the other side of it. Their sons are murderers, and they never really seem to grasp the full horror of such a thing until it's their lives at risk.

In any case, Regulus is both better and worse off for essentially being disowned, the same as Sirius. It hurts him, but it's for the best, because Walburga and Orion don't care about the trauma either of them have in the aftermath of the games; they never did, and why would they? It's not as if they cared about the trauma Sirius and Regulus carry in the aftermath of their childhood, the trauma *they* caused.

It's gotten better, though. Two months ago, Sirius coaxed Regulus over to Andromeda's to visit her and properly meet Ted and Nymphadora. Andy—despite all the years that's gone by where Regulus never visited or acknowledged her at all, due to Walburga and Orion forbidding it—welcomed Regulus in without batting an eye, not commenting on his limp, greasy hair or his frail, willowy frame barely holding itself together from the exhaustion. It was a bad time, two months ago, but with time, things have slowly gotten better.

Sirius knows the cycle. He's lived it. Things are very bad, then they get a little better, and then they get much worse, and then they're just okay, and then it's unbearable, and then somehow, inexplicably, it's really good. Over and over, so it goes. Regulus and James—and Sirius—are good now, all at the same time, which is very rare, but it won't last forever. It just gets further and further apart, letting them learn how to live with it.

"Reggie!" Sirius calls, knocking on the front door and poking his head inside to wait for the habitual granting of entry. Regulus has never, not once, refused to let him inside.

This time, there's silence.

Sirius does not panic, not like the very first time he got this response. Regulus never refuses him if he's *around,* but he's not always around. Sometimes, he's just—gone. No one knows where he goes, and no one can find him. Sirius maybe had a legitimate breakdown the first time this occurred, so now Regulus tends to leave a note, just in case.

And yep, there it is. A note in the kitchen, where it always is, reading: *Don't have a meltdown, I'll be back —R.A.B.*

Sirius turns and immediately heads back out to go up the stairs, letting himself into Regulus' room. It's an invasion of privacy, technically, but also not really because Regulus likes it. Sirius knows he does, knows he likes to come home and find Sirius invading his space like there's nothing holding him back from doing so, a sure sign that they're okay. He sits down the pen-holder on the desk, his lips briefly twitching when he sees the closed journal with a pink flower sticking out the top like a bookmark, not pressed between the pages just yet, meaning he'll probably write some more later.

Sirius doesn't read Regulus' diaries. He respects that boundary, despite his curiosity, and he's aware that Regulus would lose his collective shit if Sirius did. Regulus is the same way about his writing that James is about tending to his flowers and Sirius is about building.

With a sigh, Sirius throws open Regulus' window and perches on the edge of his bed, taking out his pack of cigarettes to light one up, peering up at the sky as he waits for Regulus to come back, looking at the clouds and missing the moon.

~•~

There's a tree on the edge of the mayor's property, neighboring the mortuary in district six. A tall tree with thick, swooping limbs and a hefty trunk, gnarled roots practically cemented into the ground at the base, like seats for Regulus to perch on. It's an old tree, probably fifty years old, quiet and solitary as it overlooks the aftermath of death.

Technically, the tree is on the mayor's property, though Regulus doubts the mayor ever sees him out here, because he's never once come out to complain. The mortuary being close by might have something to do with that.

No one comes to the mortuary, except for the mortician, but even he only shows up when it's necessary, when someone has died and there's a body to tend to, a funeral to plan. Regulus is generally alone out here, him and the tree.

Most people don't like the reminder of death. It's a morbid thing, isn't it? Something that sends a shiver up the spine, looking at the building where grief and loss bleeds out the windows, where death clings to the walls. Regulus knows better. Death is everywhere, so there is no avoiding it.

In any case, Regulus likes this tree. He thinks Evan would have liked to climb it. Regulus never has, even though he tells himself each time he comes that he will, he'll finally do it, he'll grab on and keep going until he reaches the top.

Regulus never even leaves the ground.

The tree has indentations in the bark from where he's thrown daggers into it repeatedly, because he spends a lot of time just doing that. Maybe it shouldn't soothe him, but it does. He thinks it always will.

It's hot out now that summer has barreled its way in. Regulus isn't a fan of it, frankly. He sweats more in the heat, naturally, which means there's more of a need to bathe. But, at the

same time, he's never cold at night, which he actually likes. He associates cold nights with the arena.

With a grunt, Regulus snatches his dagger from the tree and steps back, his chest heaving from the force in which he just threw it, his body delightfully ache-y. He's always careful not to cut himself, because the first—and only—time that he did, he ended up vomiting violently, which he found incredibly ridiculous, seeing as it was only a small bit on his finger. Like an idiot, he'd stuffed his finger in his mouth to instinctively soothe the small cut; as soon as the taste of iron hit his tongue, it was over for him. He hasn't made that mistake again.

Regulus thinks about tossing his dagger again, but stops and squints up at the sky against the harsh blare of the sun beating down on his sticky skin. He's been out here for hours, so if Sirius did decide to come over, then he's no doubt waiting for him. Regulus is wary of keeping him waiting too long, the memory of how bad that went over the first time never too far away from his mind. Sirius had *not* handled it well.

So, with mild reluctance, Regulus blows out a deep breath and sweeps his hair back from where it hangs soggy and damp over his forehead, trying to cling to his sweaty skin. Yeah, he's going to have to bathe tonight. The thought makes his stomach turn over, so he ignores it for a bit longer.

It's a bit of a walk to get back to the Victor's Village. Regulus passes where Barty is, but he doesn't stop, unwilling to be a catalyst to another explosive fight between him and his father. He bypasses the market, unwilling to interact with people.

After the market, he passes the school, which he steals glances at, telling himself he's not trying to see James, even though he is. He knows through Sirius that James spends a lot of time there with Mary, and Sirius also goes as well when he has the chance. Sirius has invited him multiple times, swearing Mary won't mind, promising that it would be good for him.

Regulus never goes, but he'd be lying if he said he hasn't thought about it, if only to see James. The only issue is the children. Regulus can barely function around grown adults, so he knows he'd be a lost cause around kids. Nymphadora is turning out to be an exception, but he doesn't want to test the theory with other children.

Finally, Regulus makes it back to the Victor's Village, walking the same path under the street lights, even though they're not lit up, the same path he's walked for years. He has to pass his old house—where his parents are—and he dares to take a glance. He doesn't see anything, of course. Sometimes, he does. Sometimes, his mother is leaving to go out, or his father can be seen walking past a window. Sometimes, he misses them. Sometimes, he wonders what he's even missing.

As soon Regulus opens the door and steps inside, Sirius is there, pulling him into a stiff hug that makes Regulus' whole body tense as a bolt of confusion shoots through him. Sirius never touches him unprompted, or without a clear sign of warning so that Regulus can pull away if he needs to, and on the really bad days, he knows not to touch at all. The fact that Sirius is hugging him before anything else sets him on high alert immediately, as does the panic in Sirius' eyes when he lets go.

"Hey, Regulus. Just letting you know, James left after you did, but he should be home soon," Sirius says, holding his gaze, clearly trying to convey something that Regulus is honestly just —not getting. What the fuck is he on about?

"What?" Regulus asks, baffled. Is this, like, a bad day of some sort for *Sirius?* "James isn't —"

"In fact, why don't I go get him?" Sirius cuts in hastily. "He'd like to know you two have a visitor, I'm sure."

Regulus somehow gets more stiff, and he holds his breath for a beat while Sirius looks at him, practically pleading with him to go along with this with his eyes. So, Regulus exhales and slowly nods. "Yes, I'm sure he would. Who's the visitor?"

"The Master of the Hallow himself," Sirius declares, somehow managing to sound delighted by this, despite the fact that there's no smile on his face. "He's in your kitchen."

"Ah," Regulus says, hoping like hell that it doesn't sound like he's just been punched the way it *feels.* He swallows thickly, clears his throat quietly, then sets his shoulders. "Well, I suppose I shouldn't keep him waiting, then. I'll keep him company while you bring James home."

"Alright, sure," Sirius replies lightly, like it's no big deal, but he drags Regulus back into a hug, and this time, Regulus reflexively hugs him back, holding tight. Sirius ducks his head to whisper in his ear. "I'll be quick. James lives here and you love him very much, am I clear?"

"Got it," Regulus breathes out, and Sirius gives him a squeeze before pulling away, heading for the door.

For a second, Regulus just breathes, and then he starts moving towards the kitchen. He's not…afraid, exactly, just cautious. It confuses him why Riddle would show up here, but maybe it shouldn't. After all, what he and James did no doubt pissed the man off, but it's been months. It's over now, pretty much. Sure, there's the victory tour coming up in a month and a half, but that's the last Riddle will ever have to see or hear of James and Regulus, because it's not like they're going to be mentors. Sirius is too beloved by Hallows to be replaced, and he wouldn't let them take his place anyway.

In the kitchen, there are two armed Aurors standing on either side of the doorway as Regulus steps inside, which honestly puts him on pins and needles immediately. He thinks about the dagger strapped to his side, under his shirt, and forces himself not to even form the thought that he could use it.

Riddle is indeed in his kitchen, just casually sitting at the table with a closed briefcase right in front of him. He doesn't smile when Regulus comes in, but he does raise his hand and flick his fingers, which makes the Aurors file out.

"Regulus, thank you for joining me," Riddle says, his voice smooth and clear.

"I apologize for making you wait," Regulus murmurs as he moves to sit across from him as soon as Riddle gestures for him to do so, commanding the space around him like he owns it all. "I wasn't expecting a visitor today, or I wouldn't have."

"That's quite alright. Sirius was a nice host while I waited," Riddle replies. He flicks his gaze over Regulus, critical and sharp. "You look…overheated."

"Yes, well, that tends to happen in the summer."

"Perhaps it would help if you were dressed appropriately for the weather."

"How silly of me, sir, I never even thought of that," Regulus says flatly, staring at Riddle blankly, because he doesn't care for whatever verbal spar Riddle is trying to drag him into. They both know he's covered in scars; they both know exactly why he's still in a long-sleeve shirt, even now.

Riddle's lips turn up at the corners, but it seems more like a muscle spasm than a sign of amusement. He reaches out and rests his hand on his briefcase, lightly tapping it with one finger. "I must admit, I was ever so slightly disappointed when I arrived and found that both you and James weren't here to welcome me, or even either of you. Perhaps it was foolish, but I at least expected you to be out together."

"I'm his lover, not his keeper," Regulus replies. "We do have other things to do during the day besides staying up under one another all the time, just like any other couple."

"Ah, you'll have to forgive my confusion. I was under the impression that your love for each other was different from everyone else's," Riddle announces, tilting his head.

Regulus' mouth goes dry.

"Trouble in paradise?" Riddle asks, watching him closely.

"No," Regulus says softly. "Everything is fine."

"Fine? Just fine?" Riddle continues.

Regulus struggles not to grind his teeth as he corrects, "Perfect, actually."

Riddle regards him for a long, long time in complete silence, his finger steadily, rhythmically tapping on the briefcase. His eyes are a deep brown, objectively striking, but the empty echo of them makes them look like bottomless pits. They're so cold and sharp, like shards of ice stained with rust, or blood. The sight makes Regulus feel nauseous.

"You know, Regulus, when I first saw you at the introduction parade, you intrigued me," Riddle admits.

"Did I?"

"Yes, because I thought I saw myself in you. The determination in your eyes spoke of hidden strengths. Most tributes show fear, but I did not find any in you that day. You surprised me by turning out to be weaker than them all."

"Sorry to disappoint," Regulus says stiffly.

Riddle just hums. "You're not the first, you will not be the last. As it stands, we're not alike at all, but I do think we both share an appreciation for speaking bluntly with no illusions of what's being discussed. Let's speak freely now, Regulus."

"Of course," Regulus agrees.

"I do not subscribe to the silly notion that love—" Riddle's lip curls in distaste around the word, "—can be comparable from person-to-person. That it can be greater between one pair of lovers than the next. Everyone believes they invent love, just from the depths that they feel it, but this is not the case. Yours and James' love, for example, has no need to be held in higher esteem than anyone else's. *Just like any other couple,* you said. Yes, just so. We agree on that."

"I never claimed that it was greater," Regulus tells him.

"Maybe not in so many words, but that is nonetheless the shield you picked up when you were under fire." Riddle taps, taps, taps away on the briefcase. "Whether or not I do, the people in the Hallow believe in that silly notion, Regulus, and that is the one thing that keeps you and James alive."

Regulus doesn't react to this, forcing himself not to, because he knew this already. They're speaking freely, right? Clearly they are, because Riddle sure is. "The people of the Hallow are why that silly notion exists to begin with."

"That may be so," Riddle allows, "but it is now your responsibility, and James', to keep that silly notion alive. Your willingness to die for each other at the end of your games can only be sourced from an act of love that creates obsession within everyone else, because they feel as if they can never experience that same, great love. So they idolize it. They cherish it. They would go to desperate lengths to see it flourish. You will show them that it has."

"I'm aware of what's expected of me," Regulus croaks, because he is, because he's not stupid.

Riddle shakes his head slowly and tap, tap, taps away. "I'm not so sure that you do, because there can be no doubt, Regulus. There can be no person that looks upon you and James and has even a flicker of it, even one moment to think that, perhaps, what you and James did—what James did, specifically—was born not out of a greater love that doesn't actually exist, but out of defiance. Because, if it was defiance, then that means opposition gets results—and that, too, is a silly notion, and this is one I refuse to allow people to believe in."

"What would you have me do?" Regulus whispers.

"Convince them," Riddle says simply. He pauses, then opens his briefcase with two clicks, lifting the top but not reaching inside. He holds Regulus' gaze over it. "Convince them all, and do so without allowing even one person to think it comes from a place of fear. Better yet, convince me."

"You said you don't believe in the silly notion."

"Then I press upon you the importance of changing my mind, Regulus. Even if I do not believe in it, I want to see that *you* do. James—I have no doubts that he does. But you…well, I think we have this in common as well. Prove me wrong again."

"Okay," Regulus murmurs.

"Are you afraid?" Riddle asks.

Regulus holds his gaze. "No."

"I do so hope, when the time comes, you will learn to lie better," Riddle murmurs, hand dipping into his briefcase before he pulls out a jar and sits it down between them.

Inside it, there's a Horcrux Hornet sitting lazily at the bottom, its glowing green pouch casting a sickly, shimmering glow on the inside of the glass. The Horcrux Hornet is still only for a second before the wings flutter and it flies right at the glass towards Regulus, responding to the fear that digs claws into his skin and leaves the taste of blood in his mouth.

Riddle closes his briefcase.

~•~

James watches fondly as Mary's class shrieks and runs for the door as soon as the bell signals that the day is done, bursting from the school to run home, or run right to their parents that are waiting for them outside.

James never went to this school, but Sirius and Regulus did before Sirius finished his games and they came into the Victor's Village and had access to personal tutors the same way that James did.

Mary also went to this school, then ended up becoming a teacher, as well as joining administration. She teaches art throughout the morning to the children from ages five to ten, then switches to the children from ages eleven to sixteen.

James usually comes in and essentially works as her assistant when he has the time and it's a good day for him. She can always find him something to do, whether that's cleaning up after the children or just passing out papers when she'd rather not get out of her chair. Though it goes unsaid, they both know why he shows up—not only because he adores Mary and enjoys spending her lunch break with her (which is where this all started), but because the children soothe something in him.

See, it started by accident. For the first two months, James didn't really see…anyone, excluding his parents and Sirius. He only ever left the house to bring Regulus a flower every single morning. Sirius, of course, never pressured him, but he also never failed to try and help, and one day he convinced James to come along and have lunch with him and Mary.

So, James went, and he felt better for it. He kept going back, even when Sirius didn't have the time or was busy with something else; so long as Mary let him show up, he went. Eventually, one day, she seemed to pick up on the fact that he didn't really want to leave, even when lunch was over, so she invited him to the classroom. He was wary, but he went, and he instantly lit up around the kids.

The younger ones generally don't watch the games—their parents tend not to let them, if they can help it—so most of them didn't even know about what he'd done in the arena, and they treated him as they would any other adult that was kind to them and worked hard to make them laugh. The older ones *do* watch the games—their parents usually can't stop them, when they reach a certain age and fully grasp what the fuck they are—so they do know about his time in the arena. But there's an instinctive tact that even children have about this subject, especially when they're at risk of one day entering the arena themselves. Of course, not always, though.

James has been asked questions—hard questions, invasive questions, even rude questions because children are children and that is what they do—but Mary generally handled it for him and kept her kids respectful. If not, he figured out the politest response, which was that he just didn't want to talk about it and he needed them to respect that, and they did. Kids aren't unreasonable, really. They're just curious. To a degree, they're even scared for their own fates. James gets it.

In any case, spending time with Mary and children has worked wonders for the state of his life. Of course it can't really fix everything, and he still has more bad days than good ones, but he is so fucking thankful to have this anyway. The sound of a child's laugh, their innocence, the comfort they can bring just by giving a hug or telling him they're happy to see him; it makes him feel more alive, somehow.

He sees Vanity in them, sometimes. Catches the sight of her out of the corner of his eye when he hears a delighted gasp. Looks for her when a beetle crawls over his shoe. Sees her in the smile of one young girl and the tears of another.

He tries not to see Hodge, but he's there, too. Boys pretending to be princes. Boys trying to find their way in the world. Boys celebrating their fifteenth birthday, because they get the chance to. Some of them remind him of Regulus, and that's when he works out that *Hodge* reminds him of Regulus—a Regulus that never happened, a young boy in the arena just trying to survive, lost and never making it home. Regulus could have been Hodge, if Sirius didn't volunteer for him.

"James?"

Jolting, James gives a harsh blink and whips his head around to stare at Mary in surprise. For a second, he doesn't know when he is. Before the arena, during, or after? Who's alive and who's dead and where's his hatchet? Where's Regulus?

This still happens to him, frequently. The flow of time feels out of order and disjointed, and sometimes he has to find his place in it, because the current can snatch him when he's least expecting it to. Things trigger it, of course, like a cold night or a hatchet on the ground or too much pain in his leg, but it can also just happen randomly. He's talked to Sirius about it, who has confessed that it's similar to his issues with his memory.

"Sorry, what, did you say something?" James mumbles, settling back down in the present, in the classroom, in the summer.

"I just asked if you wanted Bingley and I to walk you home, or if you were going to the market today?" Mary murmurs.

James smiles reflexively and glances over at Bingley, who is grabbing his bag from the cubbie at the back of the classroom. Bingley is Mary's little brother, quite literally half her age at thirteen. It's the first year he'll be in the reaping, and Mary has been fretting about it, seeing as she's just aged-out. Like Sirius, James has no doubts that she would volunteer for her little brother, if that's what it came to, but she can't.

Bingley is a funny kid, always cracking jokes and playfully complaining about having his sister as his teacher, even though it's clear that he actually loves it, and her.

"No, uh, I think I'll go to the market," James muses, waving her off. Mary and Bingley usually walk him home—or almost home—when he's still hanging around at the end of the day, because they head in his direction anyway. Really, technically James walks *them* home, but he knows as well as they do that it's actually for his benefit. He likes not being alone.

"Well, if you're sure, come on so I can lock up," Mary instructs, jerking her head to get James moving. "I can't wait around for you all day, Potter. Oi, get a move on, Bing Bing."

"Coming, coming," Bingley grumbles as he rushes to follow James out into the hall. James waits with him as Mary locks up the classroom, swinging his cane lazily around, doing tricks with it to make Bingley grin. James takes it with him wherever he goes most of the time, if he leaves the house, even though he doesn't always need to lean on it and he knows his leg will be fine. It's a sense of security should the need for it ever arise.

Mary blows a few curls out of her face as she joins them in walking down the hallway, and the heat is so bad that James can't blame her for pulling it back from her face and tying it up on top of her head in a beautiful mass of tight curls.

He asked her once if she thought about cutting it, because she kept complaining about how hot she was during the summer, and she explained that she hasn't had her hair cut since she was nine and told her mum that she was a girl and wanted longer hair. James, on the other hand, gave in and sheepishly asked his mum to cut his hair just a little, but it's starting to grow out again. Meanwhile, Sirius shrieked and ran in the opposite direction when Effie offered to do the same for him. Monty laughed so hard he pulled something in his back, because he is indeed an old man.

Sirius and Mary *love* to get together and complain about the effect the heat has on hair and makeup and even outfit options. James thinks about Regulus, who can always be found in a long-sleeve shirt and slacks, no matter the temperature. It makes his heart clench, because he'd thought to ask why one day, and Sirius hadn't quite answered, but the look on his face was explanation enough. The scars on Regulus' neck are still visible, always visible, and James had felt like a fool to not realize that Regulus had scars just like them in other places as well. He's never seen them, but he'll never forget the sight of Regulus coming out of that river, ripped into and bloody.

"James! *James!"*

At the sound of Sirius frantically calling his name, James' head snaps up as he grasps his cane and automatically steps in front of Mary and Bingley, on guard instantly. But it's just Sirius running right towards him, panic in his eyes.

"What? What is it?" James blurts out.

"You—you need to come with me *right now,"* Sirius gasps out, not even telling Mary and Bingley hello as he usually would, which means this is not a joke.

"Is everything okay?" Mary asks sharply, standing in front of Bingley with her arm wrapped back around him.

"Sorry, Mary, no time to explain. James, *come on,"* Sirius insists, already backing up.

James doesn't need to hear anything else. He doesn't hesitate to start running, the adrenaline pushing him to keep up as Sirius sprints back towards the Victor's Village with James hot on his heels. He wants to know what's going on, but they're both running too hard and too fast to really talk. James' leg will no doubt be pissed at him for this later, but at the moment, he doesn't particularly care.

They don't slow down until they make it into the Victor's Village, and then Sirius is hastily snatching James to a more sedate pace as he leads him up the street. They're walking now, but quickly, and Sirius is gripping James' arm tight.

"Sirius, what's happening?" James wheezes.

"Riddle is here. He's at Regulus', with him, right now," Sirius explains, his tone short and clipped. His face is alarmingly neutral, but he doesn't sound pleased. James feels his heart drop as his fear surges. "He may have implied that he didn't like the idea of you and Regulus not being an actual couple, so I may have implied that you two live together and are a very real, very happy couple, so you are going to go in there and act accordingly for the betterment of—everyone."

James' eyes bulge as he hisses, "You did *what?* Sirius, I haven't so much as spoken to your brother in nearly five months!"

"Well, if Riddle doesn't know that already, I'd like to keep him from finding out, so just—go with it," Sirius hisses back, throwing him a sharp look that lets James know he's absolutely *not* fucking around.

And yeah, alright, that's fair. It's a very intense situation, and James doesn't want anyone in danger any more than Sirius does. That doesn't stop his heart from racing as Sirius drags him to the door and lets them inside without so much as a stutter. James tells himself it's from the running.

James hasn't ever been in Regulus' house, for obvious reasons. He's been *to* Regulus' house, or at least to the front door, but that's all, so this is his first look. He doesn't know what he was expecting, but it's more bare than he thought it would be. It feels empty and echo-y, like it's gutted, like there are no signs of life cradled within the walls.

Like it's hollow.

The first thing James makes note of are the two Aurors standing outside a door past the stairs. They don't react when Sirius gestures to the door, and they don't protest when Sirius opens it and leads them inside.

Riddle sits at the table, immediately visible, while Regulus' back is to the door. There's a briefcase closed in front of Riddle and jar sitting between him and Regulus. James comes to a screeching halt as soon as he sees what's inside.

Vespa.

No, not Vespa. Vanity wouldn't keep Vespa in a jar. Where did Vanity even get a jar? Where's Vanity? Why is Vespa trying to fly? Who's afraid?

James is. James is afraid. It takes him a moment to realize it, because fear isn't helpful in the arena. But of course he's afraid; he's in the fucking *arena.* Isn't he? Is he?

Where is he?

When is he?

The flow of time yanks him back and forth, and he exhales, trying to plant his feet. It helps that he's somewhere he's never been before. Not before the arena, or during, so it can only be after. It's hot, absurdly hot, so it can only be summer. The victory tour hasn't happened yet. Riddle is here. The Horcrux Hornet in the jar is not Vespa, and Vanity is dead.

Regulus has not turned around, but his shoulders are tense. He surely heard them come in, but he's still facing Riddle, who is watching James and Sirius with critical eyes. It feels like a test, and James remembers that, in a way, it is. He needs to pass it, so he smiles and walks forward without looking at the jar again, ignoring the muffled flutter of thin wings and the dull thump as the Horcrux Hornet hits the glass over and over.

The curls at the back of Regulus' neck hang heavy, damp with sweat. James focuses on them as he gets closer, and then he drapes his hand over Regulus' shoulder delicately as he leans down to kiss the top of his head like he does it every day.

He does not. Obviously.

"Sorry I'm late," James says, lifting his head to look at Riddle with a smile. "We weren't expecting visitors today."

"Oh, that's quite alright, James," Riddle says, inclining his head as he pushes to his feet. "Regulus was the perfect host, and we just had a lovely chat. I'm afraid I can't stay longer."

"A shame," James murmurs, gently squeezing Regulus' shoulder, which is as stiff as a board under his hand. "Why don't I walk you out?"

"Yes, I'd like that." Riddle reaches out and taps the top of the jar. "I'll be leaving you two with this gift. It makes for a marvelous nightlight."

To that, James can't figure out how to respond, but he pulls away from Regulus slowly, not trying to move too fast. James leads Riddle right out of the kitchen, trying to act like he's comfortable here, like he knows this place in his sleep.

The Aurors follow behind them, guns in hand, and James forces himself not to react to the danger. It's hard, his instincts screaming out in protest at leaving his back open to a threat.

"Have a safe trip back to the Hallow, sir," James says cordially, nodding politely as he opens the front door.

"I will," Riddle tells him. He stops across from James and regards him for a moment, then cocks his head. "Quick question, James, which cabinet does Regulus keep his coffee in? I would have liked some, but it slipped my mind to ask."

Trick question, James thinks before promptly answering, with easy confidence, "Regulus doesn't drink coffee. He doesn't keep it anywhere, or I'm sure he would have offered."

"Hm." Riddle gives him a thin smile. "You're smarter than they give you credit for, you know."

"Yes," James agrees, holding his gaze. "I know."

"And yet, you're still the fool," Riddle says softly, lightly clicking his tongue, and then he leaves with the Aurors following close behind.

James swiftly closes the door, blowing out a deep breath before pressing his forehead to the wood and squeezing his eyes shut. For a long moment, he just stands there and breathes, his heart still thumping hard in his chest, his whole body shaking as he comes down slowly from the adrenaline and fear.

Eventually, James convinces himself to turn around and go back into the kitchen, entering cautiously, very unsure about his welcome. He always thought—or hoped—that the first time he stepped foot in Regulus' house, in his space, would be because Regulus invited him in. And now, after everything, that's been taken from them, too.

Sirius is crouched down beside Regulus' chair, murmuring low and fervent in his ear, not touching but clearly checking on him. Regulus is letting him, nodding slowly, his head ducked forward. James can't hear them, but Sirius glances over when he notices him coming back in, and Regulus lifts his head and swivels to look at James as well.

It's the first time they've properly looked at each other since getting off that train and going in separate directions nearly five months ago. James has seen him through his window many times while dropping off a flower every morning, but that's about it. Regulus rarely looks back.

The first time he did, James knows it was an accident. He remembers it fondly. He'd turned back to steal a quick glimpse of Regulus, just one, and at the same time, Regulus had lifted his head and stopped writing to glance out the window. James had *watched* as Regulus caught sight of him, then immediately fell out of his chair, only to pop back up seconds later, see James still there, and slowly sink back down again.

Sometimes, Regulus looks back on purpose. He makes a *point* to look at James, or James thinks he does, at least. On those days, James stands in place and doesn't move until Regulus looks away again. On those days, James feels like his heart is going to beat right out of his fucking chest.

Most days, though, Regulus doesn't look. That's okay. He always leaves his curtains open so *James* can look, and that means something. It has to, doesn't it? James hopes so.

"I'm sorry for—intruding," James blurts out, his mouth dry as he takes in every detail of Regulus' eyes, closer to them than he's been in months. "I didn't—Sirius said—"

"No, it's fine. You didn't—we didn't really have a choice," Regulus mutters, huffing out a weak laugh and looking away with a grimace as his eyes sink shut.

And how fucking awful is that? They never have the choice, do they? Everything between them is circumstantial, but maybe it's always going to be that way when they're never making choices for themselves. Maybe it's always going to be this way, period. Maybe this is all they get to have.

"Is he gone? Riddle?" Sirius asks, standing up.

James nods. "Yeah, he's gone."

"Did he say anything to you?" Regulus murmurs, looking over at him with a sharp gaze. It's been a while since James has been under the intensity of it like this. Perhaps it's ridiculous, but it flusters James. Makes him feel nervous and fluttery.

"He just asked which cabinet you kept your coffee in and—"

"I don't—"

"And I told him you don't drink coffee," James finishes quietly, which makes Regulus stare at him, visibly startled. James clears his throat. "Then he told me I was smarter than people give me credit for, yet still a fool. Very charming, isn't he?"

"Something like that," Regulus says flatly.

Sirius crosses his arms. "And what did he say to *you?"*

"Nothing I didn't already know, really." Regulus heaves a sigh and reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose, looking very, very tired. When he drops his hand, he slumps back against the chair and sweeps his hair back from his face. Fuck, but he is so unbearably beautiful. "Basically, he's expecting James and I to keep playing up our love story on the victory tour. He said we—mostly me—have to convince everyone *and* him, and that I have to make it believable. He doesn't want anyone to get the idea that defiance will get them anywhere. There was…a threat behind it, so it's—well. We can't fuck it up."

"Okay," Sirius says carefully. "Well, you're right, we did know this already. He just wanted to remind you in person?"

"I think he wanted me to realize how crucial it is that I don't fuck it up," Regulus says. "I also think he wanted to make it clear that he doesn't believe it *wasn't* an act of defiance, and if things are going to work out for us, I need to change his mind."

"You don't think we can?" James asks wearily, because Regulus looks very fucking worried at the moment.

With a hoarse laugh, Regulus tips his head back and looks at the ceiling as he rasps, "I think his mind is already made up."

"We'll figure it out, Reggie," Sirius murmurs. "When the time comes, you and James will—you'll do what needs to be done. It's going to be okay, I promise."

"How long?" Regulus demands bluntly. "Tell me, Sirius, how long is it going to be this way? How far are we going to have to take this? Will he have to move in? Will we have to get engaged, get married, adopt children?"

Sirius looks away, swallowing.

James tries not to let it sting to hear Regulus speak of all those things like he doesn't want them. James wants them, but not like this. Not this way. He thinks that's what Regulus is upset about, not what he's actually referencing. Or he hopes.

"Neither of you will ever have to mentor," Sirius mumbles, his eyebrows furrowed. "Unfortunately, you're always going to be under the Hallow's thumb."

"So, basically, we're stuck together forever?" Regulus asks, an edge to his voice.

"Thanks for making that sound like torture, Regulus. Really appreciate it," James snaps, unable to help it.

Regulus cuts him a sharp look. "Don't start. This isn't about us. This is about the fact that we have no fucking *choice.* It's our *life,* James. It's ours, and they're controlling it. How the fuck can you expect me to be okay with that?"

"I don't. I'm just—" James sighs and shakes his head, his shoulders sagging. "Nevermind. You're right, I'm sorry."

"Reggie, stop being a prick," Sirius mutters with a frown. "It's not *his* fault, and really, you could do *a lot* worse."

"But I'm not—I haven't even—fuck off, you don't *get it,"* Regulus insists, clearly frustrated.

"I do. Trust me, I do," Sirius says softly. "Look, I know it's fucked up, alright? But we don't know the future, or how any of this will go. It could be twenty years, or the Hallow could be swept up in something new and shiny from the very next games, and you two will fade into the background. I don't know. We *don't know.* What we *do* know is that we're all in danger if we don't put in the work on the victory tour, so that's what we need to focus on *first.* Agreed?"

"Yes," Regulus mumbles, deflating a little.

"Yeah," James agrees, subdued.

Sirius sighs again, world-weary and sad. "Dorcas should be arriving with Pandora in a month to get you two ready for the on-screen interview to kick off the victory tour. Until then, we keep our heads down and stay out of trouble."

"Fine," Regulus snips, sounding bitter, and then he pushes to his feet and swipes the jar off the table with the Horcrux Hornet in it in one swift motion. "Now, if you'll both excuse me, I'm going to go bury this in my backyard."

James has his cane up in hand and snaps it out in seconds, pressing the length of it across Regulus' chest to stop him right in his tracks. Regulus does stop, stiffening as he turns his head to stare at James, who stares right back.

"No, you will not," James declares sharply. "If you don't want it, I understand, but I'll take it."

"You're not taking it. It's fucking *dangerous,"* Regulus grits out, glaring at him. "I'm going to wrap it, put it in a box, then bury it so deep that no one will ever find it."

"Just try it," James warns, holding his gaze, not backing down an inch. "I'm not letting you leave this room with it."

"Letting me?" Regulus retorts. "You can't fucking *stop* me."

"Hey now," Sirius warns, sounding wary.

James flexes his fingers around his cane. "Give it to me, Regulus. I'm not joking."

"It's not *safe,* James. If it gets out—"

"I won't let it out, but I'm not letting you fucking *bury* it either. Just—for fuck's sake, stop being stubborn and give it to me. I'll take care of it so you don't have to worry about it."

"You think I'll worry about it *less* when it's around you?" Regulus asks with an incredulous scoff. He shakes his head and carelessly shoves James' cane down.

"Please," James whispers, swallowing harshly as he looks at Regulus, meeting his eyes. Regulus visibly wavers, his face softening pretty much immediately.

"It's not safe," Regulus murmurs, lips tipping down.

"Please, Regulus," James begs, genuinely begging at this point, a lump forming in his throat. "Vanity wouldn't—she wouldn't want it buried. Please just—I need it, alright? I need it."

James *sees* Regulus give in. Something in him soars, because Regulus' gaze goes gentle with building compassion, and James thinks that Regulus can't refuse him what he needs. There's something about that. Something special.

"Okay." Regulus takes a deep breath and holds the jar out, though he doesn't let it go when James grabs onto it. "Don't open it, James. Just be careful, alright? I mean it. Promise me."

"I promise," James replies instantly. Regulus hesitates, but then lets the jar go and steps back. James holds it to his chest in one arm. "Thank you. I'll go now. Sorry for…"

Regulus snorts weakly when James gestures awkwardly to his cane, which he sort of used against Regulus. "Don't worry about it. For what it's worth, it was…nice to, ah, see you again."

James fights a smile, but he loses, and he's more than happy to, especially when Regulus' cheeks turn red. Regulus clears his throat, loudly, then turns around and sweeps off into his kitchen, muttering under his breath as he goes. James watches him go with a goofy grin, only to tuck his lips in as soon as he sees Sirius staring at him in an unimpressed fashion.

"Go home, James," Sirius says.

"Right, yep, doing that," James replies quickly, dutifully nodding his head and backing up. "You coming?"

"I'll be over in time for dinner," Sirius tells him, and James nods before leaving.

On his way out, he tries to snatch one more glimpse of Regulus before he goes, but the only thing he sees is a bouquet of familiar flowers sitting on a windowsill.

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Just like every other night, Sirius crawls out of his window to perch on the roof before bed. He lays back against the tiles and blows out a deep breath, trying to let go of the mounting tension from the entire day.

Oh, what a day it's been.

"Remus," Sirius mumbles, "you are not going to *believe* the day I just had. Honestly, I don't even know where to start…"

Sirius sprawls out and shares his thoughts with the moon, gazing up at it with a deep, ever-growing yearning snarling and snapping its jaws in his chest. The moon is beautiful, a glowing dome in the dark that blankets the earth, and it's still a poor substitute for Remus. But it's all he has.

For now, it's all he has.

Chapter End Notes

HE. BRINGS. HIM. FLOWERS. EVERY. SINGLE. DAY. 😭😭😭 JAMES PLS IM BEGGING YOU I AM ON MY KNEES PLEASEEEEE

anyway.

so, new characters unlocked!!! barty, hello barty, you're a good friend, barty <3 he really is, though. he and regulus just Get Each Other, and they take care of each other. like there's love there, but they're not In Love, if that makes sense? like an ex that you tried to date and it was nice but you turned out better as friends, but not best friends because then you'd just end up dating again, except both of you just like where you are now. yeah, that's regulus and barty.

the evan mention!!! evan finding barty annoying 😭😭😭 GOODBYE. even when one of them is dead, they still find ways to be little shits to each other.

forever funny to me that regulus was technically barty's sugar daddy for a while, paying his bills and keeping his family fed. not even for sexual favors, but just because. regulus ily king

also regulus and his sad boy poetry 😭😭😭 this is me poking fun at me bc i wrote it. i know it's Sad Boy Poetry, that's the point. you can point and laugh, i do it every time i look in the mirror. but really, it's adorable that regulus is writing poetry about james again. his trauma as well, yes, but that's Good For Him. cathartic. healing. not drawing any parallels between myself and the fact that i write or anything, ofc not.

also², the way regulus literally SPRINTS to get the flowers that james leaves him 😭 he's a runner, he's a track star!!! thats so cute pls. he has a little crushhhhh. he's in loveeeee. he has no idea how to handle it, but it's true.

effie and monty my beloveds <3 they mean the world to me. i love them so much. we see more of them in the future, i promise. also just them being the best parents>>> walburga and orion could NEVER

speaking of walburga and orion, they can burn in a fire <3

and then james. i told you we'd see, like, growth and healing. like, he talks to sirius about his issues, and he does things that make him feel better, and he learns to navigate the things he struggles with. even regulus is doing better in increments (though he doesn't see it that way).

nearly five months of james and regulus Not Interacting outside of the intricate ritual of Flower Giving and Flower Keeping, but it was healthier for them that way. they've been dealing with a lot of their own shit to be worried too much about love, honestly, and you can't blame them for that. plus, it's just like. acclimating back into everything post-arena, finding a routine, getting through bad WEEKS, taking steps to get better. all good signs, believe it or not.

however, the riddle visit... HOLD ON ILL GET TO THAT IN A MINUTE.

first, mary my beloved <3 yes, she exists. yes, we will see more of her. yes, she is trans. yes, she is amazing. yes, she had a little brother in just lovers named bingley as well. yes, we will actually have more than one scene with her (and barty, too, actually).

okay, so, riddle. oh, That Man. FEEL FREE TO SHIT ON HIM HE'S JUST EVIL THERE'S NO GRAY AREA HE'S JUST A BAD DUDE!!! however, writing this exchange between him and regulus was interesting bc riddle is so...sinister??? he's got some nefarious shit going on.

and yes, leaving a horcrux hornet was a threat, a very fucked up one, because there's literally no way to kill it, seeing as fiendfyre ants (the only thing that can kill them) are hallow-made and don't exist in districts. so like riddle essentially trapped a plague in a jar and Made Them Keep It as a sign of like. his power over them. rest assured though that the jar does NOT get opened. no one dies to it.

oh, and shoutout to sirius <3 HE'S BUILDING AGAIN!!! remember when he couldn't, when he only thought he broke things 😭😭😭 the fact that he could build again for james, but hadn't managed to for regulus... but also, it just shows how far sirius has come. remus lupin your impact>>>

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-sirius calling james "romeo" it gave me a chuckle
-barty's little poem that regulus actually wrote down
-the tree on the edge of the mayor's property (this is Important later, i just really love foreshadowing)
-regulus still being obsessed with daggers
-sirius and regulus still being close
-regulus not having his parents in his life but gaining the tonks' <3

-monty and effie flirting
-THE FUCKING BOOKCASE FOR JEGULUS
-sirius talking to the moon like he's talking to remus 😭😭😭
-regulus waking up and immediately thinking/hoping it's james next to him 😭😭😭
-regulus falling out of his chair the first time he saw james out his window, taking a peek, then hiding again 💀

yeah, that's about it. thoughts?

The Moon's Secret

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death
-very brief references to common issues we've seen so far (nightmares, issues with time, aquaphobia is mentioned like once, i think??? just like, it's all so light compared to anything we've seen so far that you likely won't even bat an eye)

...that's literally it. yeah, im pretty sure that's it. very short list for a change. don't get used to that lmaooo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The victory tour is scheduled like this:

It kicks off towards the last part of the final week in the fifth month after the previous hunger games, starting with the on-screen interview set in the district of the previous Victor—or in this case, *Victors*. The very next day, the Victor(s) and their mentor set out for district twelve, where they will start on the tour. They go back from district twelve, stopping in all the ones on the way back to the Hallow over the course of three days, skipping their own along the way.

When they make it to the Hallow, they'll have an interview there with Rita, then settle in for the night. The following day, they'll travel to a very big party at Riddle's castle, stay that night, then go home the following day.

So, for a week, six months after the hunger games, Regulus is going to be pretending to be madly in love with James, except he *is* madly in love with James, so this really shouldn't be that difficult for him to pull off.

But it is.

Neither of them like it, that they're *forced* into this, that they don't get the chance to do it their own way. Regulus is bitter, because he wouldn't want to give any of this to the Hallow if it was true *anyway.* This is supposed to be theirs: whatever it is, whatever it could be, it should belong only to them.

Regulus doesn't want it to be a necessity. Or a performance. He wants it when he's ready, when they both are, and now isn't the time. Six months isn't nearly enough time.

Not when Regulus still sleeps with a dagger under his pillow, clutched in his hand. Not when Regulus still talks to his dead best friend in his sleep most nights, never managing to save him when he falls. Not when Regulus still cries when he bathes, and shies away from touch, and can't work out how to give James everything he deserves.

But, well, here they are anyway.

Pandora and Dorcas are a whirlwind when they arrive together, and Regulus is startled to realize that he's actually happy to see them. They're all doing this at the Potters' place, which is particularly awkward for Regulus, purely because he has to spend time around Effie and Monty, who have known him since he was a little kid and still have the ability to make him feel like one with something as simple as a smile. They're kind to him, warm and welcoming, treating him as they always have, like he didn't spend ten years avoiding them at all costs, then a week in a death arena with their son, alternatively threatening his life and flirting with him in rotation.

Regulus blushes every time they speak to him.

Dorcas and Pandora absolutely charm Effie and Monty with ease. Dorcas flirts with Effie, much to James and Sirius' joint chagrin, and Pandora flutters around Monty with basically a million questions about the book he was reading when they swept in, much to his delight. Regulus sticks close by Sirius, who he's most comfortable with, which would have made him scoff in disbelief only a year ago.

Things change, even the things you least expect to. Regulus could have never imagined in a million years that he and Sirius would be close again, like they once were, and they're…not,

not really. It's different, after all this time, after all they've been through. But it's… It's really good, despite everything. Honestly, it's the best part of Regulus' life now.

Regulus had admittedly worried that he and Sirius would drift apart back home, but neither of them allowed that to happen. Maybe that's due to Remus' influence on them both, Regulus can't be sure, but they took to caring about each other with that special brand of Black stubbornness that they once used to keep their distance. Sirius is there when Regulus needs him, always. Regulus is there when Sirius comes to him for a reminder that Remus was real; he never forgets, he says, never forgets one second of the time they spent together, but he likes the reminder anyway. Regulus is happy to give it to him.

Sirius tells him sometimes, off-hand, that he loves him. Casual, light, on his way out the door, usually. Just a quick call of, "Love you, Reggie!" as he carries on, like it's something he feels the need to remind Regulus of, every once in a while.

After all this time, Regulus still hasn't managed to say it back.

In any case, Regulus doesn't get to hover around his brother for very long before Dorcas finishes up with James and sweeps him off to get him ready. Dorcas goes all out, even doing his makeup, which she didn't really do much of last time, and Regulus hasn't had a full face of makeup since he was thirteen and Sirius did it for him one night when they were bored.

She trims his hair a bit, with his permission, fluffing his curls and making them all bouncy and shiny. She puts on mascara without poking him in the eye, and expertly applies eyeliner with the same care, then draws little stars in the corner of his eyes by the wings, seeming pleased with her work.

"You didn't do all of this to James," Regulus mumbles, squinting at her suspiciously.

"Yes, I did, my love. You just refused to look at him," Dorcas informs him, arching an eyebrow. Regulus…can't argue with that, so he stays silent. "What's that all about, hm?"

"What?" Regulus asks.

Dorcas sighs. "You and James. You seem on outs, which isn't very helpful for what's about to come, you know."

"We're not… It's just complicated," Regulus says. She stares at him boldly, and he groans in frustration, starting to lift his hands and scrub them over his face, but she catches his wrists quickly and glares at him. He drops them hastily, clearing his throat. "Look, it's just…hard, alright? Maybe I'm—I'm scared, I don't know. No, I *do* know, I am scared, but I just—" He takes a deep breath and gazes at her helplessly. "Have you ever been afraid to look at someone, because you know you'll never want to look away as soon as you do?"

"Yes," Dorcas says softly. "It should comfort you to know that he's always looking back."

"I don't want him to see me," Regulus whispers.

"I think it's a little late for that," Dorcas murmurs, gently.

Regulus swallows thickly and looks away.

James nearly breaks his fucking neck to do a double-take as soon as Regulus is led out again. If he was a dog, his ears would be standing straight up in intense interest. Sirius whacks him on the back of his head in what seems to be a reflex, most likely because James is doing absolutely nothing to hide the fact that he's currently undressing Regulus with his eyes. James takes the gentle tap upside the head like he has earned it, because, in fairness, he sort of has. His *parents* are in the room, for fuck's sake. To his credit, James does look mildly abashed as he drags his gaze from Regulus, only to end up staring at him again only five seconds later.

Pandora snaps her fingers in front of his face and says, "Yes, he's pretty, we get it, but I need your focus."

"Can you all just—leave me alone?" James grumbles, frowning down at his fingers. "You're all so mean. Stop bullying me. This is bullying. I'm being bullied. Mum—"

"Alright, that's enough," Effie declares, walking behind James' chair to rub his shoulders. "No one's coming into my house and bullying my baby. Let him be."

James leans his head over on his mum's arm and looks very smug, gazing up at her with undeniable adoration. She smiles down at him and winks, while Sirius shares a look with Monty, both of them stifling a laugh. Regulus stares down at his shoes and tries not to feel so alone in a room full of people.

Everyone stops teasing James after that, and even Sirius doesn't make a fuss when James keeps stealing glances at Regulus, like he can't help it. Regulus figures he can't, because he's in the same predicament, just much more covert about it.

Dorcas did indeed doll James up. His face is clean-shaven, which makes his jawline so much more potent and causes Regulus' stomach to go all wobbly. She didn't cut his hair, probably because it was cut months ago and didn't need it. She took his glasses, too, which makes Regulus want to rip the sky apart, because it reminds him of the arena, and it also makes the full-force of James' eyes feel so intense that Regulus genuinely cannot stop fidgeting. She did his eyes, too. Oh, why did she do that?

He has glittery, golden suns on each eyelid, just the arc of one like a horizon that dips with each blink. It's entrancing, utterly fascinating, as well as ridiculously pretty paired with his eyelashes. Oh, his eyelashes...

James has always had full eyelashes, thick and long and dark, but they're so pretty now that Regulus is sort of pissed about it. He doesn't want the Hallow to see that. They don't fucking *deserve* to see James, not now when he's wearing makeup, and not any other time when he's not. Regulus wants to keep him out of sight, so no one can look at him, ever.

Still, Regulus steals covert glances as Pandora prattles on about what they're expected to do and say, yada yada yada, and he assumes that he's being sneaky enough that no one notices him, only to end up quite caught. There's a moment where Regulus shifts his gaze away and finds Monty looking right at him, clearly catching him right in the act of internally drooling over his son, and the sad part is, it's not even the first time.

Regulus knows for a *fact* that Effie and Monty were aware of his crush on James when he was a child. Looking back, he now knows that they thought it was cute, but back then, they never called attention to it. They were even gentle with him about it, especially because he was so shy. James, of course, never teased Regulus in front of them, or else Regulus suspects that Effie and Monty would have had a talk with him about not being a little shit about the whole thing.

In any case, Regulus is once again caught, all these years later, like some things will never change. Monty's lips twitch, and Regulus' whole face feels like it's on fire. He looks away and tries his absolute *best* not to look back at James again, but he is a weak man and fails in less than five seconds flat.

For a moment, all Regulus wants to do is fall at James' feet and tell him how lovely he is. Just that, that's all he wants to do, that would be enough. It would be enough to fall at the altar of James Potter and worship him.

"Is that okay, Regulus?" Pandora asks.

"What?" Regulus blurts out, his head snapping around to find quite literally everyone staring at him.

Pandora slowly raises her eyebrows. "I asked if you were fine with that?"

"With…" Regulus can feel his face burning all over again, and he can't stop fucking *fidgeting,* because the weight of James' gaze on him is like an actual caress. "Sorry, um, with what?"

"Distracted, are we?" Pandora teases, her eyes crinkling as she smiles. "I know James is pretty, but I need *your* focus, too."

Regulus scowls. "You know what—"

"No, no, it's okay! This is good. Very good," Pandora insists cheerfully. "Channel that energy into the interview, and it's going to be just fine. Dorcas, you're marvelous."

"Thank you," Dorcas replies, sounding satisfied.

"I would just like it on the record that I would be like this regardless of whether or not Dorcas got ahold of him," James announces, like it's important to him that everyone is aware that he's distracted by Regulus no matter his state.

"We know, James," Pandora and Dorcas chorus back at the same time, with the same level of exasperation.

"I am in Hell," Sirius mumbles mournfully. Effie makes a soft, cooing noise and pats his shoulder gently, and he leans into her pretty much exactly like James did earlier.

Pandora once again launches into a whole spiel about how this interview is supposed to go, and Regulus does better with listening this time. Before, she was asking him if he was okay with James giving him a kiss on screen, because this is just the sort of conversations they have out loud, apparently. Regulus glares at her until she wisely and quickly moves along, never getting her answer either way, which is probably rather irritating for her, because she seems determined to plan everything down to the very last detail.

It's not very long before the camera crew arrive, so James and Regulus are ushered outside and left to stand in front of Regulus' house to better give the impression that they live together, while Sirius stands with Dorcas and Pandora behind the camera crew, and Effie and Monty stay in their house. While the cameras and screens are set up and such, Regulus and James are sort of just…left alone while everyone else bustles around like chickens with their heads cut off.

"So…" James coughs. "You look nice."

Regulus doesn't look at him. He can't.

"Thank you, James, you look nice, too," James says, then makes a *pfft* noise and waves his hand casually. "Oh, it's nothing, really. I woke up like this."

Regulus' entire face twitches, and he struggles to fight the smile tugging ruthlessly at his lips. He genuinely can't reply for fear of opening his mouth and either releasing a helpless laugh, or a smile splitting across his face.

"Great weather we're having, isn't it, James? Nice and sunny, but also a bit breezy." James hums and nods his head dutifully, as if in agreement. "Just marvelous, really, Regulus. You're absolutely right to point it out. The breeze *is* nice."

Regulus reaches up to swipe his hand over his mouth, trying to tuck away the growing grin, sincerely struggling not to break out into laughter. James makes a *mhm-mhm* noise as if they're still carrying on a conversation.

"And how are you today, James?" James continues, and then he shrugs and clicks his tongue. "Oh, can't complain, I suppose, since I'm here with you." He gasps and presses his hand to his chest. "Why, James, you are *so* sweet, just the sweetest; oh, how you make me swoon—"

Regulus cracks. He can't help it. His head ducks forward as he loses it, his shoulders shaking as his laughter builds up and bubbles over, light and airy in his chest. As much as Regulus tries to smother it, he literally can't.

"You're laughing. Why are you laughing?" James asks in mock offense, putting his hands on his hips. "What? Do you have something you want to say?"

"No, nothing. You've said it all for me," Regulus says, shaking his head as he steals a glance at James out of the corner of his eye, still unable to fully look at him.

James is grinning in triumph, which makes it even more difficult. "I just thought I'd get all the awkward tension out of the way quickly. Did it work?"

"Well, calling attention to it does bring it back to the forefront, you know," Regulus says wryly.

"I think acknowledging it makes it easier to handle, actually," James counters, shifting to turn and stand directly in front of Regulus, gazing at him softly. "Really, how have you been?"

For a long moment, Regulus doesn't even know where to start. They've seen each other, of course, at least once a day because James still brings a flower every morning, without fail. But, in the past month, it's been just like all the ones before it, especially in the aftermath of Riddle's visit. A much-needed distance—for Regulus, at least—because the reality that they have no agency over their own…love story, or whatever, has been even heavier since Riddle made that clear to them.

Regulus has been tangled up in knots about this interview, about the week they're about to endure, but now that it's here and now that James is here, in front of him and making him laugh, Regulus realizes that he's missed him.

So, Regulus just—admits it, just meets James' ridiculously lovely eyes, and whispers, "I've missed you."

"Oh," James says, a breath punching out of him as he blinks rapidly and looks so very startled, like that possibility never even crossed his mind. "Yeah, I—I know the feeling. I've missed you, too. I just—I mean, I'm only across the street, though. Not—I don't mean that you had to see me, just that you could have if you wanted, at any time. If I did anything to make you think that you couldn't, or that it had to mean something for you to be able to, then I'm—"

"No, you didn't," Regulus cuts in quickly. "It's not anything you did, James, or didn't do. It's me. It's still just…me."

"Oh," James repeats thoughtfully, and he searches Regulus' gaze for a long moment before his face softens. "Well, that's okay, Reg. I don't expect anything from you, you know that."

"Maybe you should," Regulus mumbles.

James purses his lips. "All I expect from you is for you to do what's best for yourself."

"Yes, uh, about that…" Regulus huffs out a weak laugh and lifts a hand to rub his temple. "I don't really know what that is, you see, and I've been trying to figure that out, but it's taking a really long time—and I don't just mean with…us; I mean with everything, because it's—it's all really—"

"Hard," James fills in quietly, nodding at him in visible understanding, like he actually gets it—and why wouldn't he? After all, he was in the arena, too. "It's very fucking hard."

"Sirius helps, but…" Regulus flicks his gaze over to where Sirius seems to be trying to soothe a frazzled Pandora and swallows as his chest goes tight.

"I, uh—I struggle, too, so I—I get it," James murmurs.

Regulus exhales slowly and holds his gaze. "But you still bring me a flower every day. Every single fucking day, James, no matter what else is going on or how you feel."

"Should I…not?" James asks, almost cautious. "It's—I mean, if you'd like me *not* to, you know I'll stop."

"Some days, I wake up and I don't want to move. I don't want to speak. I don't even want to *think.* All I want to do is—lay there, just lay there and never get up again, so I don't really understand how you do it," Regulus says.

"Funny you would say that," James replies gently, his lips curling up. "I've been tempted to ask you the very same thing, because every day, without fail, you're at that window. What gets *you* up when you don't want to?"

"I—Because I—" Regulus stutters to a stop, blinking at James, who waits curiously. The thing is, there's a lot of answers to that question. Sometimes, just knowing that he's going to see Sirius can get him out of bed on days when it's the last thing he wants to do; sometimes, it's the thought of the promise he made to go visit Andromeda, Ted, and Nymphadora again; other times, it's because Barty is there to nudge him awake and coax him out of bed. But those things have failed before. There have been times when not even those things were enough to combat the crushing weight that kept him pinned to his bed, and all that was left was a flower.

One lone flower should not have that much power, and yet it does. At the start of the day, when it feels like the end of his life and he's so very exhausted with everything, when all else fails, it's that flower James brings to him every morning that gets him out of bed. Because Regulus has to make sure that it's there, every day, desperate to find it on his doorstep time and time again while terrified that, one day, it won't be.

"There are days where I wake up and instantly want to go back to sleep, or just stuff my head under my pillow and never resurface, but I get up anyway, because I know you're going to be at that window," James explains. "You're always there, no matter what, so I drag myself up and bring you a flower. If that's all I do in a day, at least I've done that. Maybe that's a strange thing to have as a consistent source of motivation—"

"No," Regulus interrupts forcefully, and James blinks, looking mildly startled. "No, James, it's not. It's—well, actually, this is a bit ironic, I suppose, but that flower is why I get up, even on the days when it's hardest to do so."

"Oh," James says softly.

Regulus frowns slightly. "Don't take that to mean you *have to,* alright? It's not a standard you have to hold yourself to, and if you don't do it, or just…can't, that's okay. I just—I want you to know that I appreciate that you do it."

"Thank you for keeping your curtains open," James blurts out, fidgeting with the lapel of his suit jacket. "You don't have to do that, and I'm sure there are days when you'd rather close them, but you keep them open, and maybe it's foolish of me to think that it's for my benefit, but—"

"It is," Regulus confirms.

James blinks harshly, the column of his throat rising and falling as he searches Regulus' gaze. His voice is so soft when he whispers, "You really miss me?"

"Yes," Regulus admits bluntly, despite the way the truth makes his heart thump heavily in his chest. What a terror it is to open himself up and let himself be seen. He swallows, too, and sighs a little wistfully. "And now I miss your fucking glasses. Why do they take them from you *every time?"*

"I—" James blinks, then huffs out a weak laugh. "Well, Dorcas let me keep them as long as I agreed not to wear them on camera or at the party when we reach the Hallow. I—I still have them. They're here, in my pocket."

Regulus watches James gently tap the side of his jacket with a frown. "Alright, sure, but why can't you wear them? I suppose it made a bit of sense in—in the arena, but—"

"I think it's just how I presented myself to the Hallow before, or how I was *presented,"* James explains. "It's what they're already used to, and it's more…digestible that way? I think? Maybe it's a mental thing, too. For me, I mean. When I have them off and I'm wearing contacts, I'm not fully comfortable, and I shouldn't be while…all of this is going on."

"You prefer it this way?" Regulus asks.

James nods carefully. "I think so. It's a physical reminder, maybe, that this is—separate, do you know what I mean? I've worn my glasses in every other portion of my life, except for when I'm presenting myself to the Hallow, so it helps keep it all from blending… And, um, it sort of helps me figure out the timeline, if that makes sense? Like, I'm not wearing my glasses, so it can't be before the arena, but I also have my cane, so it has to be *after* the arena."

"Oh," Regulus murmurs, eyebrows furrowed. "Is—is that something you struggle with? Knowing…when you are?"

"Yeah," James replies. "Frequently. Time is—stupid."

Regulus feels his lips twitch at how petulant James sounds about it. It makes him want to reach out and soothe away the pout on James' face until he's smiling again. "Yes, I'd say so. Is there—I mean, can I…do anything?"

"No. It's sort of just…one of those things," James says with a weary sigh, resigned to it. "I can usually work it out from context clues, and fairly quick, too. Sometimes Sirius has to tell me, so I suppose if I ever ask, you could as well."

"Okay," Regulus agrees.

"Five minutes!" Pandora calls out in warning.

James blows out a deep breath, glancing away, then back at Regulus again. "Right. Happy couple time. Um, should we talk about…boundaries, I suppose? Is there anything—"

"Blanket permission," Regulus cuts in firmly, setting his shoulders and holding James' gaze. "You have blanket permission to do anything, James. We can't afford to fuck this up, so…go for it, I suppose."

"Go for it," James repeats, eyebrows shooting up.

The idea of James *going for it,* as it were, makes Regulus want to curl in a tight ball and shrivel into himself. He doesn't—even now, touching is... It's hard. He has his moments, his good days, but most of the time, he can't stand to be touched. It's the same as shying away from dead things, repulsed by rot; he is a corpse that forgets he is dead until someone touches him and reminds him he's not alive. He doesn't want James to brush up against that.

He also has no choice, because danger is breathing down their necks, and they can't outrun it. They can only keep moving forward and never turn to face it. To do so would be defiance. Regulus doesn't feel the urge to be defiant anymore. Compliance is safe. Compliance is quiet grief and unspoken tragedies. He does not want to raise his voice. He does not want to speak at all.

Regulus clears his throat. "For the next week, when it's required, you can be as sappy and romantic and affectionate as you like. Don't hold back. I want them sick of us by the end."

"Alright, but still, is there anything you don't want me to do, not even to put on a show?" James insists.

And of course, here James is, stopping in place and planting his feet despite the heavy breathing echoing in their ears, whispering promises of further detriment. He gives Regulus options. He gives Regulus the space to choose, always. Regulus will never be able to express what that means to him.

"Oh. Um." Regulus swallows. "Just—I mean, I'm okay with... Hands. We can—hold hands. That's... Yeah, that should be fine." He pauses, then grimaces slightly because he already knows that's not going to be enough. Of course not. "It's—James, it's okay to touch me over the next week. On camera, at least. That's...separate for me, too. Just—maybe no kissing? Not—not a lot, anyway. Cheek is fine. Maybe just let me initiate most things. Is that okay?"

"That's okay," James assures him quietly, and Regulus really hopes that James doesn't take it personally. It's not him. It's Regulus. Of course it is.

Regulus nods. "And—and it's important to remember that this isn't real. I'm not saying—I know you know that, and I'm sorry, but I'll do what needs to be done when those cameras are on, when people are watching, but when they're not…"

"Don't worry, Regulus," James murmurs, averting his gaze to the side, "I won't get the wrong idea."

"James," Regulus says weakly, because the distinction is important to him. All of this with James over the next week, it's not... It can't be anything. Not yet. Not like this. They're not ready.

Shaking his head, James gives him a tight smile. "I'm not upset with you. I'm just really fucking pissed off that—that we don't have a choice in the matter. You shouldn't be forced into this, and I—I shouldn't either. Trust me, there's no chance I'll get the wrong idea about *this*. I know what we are."

"A great, big tragedy," Regulus mumbles, and James just nods in silent agreement. Regulus' stomach turns over like it's tumbling down a hill, his heart squeezing violently in his chest. "We could be—I mean, do you still think that, someday, we could...?"

"Regulus," James says gently, his gaze so soft.

"Ignore me. That was—stupid. Sorry." Regulus cringes a little and looks away. Five minutes with James, and he's a little idiot in love again. Someone save him.

James laughs, quiet and breathless, and his eyes are bright when Regulus peeks at him again. "Love, I haven't ignored you since your fifteenth birthday. Trust me, I'm not about to start now."

Regulus knew that. He did. And yet, his face still burns. Oh, he's so pathetic. James. Fucking *James*. Regulus hates him, but oh how he loves him so.

"It's—this is going to be difficult for me," James announces, clearing his throat. "I—I'm going to struggle, I think, and I don't want to take that out on you. I really don't. So, just, if you would, don't ignore me either, please? Can we just get through it together?"

Regulus' heart sinks, because he doesn't know if he'll be able to manage that, or get it right. He doesn't know if he can. All he can say is, "I'll try," and he hopes James knows that he really, truly will.

The problem is, he's going to fail. He knows he will.

He always has.

~•~

Sirius doesn't remember his victory tour. Not one second of it.

He's spoken to Effie about it in preparation for this one, because he genuinely has no recollection outside of small snatches of memories that he's not entirely sure are real. He knows it happened, and he knows Effie was there with him the entire time, but that's about it.

So, Sirius is sort of visiting all the districts for the first time, too, even though he's technically already done it once. Effie has done it four times—once when she was a Victor, once as Bellatrix's mentor, once as Narcissa's, and once as Sirius'. She gave him a basic rundown of what to expect, slipping back into a mentor role like she never even left, for which Sirius was grateful, because he really needed her guidance on this one.

In any case, he feels mostly prepared by the time they leave for district twelve, their very first stop on the tour. It's the day after the interview, which had gone well. James and Regulus were disgustingly lovey-dovey throughout, but as soon as the cameras were off, they went their separate ways again.

Pandora and Dorcas will be with them all the way back into the Hallow, and Pandora has sat James and Regulus down to coach them so thoroughly that they could probably give their speeches in their sleep.

It's not going to be a good time, regardless, because they'll have to face strong reminders of people they killed, and people they lost. Pandora got the full list, so she knows each tribute from each district. The ones that Sirius is worried about are the ones he's known this entire time.

District eleven is where Vanity and Hodge were reaped from, where Marlene is. District nine is home to Emmeline, who had Evan and Juniper as tributes. District five had Irene and Mathias, which is where Frank is. District three might be hard, too, because that's where Peter was from.

Two probably won't be hard, because that was Axus and Willa. One, of course, was Mulciber and Avery, but Sirius suspects that will be particularly difficult for him and Regulus for reasons that have nothing to do with the fallen tributes and everything to do with the fact that it'll be a bit of a family reunion if Lucius gets Narcissa and Bellatrix there. Four, seven, eight, ten, and twelve should be the simplest.

District six is home, which they won't properly see again until the week is over. Just one week. They can handle a week.

District twelve, Sirius assumes, won't be an issue at all. The tributes who died from there never even spoke to James and Regulus, really. So, when they arrive, it's mostly just jitters from doing something for the very first time. In no way, shape, or form should district twelve be impactful at all.

It doesn't take Sirius very long to realize that this will not be the case.

Before James and Regulus have to stand up and give their speeches, there's lunch with the mayor and the mentor of the fallen tributes, and it's held in the mayor's office. Sirius isn't very close with the mentor of this district, some man named Figgins, who drinks more than he talks and has been a mentor for at least thirty years; Sirius thinks he and Effie got on well enough, back in their day, but that's all he knows.

It's as they're all moving through the front hall of the mayor's office that things go awry. Sirius doesn't much like the mayor, if he's honest. A man who cares more about the reputation of his district than the people in it, too concerned with fitting into what's expected of them, blithering on about a new order since he was given the position. He's fairly new to it, or newer than most, because he's young, only a bit older than them, from what Sirius can tell, but he acts like he's of great importance and far more distinguished than them.

Sirius is admittedly tuning him out, and in doing so, he's flicking his gaze over the pictures on the wall, and one catches his eye and makes him do a double-take so hard that he

genuinely comes to a screeching halt. The group keeps walking, but Sirius is frozen in place, staring at a picture of Remus with wide eyes, his heart racing.

The man—Mayor Vernon—keeps on talking, but Sirius eases towards the picture. It's as he gets closer that he realizes, no, that's not Remus. It's a man strongly resembling him—or rather the man that *Remus* strongly resembles. The plaque underneath the picture reads *Lyall Lupin* and thanks him for thirty plus years of service as an Auror.

"Sirius?"

Jolting, Sirius exhales sharply and whips his head around to find Regulus standing right beside him. Sirius clears his throat and looks over to see the others still walking ahead, but here Regulus is, waiting. "Sorry. I… Um. I—"

"Oh," Regulus murmurs, gazing at the picture and apparently reading the name on the plaque. He blinks, then looks at Sirius again. "Yes, okay."

"What?" Sirius mumbles weakly.

Regulus arches an eyebrow at him. "You know what. Just go, Sirius. I'll handle the others."

"Thank you," Sirius breathes out, already backing up.

"Don't rush. We'll be fine," is Regulus' only response, and Sirius nods gratefully before he's gone.

Seeing as Sirius has no fucking clue where Lyall lives, or anything about district twelve overall, he's a bit lost from the start. Fortunately, Sirius knows how to charm people and get exactly what he wants, so he talks to every person he comes across and gathers enough information to hopefully point himself in the right direction.

Eventually, Sirius is walking slowly up a set of rickety steps, his breath held as he approaches a sea-foam green door with a brass knocker that he just—stares at for a few moments in rising distress. He's never used a fucking door-knocker before. Is that a thing? Do people actually use that? People generally just knock directly on the door, right? But is it there just for decoration, or should he really use it? Does it matter?

Sirius stands there for a solid five minutes, probably, just debating on whether or not his style of knocking would give Lyall a bad impression, then realizes he's being a bit of an idiot, because the man likely won't give a shit *how* Sirius knocks when Sirius starts talking about his son.

So, Sirius takes a deep breath, gathers his courage, and reaches out to knock, then stands there and internally spirals into a bit of a panic, because what if he knocked too hard? Too many times? Really, the knocker is *right there,* and isn't it very annoying to have that, only for no one to use it? Can he do both? Maybe he should do both. Maybe—

The door opens before Sirius can settle on what counts as proper etiquette when knocking on the door belonging to the man whose son you're head over heels in love with.

Lyall, like Remus, is a tall man. He's older than the picture in the office, his hair graying and his eyes framed by wrinkles. He looks stern, and Sirius can see where Remus gets that guarded expression of his from. Lyall, also like Remus, is incredibly handsome—aged like fine wine, as that saying goes.

"Hello," Sirius greets, struggling not to cringe because of how formal he sounds. "Um, hi, I know you don't know me, but my name is Sirius Black. I'm…"

"The mentor to this year's Victors," Lyall fills in, when Sirius trails off awkwardly. Poor Lyall looks like he has absolutely no idea what would bring Sirius to his door, which is fair, because if not for Remus, Sirius would have no reason to be here. "Is there something I can… help you with, Mr. Black?"

"Sirius, please," Sirius says quickly, stuffing his hands in his pockets and clearing his throat. "I—I was hoping I could come in, if that's not too much of a bother. I'd just like to talk to you about something important. I'm aware that's confusing, sir, and I understand if you'd rather not, but I really do think you'll be grateful that you did."

Lyall regards him for a long moment in complete silence, visibly bemused, then steps back and murmurs, "You've caught me at a good time. Come on in."

"Thank you," Sirius replies, following Lyall further inside.

Past the little hall from the front door, where there's a coat rack, the main sitting room waits. Sirius can see the kitchen off to the side, quaint and cluttered, and two separate halls that he presumes leads to rooms. The sitting room has two chairs with a side-table between them, a lamp resting on top of it, and a framed picture of a much younger Remus being hugged from behind by a beaming woman that Sirius is quite sure is Hope Lupin. Sirius' breath catches when he looks at it, because only one glance tells him that Remus got his freckles and hair from his mum, and they both look so fucking *happy* in the picture that it leaves him breathless.

It's the sort of photo that you'd find in happy, loving homes with whole families that aren't trapped together by all their broken parts, nothing like what Sirius comes from. It's the sort of photo that Effie and Monty have all over their house. It's the sort of photo that wouldn't make you think that anything ever went wrong, that this family ever knew tragedy, or loss.

"I don't mean to be rude," Lyall says carefully, drawing his attention, "but I'd appreciate knowing what you're here for."

Sirius opens his mouth, closes it, then does it all over again on repeat as he tries to figure out how to start. His legs are jumping up and down restlessly. "Right. So, I—well, honestly, I'm not sure how to explain. I suppose I should just—come right out and say it."

"That's generally a good place to start, yes," Lyall agrees.

"I know your son," Sirius blurts out, and then they both just sort of stop and stare at each other. Lyall isn't moving, doesn't even seem to be breathing, and neither is Sirius. There's an emotion flickering in Lyall's eyes, but Sirius can't put a name to what it is. The silence stretches on, and Sirius finally can't take it anymore, his exhale exploding out of him as he promptly begins to ramble. "I mean, I got to know him. Your son, I mean. Recently, when I was in the Hallow. We got to know each other, to be more precise, which was—"

"Wait, just." Lyall holds up a hand, and Sirius snaps his mouth shut. Lyall's fingers are ever so slightly trembling, even as he stares at Sirius steadily. "My son. You…know him."

Sirius swallows and nods. "Yes. Remus. We got to know each other, like I said. He was assigned to our suite as a servant, but I made him take his mask off. Wait, no, I—it's—that came out wrong. I—I did try to, at first, with good intentions, but in the end, he made the choice to take it off himself, and—and he was free to just do as he pleased in the suite, so he did, and we spent a lot of time together. We talked a lot, which is how I know about you, and he—he's just brilliant, Mr. Lupin, truly."

"He's…" Lyall trails off for a long moment, seeming to need a moment to process, and he reaches up to swipe his shaking hand over his mouth. Whatever emotion exists in his eyes, it just keeps getting brighter. "Is he—well? Is Remus okay? Just, I need to know if—if my son is…"

"Well, er, being a servant isn't the most…glamorous thing, for obvious reasons, but he's—despite everything, he's as okay as he can be, sir," Sirius says softly. "He's kind, and passionate, and he hasn't let the past five years make him forget his worth. When I was with him, I saw many smiles and heard plenty of laughter, if that comforts you at all."

Lyall's eyes sink shut. "It does. You cannot even begin to imagine how much it does."

"He talked about you and his mum with—just so much love, Mr. Lupin," Sirius murmurs, his heart clenching when Lyall's eyes flutter open, shining a bit, wet with unshed tears. "I think he would like you to know that he loves you, and misses you, and he hopes you're…doing well, too. I know circumstances are unfair, but if I could give you this—give him this—then I had to at least try. I'm sorry if I've overstepped, but—"

"You have not. You—thank you." Lyall reaches out and hovers his hand over where Sirius has his arm propped up on the chair, and after a beat, he rests his hand on Sirius' arm and gently squeezes it. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Sirius takes a deep breath. "I plan to see him again when I go back to the Hallow for the next hunger games. It's still six months away, but I would be more than willing to take a letter to

him, if you wanted to write one. Or if you just wanted me to tell him something, I would."

"You plan to see him again?" Lyall asks as he draws his hand away, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"I—well, yes, sir," Sirius admits. "I intend to make it happen, whatever it takes. Bribery, if necessary. I, um, have a way with the Hallows, anyway. I'm sort of…good at manipulating them to do what I want, and for Remus, I will."

Lyall blinks, staring at him, then nods slowly. "Well, that's… Ah, I'll hardly stop you. From what I understand, Remus has a bit more freedom while with you, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Sirius says. "I don't really…like servants." He pauses, then his eyes bulge. "Wait, I didn't mean it like that. I meant that I don't like how servants are treated, and I—I don't allow it in our assigned suite, where it's safe for them to be treated as they should be. It's—Remus isn't the first that I insisted on getting to have basic human rights, but he *is* the first that actually allowed himself to fully agree. Usually, the danger it poses holds most people back, and I can't blame them for that, but Remus was…different."

"I always feared that he would get into trouble he could not get out of, and now that he has, I feared that everything that made him who he was would be…taken from him," Lyall confesses quietly. "To know that this is not the case, to know that he's still…" Lyall exhales and looks up to hold Sirius' gaze, lips curling at the corners. "You've given me a gift I can never repay, Sirius, and I—I cannot even begin to express what it means to me. I would like to write him a letter, if you meant it when you offered to take it to him."

"I meant it," Sirius confirms immediately. "I'll get it to him, sir, I promise. I think it would be very good for him."

Lyall swallows. "It's a risk. I'm sure you know this, but I feel the need to point it out, if only because I sincerely doubt that my son would want you to endanger yourself, even for this. If you're discovered giving this letter to him, you would both be punished, or possibly killed."

"I know," Sirius says, his voice steady and unwavering. "I'll be careful, of course, but the risk is worth it for him, and I can only hope that you'll agree. If—if it's discovered, you would also be in danger, Mr. Lupin. I can't force you, and I would understand if you'd rather not; I'm sure Remus would as well."

"No," Lyall murmurs. "If you're willing, then I want to. My son was always so brave, even to his own detriment, and I can stand to be brave for him now. There are things I never got the chance to say to him, things he deserves to hear, so if you're absolutely sure about doing this…"

"I am," Sirius assures him.

"Very well." Lyall leans forward and pushes himself out of his chair, blowing out a deep breath. He moves over to a bookshelf in the corner and shuffles things around to grab something, bringing it to Sirius. "This is a photo album, if you'd like to flip through it while I write the letter. Just give me a moment."

Sirius grabs the photo album and nods at Lyall. "Of course. Take your time."

Lyall gives him a faint smile and wanders off down the hall to the left, presumably to go write the letter to Remus in the privacy of his own room, which Sirius can't begrudge him.

To pass the time, Sirius does indeed flip through the photo album, grateful that he's alone, because he's pretty much infatuated from the very first page. It's photos upon photos of Remus growing up, all the way from a baby to an adult. Lyall, Hope, and other people feature in the pictures as well—one girl pops up a lot that Sirius believes is Lily, based on her red hair and green eyes and how close she and Remus seem to be.

In most photos, Remus is smiling. None of his baby pictures, though, because he was apparently a baby who never smiled, always scowling or crying, which Sirius finds ridiculously adorable. But, as he grows through the pictures, he starts to smile more and more, looking so young and delighted by life. There's a lot of laughter captured in the moment, and Sirius reflexively smiles every time he sees it.

Sirius finds a quick favorite. A picture of Remus and Lily, he's pretty sure. It's clearly a photo they took themselves, just from the angle. They look young, probably around sixteen or seventeen, if Sirius had to guess. In it, Lily is holding Remus by the jaw and sticking her tongue out towards his ear, like she intends to lick it, and Remus' face is scrunched up into a smile that, for some reason, brings tears to Sirius' eyes. He releases a wet laugh, stroking the edge of the photo reverently, his heart feeling swollen and bruised in the best and worst way both.

It's just—well, this could have been around the time Sirius was in the arena, or afterwards when things were so fucking hard for him. It hurts, in a way, to see people living with such ease, as if the world wasn't falling apart, because at that time, that's how it felt for him. In the same breath, something about it soothes Sirius, too, just to know that Remus had this, to know that he was happy and loved.

Remus, unsurprisingly, was heartbreakingly handsome throughout his youth, and there is absolutely no doubt in Sirius' mind that he had people falling all over themselves for him. *Sirius* fell all over himself for Remus, so really, he gets it. That doesn't mean he's very pleased to come across a photo of Remus and some boy who he must have been dating at the time, because they're kissing in it. Sirius purses his lips and glares at the picture, then flips to the next page with a huff.

Towards the end, the pictures become more spaced out and, eventually, Hope stops showing up in them at all. Remus' warm smiles start to take on an edge, something a little sharp in his grin, as if he's always ready for a fight, no matter what's going on. There's one candid of Lily and Remus both smoking, touching the very tips of their burning cigarettes together as they flip off the camera, so Sirius assumes someone else took it. And, finally, there's the very last photo.

In it, Remus looks as old as he ever gets in any of the photos, nothing past twenty, since he was captured at that age. He's sleeping in the picture, with Lily right next to him, both of them sprawled out with their mouths slack and their limbs thrown over each other carelessly.

Sirius stares at it for a very long time. He's never seen Remus sleeping, never had the chance to, and he'll never see it in person. It's a crying shame, because Remus is lovely while sleeping, at least when he's resting comfortably. He looks gentle, like the kind of person who would smile as soon as you made eye-contact with them.

Sirius misses Remus so much that it's pitiful. He misses Remus all the time, no matter what he's doing, and he only needs to be alone and get still for a few minutes before his mind is turning to every memory of them that he has. He hasn't forgotten any of it, not one second, and he thinks he could forget everything else and still remember Remus.

The sound of Lyall shuffling back into the room makes Sirius gently shut the photo album and sit it aside, straightening up as Lyall moves back to his chair. Lyall's eyes are red-rimmed and a little puffy like he's been crying, which tugs at Sirius' heartstrings something awful, but he doesn't call attention to it, because he thinks Lyall would prefer it if he didn't.

"Remus doesn't trust very easily," Lyall murmurs, "but I know he must trust you to have told you about his mother. It's not something he's ever talked about very much. Losing Hope was hard for him, hard for us both, and knowing that he told you about her lets me know that he trusts you, so I'll do the same."

"Thank you," Sirius replies quietly. "I would never do anything to hurt Remus. You can trust that, Mr. Lupin."

"It's all a parent wants, just to know that their child has people who care for them," Lyall croaks as he holds out the envelope, unmarked and sealed. *Not all parents,* Sirius thinks, but he doesn't say it. "I appreciate you more than you'll ever know."

"You're a good father, sir." Sirius reaches out to take the letter gingerly, offering Lyall a tiny smile. "In fairness, it's very easy to care about Remus. He's…something special."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Lyall declares, but his lips press into a thin line. "Unfortunately, not many people would be able to look past what he's done to see that. I cannot thank you enough for doing so, despite the people that he killed."

Sirius drops the letter, his fingers fumbling it and going slack as he rears back, eyes growing wide. The letter hits the floor in front of his boots, and Lyall freezes.

"Oh," Lyall says softly, looking stricken, "you didn't know… I thought—well, he told you so much that he'd never told anyone, and you said you both talked a lot, so I just assumed that

this was something he trusted you with as well."

"No," Sirius rasps, "he—he failed to mention that part."

Silence falls on them like a guillotine, and Sirius' brain can hardly make sense of this. Remus killed people? What the *fuck?* That's not—that doesn't make any sense. Remus was never in the games. Why would he—what reason would he *ever*—

Is this why he's a servant? Was *murder* his crime? Well, fuck, Sirius genuinely did not see that coming. How could he see this coming? Remus never even *hinted*—

"Sirius," Lyall starts, very carefully, "I—I know that this seems bad and puts him in a negative light, but you have to understand that it's not what you think. Please allow me to explain the full story before you—"

"Ah, no," Sirius cuts in quickly, blowing out a deep breath as he shakes his head. "No offense, sir, but I don't think that would be a good idea. I think he should have the chance to explain, despite how badly I'd like to know."

Lyall eyes him warily. "You're still going to visit him?"

"What? Of course," Sirius says, baffled. "Why wouldn't I?"

"You just found out my son is a murderer," Lyall informs him, raising his eyebrows slowly.

Sirius blinks. "Mr. Lupin, I'm also a murderer. I've killed twelve people."

For a beat, they just stare at each other in silence as that settles between them, because this is the world they live in, where saying something like that can be true without it being absolutely fucking insane. Well, it *is* insane, but it's also very normalized. It's just…the way the world works.

And, really, Sirius has no room to judge, does he? That's the truth. He *has* killed twelve people, at the tender age of sixteen. It's a fact he can never be free from. Of course, he was in a situation where he had no choice, where it was either that, or die, and he has no idea what circumstances Remus was in when he became a murderer.

He doesn't know the details; the reasons behind it; how many people, or even how he did it. Maybe it's foolish, but Sirius doesn't particularly care. He didn't see it coming, but it's not as if it changes anything. Sirius still misses Remus with every breath, still loves him with every cell in his body, and still has all plans to see him again as soon as he can.

"Well, you just seemed…quite upset," Lyall says awkwardly.

"Not because of the murder thing," Sirius mutters, waving his hand carelessly. He pauses. "That makes me sound rather mental, doesn't it? I just mean, I know that whatever it is, however it happened, it wasn't something inexcusable. No, I was just surprised, honestly, and I do feel like maybe he should have mentioned it. Not that I'm entitled to any information he isn't comfortable sharing, but I do think it's something you tell someone before you have sex with them, at the very least."

It takes a second for the words to catch up with Sirius, and then his eyes bulge as heat creeps up into his face. Lyall's eyebrows are raised very, very high.

"Oh, fuck—I mean, shit—wait, sorry, excuse my language, sir," Sirius chokes out, his voice going high from his rising panic as his heart takes off sprinting in his chest. "I wasn't—I shouldn't have said that. I don't know why I said that. Please don't think I took advantage of Remus. I swear I didn't. It was very mutual, and actually I was super nervous and not really sure about the whole thing—er, sex, I mean, because I'd never even done it, but I trusted Remus, and he was just so lovely—"

"Sirius—"

"I—I didn't force him, I would never, and he had full freedom to do whatever he liked, or didn't. He could have just—beat me up, if necessary. I'm pretty sure I told him that once, actually, and hey, now I know he could have just fucking killed me, so there's that. Shit, sorry,

the cursing again. I'm just—I don't mean to be disrespectful in your home, sir, I swear. I'm just panicking a bit, currently, and—and trying to explain that I didn't, in any way, coerce your son into having sex with—"

"Sirius," Lyall interrupts yet again, louder this time.

"I'm in love with him," Sirius blurts out, then inhales sharply and tangles his fingers together in his lap, staring at Lyall with wide eyes. His face feels like it's about to melt off.

"My word," Lyall says faintly, and then a quiet chuckle slips out of him, but it keeps building until he's laughing so hard that he leans back in his chair and cradles his stomach. It's a full-bellied laugh, echoing throughout the empty house that shouldn't be empty at all. It takes Lyall a bit to calm down, and once he has, he genuinely has to rub tears out of his eyes as he shakes his head. "Oh. Oh, hell, I needed that."

"Mr. Lupin?" Sirius asks cautiously.

"Please call me Lyall, Sirius. You've absolutely earned it," Lyall declares, gazing over at him with a fondness that Sirius is not at all prepared for. He looks—warm. Pleased, even. "I bet Remus is endlessly entertained by you."

"I—well, yeah, pretty much," Sirius admits sheepishly. "He thinks I'm a mess. I think he's right."

Lyall hums, shaking his head again, amused. "I should tell you, I did work out that there was something going on between the two of you, just from how you spoke about him. Your love for my son is not subtle."

"I wasn't trying to make this about me," Sirius murmurs.

"You're fine, Sirius," Lyall replies kindly. "It's comforting, in fact, to know that he's loved. It also—doesn't surprise me in the least, not with my son in mind. He's surely aware that it's

something he shouldn't do, but…" Lyall's face softens in a mixture of pain and pride. "Well, Remus has never been good at doing what he should. As concerning as it is, I'm grateful to know that hasn't changed about him."

Sirius clears his throat and leans down to pluck the letter back up carefully. "Right, well, sorry for…um, you know."

"Don't worry about it," Lyall says wryly. "He's Remus. I expect nothing less from him, honestly." Sighing, Lyall glances at the clock, then focuses on Sirius again. "If you want to make it back before your tributes get on stage, which I recommend to avoid any suspicion, then you should leave now. I'll be watching where it's televised from here—a bad hip keeps me home, most days, so this was nice. I'm very grateful to have met you, Sirius, and thank you for loving my son as you do."

"Right, yes, okay," Sirius agrees, pushing to his feet. He tucks away the envelope and surges forward to shake Lyall's hand as soon as he offers it. "Thank you, Mr. Lup—um, Lyall."

"I doubt we'll ever see each other again," Lyall murmurs as he drops Sirius' hand, "but I wouldn't mind being wrong about that. If you're ever in the area, you're welcome here."

Sirius smiles, unable to help the pleased surge of triumph that gives him, just because he's gotten Lyall's approval. "If I am here, I'll be sure to stop by."

"Alright, go on now," Lyall says with a chuckle.

With a deep breath, Sirius nods at him, says goodbye, then turns to go. He feels the weight of the letter in his pocket the whole way out the door.

Chapter End Notes

okay, starting from the top!!!

the first part of this chapter was basically just regulus pining after james like a lovesick little idiot. he's soooo in love, it's adorable. literally just staring at james with stars in his eyes, utterly enamored. this poor man. like, i pity him, and i also Get Him. i would be no different than him about james. i AM no different 💀

HELP the whole bit where they're just Looking At Each Other bc they're looking especially pretty. GOODBYE. literally just get married already.

pandora and dorcas my beloveds <3

dorcas' little talk with regulus... Remember That. particularly the "i don't want him to see me" also that's just so valid of regulus. i, too, fear being perceived.

regulus blushing every time effie and monty speak to him 😭😭😭 no bc they watched him THREATEN TO KILL THEIR SON MULTIPLE TIMES!!! and also flirt with him. and also try to die for him. like??? how do you look them in the eye after all that? i would spontaneously combust.

also james is just so... like, he is absolutely the type to just carry on a conversation with himself and be silly to make other people laugh. i adore him. he means so much to me, you don't even KNOW.

regulus being like: hey you're not giving up on me, right? please don't do that. and then the instant cringe... BABE GET A CLUE THE MAN BRINGS YOU A FLOWER EVERY DAY???? he's got problems.

in his defense, he's in a difficult position, because he's still working through his shit, so like. he knows they're Not Ready, but he also...wants to be, someday, which is progress. he's in that stage where he's like, terrified he's too late or taking too long, like he's so close, but never close enough...

yeah, you know. it's a whole theme with this fic.

james talking about it being hard for him—yeah, we see more on that over the next few chapters. it's one of those things where, like, he has to figure out the healthiest way to handle it and actually Do That, except he's stubborn and easily distracted lmaoooo. you'll see what i mean soon enough.

ONTO REMUS!!!

first, sirius seeing a picture of remus' dad and his first instinct being to do something so compassionate and comforting by giving them at least one thread of communication they never had in the last five years??? sirius black, come here, im kissing your forehead rn.

he's just so, so lovely. i adore him so much. like, he loves remus SO MUCH and it kills me 😭😭😭

the whole interaction between lyall and sirius was so, so funny to me. literally like Meeting The Parent and trying to leave a good impression. sirius was trying SO HARD, and he was so nervous. he's so cute, i love him.

and then the bomb drop. lyall really just outed his son for being a murderer, like??? lyall??? maybe don't just bring that up in casual conversation??? 😭😭😭 in his defense, it's like a Known Thing in his district, so it's not this big huge secret to him, and he knows how big of a deal it was for remus to tell sirius about his mother (we find out more about that later), so like. murder literally was not that big of a leap for him.

however, remus did in fact conveniently forget to mention that he's a murderer. and remus "be gay, do crime" lupin IS indeed a murderer. the last question to be answered is why, and what the fuck happened??? which we do see the answers to very soon, i promise!

lmaoooo sirius being like "i don't care that he's a murderer, so am i, he isn't special" GOODBYE 😭😭😭 he literally just. processed it and immediately went, yeah but you don't have all the facts, i love him 🥺 he's so valid for that, actually.

also sirius dissolving into a nervous mess the moment he slips up and says he and remus have had sex, then just panicking and blurting out that he's in love with him??? sirius, my love, you are Everything to me. he's marvelous. if you think he can't become more of a mess, literally Just Wait 😭😭😭

right, HONARABLE MENTIONS:

-james' flower being the thing that gets regulus out of bed and motivated when all else fails 😭😭😭
-effie being a mentor to bellatrix, narcissa, AND sirius (we learn more about the history of the Victors from the Black family later)
-dorcas being a great stylist and friend
-pandora always doing her best for them <3 put some respect on her name, she is holding this team together
-sirius panicking about how to knock on a door
-regulus seeing the picture of lyall and immediately covering for sirius so he can go
-sirius and regulus being close 😭
-regulus keeping his curtains open so james can see him (remembering after the arena right now)
-sirius making lyall laugh and actually making a good impression on him
yeah that about sums it up!

A Bad Day

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past deaths
-references to past child deaths
-mentions of ptsd/ptsd-responses (nightmares, paranoia, hallucinations, lashing out)
-james' issues with time (it's not light, it's quite bad, and ill put an in-depth warning in the end notes for those who need it or want it explained)
-depictions of grief
-references to past violence
-references to past panic attack (brief and not described in detail)
-references to past child abuse (not regulus and sirius this time)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dorcas' breath catches the moment she lays eyes on Marlene, who immediately meets Sirius in a tight hug.

She looks—well, frankly, she looks like the polar opposite of a Hallow in ripped-jean shorts and a loose, black t-shirt with the sides cut off all the way down to the hem, showing her bare sides and the dark sports bra underneath. It reveals the muscles in her arms, in her legs, and her golden hair is piled into a lopsided, messy bun on top of her head. There's dirt under her fingernails and the random, yellowing bruise in various spots on her legs and arms, like she's active, like she's vivacious, like she's doing things a little too rough and doesn't plan to stop.

Back in the Hallow, people would see her like this and scoff. They would call her 'poor', despite the fact that she's not; she can't be, as a Victor. They would call her 'messy', or 'thrown away', or something equally insulting.

Meanwhile, Dorcas nearly chokes when she inhales her own spit, because she'll be damned if that is not the most attractive woman she's ever seen in her fucking *life*. Holy shit, that's not even fair. Oh, this does not look good for Dorcas, not at all. She hasn't seen Marlene in six months, basically, and she told herself she was going to keep her wits about her and be

normal when meeting her again, but one glance at Marlene looking like she just rolled out of bed and did some manual labor lets Dorcas know she's going to fail miserably.

Sirius and Marlene murmur to each other off to the side while Pandora, Regulus, and James meet the mayor, and Dorcas stands back, her heart racing as she waits for Marlene to notice her while debating if she should run and hide on the train before that ever happens. There's a point where Pandora is clearly entertaining the mayor the most, which frees James and Regulus to go to Sirius and Marlene when Sirius raises his hand and waves them over.

"Um. Hello," James says softly, more meek than Dorcas has ever seen him. His shoulders are hunched forward, and he doesn't seem able to look Marlene directly in the eyes.

Not for the first time, Dorcas' mind turns to Vanity and Hodge, and James' heartbreaking involvement in their respective last moments. This is clearly hard for him, just being around Marlene, their mentor, and the guilt practically drips off of him from all over. It's clearly not very easy for *Marlene* either, because something passes through her eyes when she looks at him, and for a brief moment, her jaw clenches and her fingers twitch at her sides like she's considering doing something violent.

In the end, Marlene exhales and looks at Sirius, who nods gently, and then Marlene steps forward and holds her hand out to James. "Hello. Nice to meet you."

It's very stiff and awkward between them, but James does reach out to shake her hand. It's over quickly, and maybe that's for the best, because Regulus is starting to look twitchy. He gets like that, Dorcas has noticed. Anything he perceives as a threat makes him restless, and do *not* let it be a threat he feels is directed towards James or Sirius, because then things are in high chances of going from bad to worse. Dorcas has never seen a more hostile, dangerous group of people in her life.

Because Dorcas gets things done, and she can see that this is very hard for Marlene and James, specifically, she sweeps forward and says, "What, no hello for me, Marlene?"

Marlene's head whips towards her, finally realizing she's there, and she stands taller immediately. Her fingers twitch again, but this time, Dorcas is quite sure it's not because she wishes to do anything violent. "Dorcas."

"In the flesh," Dorcas muses, stopping just short of Marlene and wondering if it would be too much if she went in for a hug. Friends hug, don't they? Oh, fuck it.

Despite knowing it's an incredibly bad idea, Dorcas steps forward and holds out her arms in offering, leaning in and fully preparing for it to be awkward or awful, or for Marlene to dodge her entirely. Marlene does not, and it isn't awkward or awful. In fact, Marlene meets her halfway, and it's wonderful.

Dorcas is very close to Marlene's height, only a *teensy* bit taller, so they sort of just—match, somehow. Or maybe that's just how it feels to Dorcas. Either way, wrapping her arms around Marlene is the most natural thing in the world, so fucking right that the idea of letting go feels wrong. Marlene smells warm, like sunshine and…motor oil, for some reason? It's good, something homely and foreign all at once.

"I didn't expect to see you," Marlene says quietly when they break apart, much to Dorcas' internal dismay. "I wasn't sure if the stylists traveled on the victory tour."

"I had the free time," Dorcas murmurs.

Marlene clears her throat and nods. "Well, that's—I mean, I'm glad. It's good to see you again."

"I wanted to… I actually came to see you off—before you left the Hallow, I mean," Dorcas blurts out, her heart lurching forward in her chest with a low keen when she sees Marlene's eyes light up with surprise. "I was going to say goodbye, but I just—I waited too long and showed up too late, is all."

"Maybe don't wait next time, yeah?" Marlene teases, breaking out into a broad grin that maybe makes Dorcas' knees go all wobbly; whatever, it's completely fine.

"I won't," Dorcas says, and she hopes it's not a lie, because even though they can't be… anything, she can't resist wanting to keep Marlene in her life, even at a distance.

Pandora comes bustling over and gathers everyone up, ushering them along with the mayor of district eleven, a kind woman who leads them to a room with refreshments and snacks, but not a full meal. There's no need, seeing as twelve fed them all, but each district is required to provide drinks and at least some food options for the Victors during the tour.

Dorcas is only just now learning firsthand how cruel that is, especially in districts where poverty is more prominent. Of course, various people at the Phoenix who escaped from districts have talked to her about these things before, but it's one thing to hear about it and another to *see it.*

The mayor ends up getting on well with Pandora and James, who sticks with her and seems desperate to avoid Marlene at all costs. Regulus, unsurprisingly, hovers around Sirius like his personal shadow. He does that a lot, too, Dorcas has noticed. Just gravitates towards his brother without even seeming to realize it, like an instinctive thing. When he doesn't, Sirius looks for him, never fully settling until he knows where his little brother is and what he's doing.

Sometimes it sort of breaks Dorcas' heart, honestly. It's just that it's blatantly a familial thing, just checking in with the person you're comfortable with in only the way family can be, but it's mixed with something else, too. A constant, unending undercurrent of worry, needing the reassurance that the other is there, that they're close by, that they're safe.

Marlene spends time with Sirius—and Regulus, because he is hovering—while Dorcas sticks with James, Pandora, and the kind mayor. If Mayor Matilda notices that more than a few people are avoiding each other—James and Marlene, James and Regulus, Dorcas and Marlene—then she doesn't mention it or seem to mind. Genuinely, she is a very nice woman.

It's not that Dorcas particularly *wants* to avoid Marlene, mind you, it's just that doing so is for the best. She's thankful just to get to see her, though, to lay eyes on her once again and know that she is okay. Just that is enough. It has to be.

At some point, Pandora and James get into a very deep, very convoluted conversation with Mayor Matilda about types of soil—a shared interest among them, apparently—and Dorcas slowly inches away and sneaks off, because she genuinely has no idea what they're fucking talking about.

She slips off instead out the side door that Mayor Matilda ever so kindly informed her earlier she could use to take a smoke break, if she wanted. Dorcas does, in fact, want.

She only gets through one half of her cigarette before the door opens and Marlene walks out, which honestly shouldn't be a surprise. Somehow, it is. Somehow, it startles Dorcas that Marlene would join her, would seek her out, would be at ease with her enough to purposefully spend time with her. She doesn't know why that's so shocking, here in Marlene's home district, but compared to the Hallow, it is. This is where Marlene is from, where she grew up, and Dorcas is just a girl from the Hallow. A place that takes the saying *all that glitters is not gold* to the next level. A growing cesspool of despair and rot that hides within pretty smiles and pretty jewels.

This, here, is real beauty. *Marlene* is real beauty.

"Long day?" Marlene asks lightly, coming to lean against the rail of the porch beside her.

"It's barely started," Dorcas says with a sigh. "We have to go all the way to district nine today. Eight, seven, five, and four the second day. Three, two, one and then into the Hallow on the third day, where I'll have very little time to get James and Regulus ready for their interview."

"Didn't you volunteer to be along for the ride?" Marlene asks in faint amusement, arching an eyebrow.

Dorcas makes a *tch* noise and takes another pull on her cigarette, blowing smoke lazily towards the sky with her head tipped back. "Yes, I did, but let me grumble in peace."

"As you like," Marlene murmurs, lips twitching.

"How have you been?" Dorcas asks, watching her curiously, helplessly wanting to know every little thing about her.

Marlene takes a deep breath, then blows it out and rolls her shoulders in a lazy shrug. "Oh, you know, same old thing, just a different day. I've been helping my dad at the factory lately; he works with most of the other men in the district to build engines and other such things, usually for the Hallow. My cousin just recently had a baby, cute little thing, but my mum's been an emotional wreck because I never hold him. I, ah, painted Mrs. Chevolik's house—she's Hodge's mother—and now she brings me peanut brittle every week."

"Is it good?" Dorcas asks, because that's the first thing that falls out of her mouth.

"It's absolutely awful," Marlene announces, and they stare at each other for a beat before breaking out into laughter. "No, I'm not joking, Dorcas. It's genuinely so bad. I hate it anyway, because it gets in my teeth, and I despise anything tasting even faintly of caramel. But I eat it with a smile every time. It makes her so happy, and it was Hodge's favorite, so I—I think she appreciates having a reason to make it."

Dorcas isn't laughing anymore, and neither is Marlene. That sits between them, heavy, and then Dorcas looks away as she swallows down the lump in her throat. "Why don't you ever hold the baby?"

"Maximus is a calm baby, don't get me wrong, but I just… I don't know, he's so *small,* and I'm not—" Marlene halts, then clears her throat. "Well, like I told you, I don't always know how to be gentle."

"You do," Dorcas murmurs. "You're capable of being gentle, Marlene. You eat peanut brittle that you hate, just to make a mother happy, and if that's not gentle, I don't know what is."

"Sometimes," Marlene whispers, "being gentle is a chore."

"Yeah," Dorcas replies, remembering the way Slughorn's face felt under her fingers, when she dug her nails in. "Yeah, it can be." She sighs. "And the factory? Do you enjoy it?"

"It's hot, and it's grueling, but it's…satisfying," Marlene muses, and Dorcas hums to encourage Marlene to continue, taking another puff from her cigarette as she listens. "Most of it is mindless work, once you know the whole process and figure out how to work the

machines. It's—I can waste entire days in there, not even thinking the entire time. Can be a bit dangerous sometimes, though. I actually nearly cut off my finger last month. Look, see?"

"Fuck's sake, Marlene," Dorcas says in exasperation as Marlene shoves her hand in Dorcas' face and shows off the scar on the outside of her thumb.

Marlene grins at her, all teeth. "Stitched it myself, then went right back to work."

"Idiot," Dorcas mutters fondly, shaking her head as she blows out some more smoke, pointing it away from Marlene.

"I don't like looking at the scar, though," Marlene admits, peering down at her thumb with a frown. "It healed all wonky, so it looks weird to me, and it also makes me feel stupid when I look at it, because *technically,* it was my fault, but you didn't hear me say that. If my dad asks, I was *not* nodding off while running the compactor, deal?"

"You *fell asleep—"*

"Listen—"

Dorcas wheezes out an incredulous laugh and starts coughing, the smoke building in her lungs when she doesn't exhale it fast enough. She coughs her way through it, catches her breath, then says, "I don't even want to hear it. Be more careful while handling heavy machinery, Marlene."

"You sound like my mother." Marlene's face scrunches a beat later. "Oh, I hate that I just said that."

"No, me too," Dorcas assures her, then grins when Marlene wrinkles her nose in further distaste. "But at least your mother sounds like a sensible woman."

"She's not. She's easily frazzled and has no idea what's going on at any given moment," Marlene corrects, her eyes softening with unbridled love. "She just—feels a lot, if that makes sense. Not a thought behind her eyes, really, but in the best way. She's…all heart. Mental as she is, I love her dearly."

Sounds like Sybill, Dorcas thinks, biting back the words before they fall recklessly from her mouth. "She sounds lovely."

"Mhm." Marlene pokes at her thumb again, sighing. "She sends me off with a band-aid every day like I'm a fucking toddler, because she knows the scar agitates me. I told her I lose it within an hour, and she still does it anyway. I hate that she wastes them like that, though. I'm going to have to think of something, or else she'll just use them all."

"Hm." Dorcas regards her for a long moment, then finishes off her cigarette. As she blows the last exhale of smoke, she tugs the ring off her left thumb—a simple silver one with black engravings all the way around—and then she steps forward to wriggle it on Marlene's thumb, pushing it down where it fits perfectly over her scar, save for one tiny portion that peeks out just a bit above the ring. "What about that? Does that suffice?"

"Oh, Dorcas, I can't take that. It's yours. It's—"

"Shut up. It covers it, doesn't it? Does it work for you?"

Marlene stares down at it for a bit, then glances up and meets Dorcas' eyes. Softly, she says, "You know, it really does."

"Well, there you go," Dorcas murmurs, feeling her heart twist around vibrantly in her chest just thinking about the fact that Marlene will have it, will keep it, will wear it and have a bit of Dorcas with her always. Maybe she'll think of Dorcas every time she rubs her finger over it.

"You didn't have to do that," Marlene whispers.

Dorcas swallows. "What are friends for, right?"

Marlene sways closer, and only now does Dorcas realize how close they actually are, and it's too late to do anything about it, because Marlene is kissing her, just like that. Friends. Yeah, they've got this friend thing down really well, don't they?

Dorcas kisses her back, and it's not because she's used to kissing Marlene back, but because she can't stop herself from doing it. She *shouldn't,* she knows better, and she still can't help it. Marlene's mouth is a line of heat against hers, pressing in and peeling her lips apart, not gentle or teasing at all. It's not as if Dorcas is sinking into it, getting lost, but rather like she's resurfacing, like she's coming alive.

Like this, none of her responsibilities matter. She doesn't know about the war, or care about the danger, or think about the risks. It's just Marlene's mouth against hers, Marlene's tongue swiping into the seam of her mouth desperately, eagerly, like she wants it so very much.

Oh, but so does Dorcas.

When Marlene's hand cradles her cheek, Dorcas can feel the cool line of the ring on her thumb against the heat of her skin.

"And you?" Marlene breathes out, pulling back to gaze at her with bright eyes and a swollen mouth. "How have you been?"

It all comes crashing back down on Dorcas, then. Seeping in like a pipe just burst. A room filling with water, but there's no windows and no exit. *I've been awful, full of grief for those that are gone that I'm partially to blame for. I've been preparing for war. I've been lost, lost, lost. I've been thinking of you.*

"Oh, you know, same old thing, just a different day," Dorcas croaks, licking her lips before carefully pulling away from Marlene and shakily fumbling for another cigarette.

Marlene waits for Dorcas to continue, to give her more, but Dorcas doesn't.

Dorcas can't.

Marlene looks down and twists the ring around her thumb, and they don't say anything else. Despite everything, the silence is comfortable.

It usually is, between friends.

~•~

Things go awry the moment James is on the stage and lays eyes on Vanity's family.

The thing is, this was difficult to do in district twelve, and James didn't even fucking *speak* to those tributes, not once. Just seeing their families on the two platforms towards the back of the crowd, standing front and center, had hurt him. It's cruelty at its finest, making those people who have lost their loved ones stand up and face the people that lived.

It's particularly devastating when James *did* know the fallen tributes. He knew Vanity. He spoke to her, laughed with her, did everything he could to protect her; he lived and she didn't.

And Hodge… Well, not only did James live, but he also killed him. He is the reason that Hodge is dead, and it doesn't matter if it was an accident, doesn't matter if he likely wouldn't have made it to the end anyway. None of that matters, surely not to the people who wanted Hodge to come home to them.

Vanity's mother, father, and three siblings—Divan, Curio, and Hoosier—stand in tribute to her. Her siblings are all younger, two of them are twins, and Curio resembles Vanity the most. James looks at all of them, and he feels like he's going to crumble into dust, like he's caving in from the inside out.

The only person standing in tribute for Hodge is who James presumes is his mother. A frightfully young woman—can't be more than ten years older than James—which means she had Hodge quite young, and it also means she has a lot of life left to live without her son. There is no father or other siblings. She is crying before a word is spoken.

James does, in fact, have the speech he's meant to give memorized, as does Regulus. The issue is, James is stuck. Behind the families are large screens displaying the tribute profile, so there Vanity is, there Hodge is, looking right at him with clear, innocent eyes. He has forgotten what they actually looked like, because they are dead and vengeful when he sees them in his nightmares. But, like this, nothing but a memory on a banner, they are young and bright. Still dead anyway.

Regulus is squeezing James' hand almost to a violent point, and James knows—he *knows,* okay? He knows that he needs to speak. He knows that he needs to start the speech. *Thank you District Eleven for the warm welcome; we are delighted to be here. The tributes who hailed from here upheld all that you stand for with integrity and respect. You have every right to be proud of—*

But that's the thing, isn't it? Vanity and Hodge weren't representatives for their districts, not really. Sure, that's what the Hallow likes to perpetuate to further dehumanize them, but that's not it. Vanity and Hodge were children that had their futures stolen from them—and James, one of the thieves. Their families are not proud; what is there to be proud of? What happened was not noble. It was a tragedy.

"I…" James' voice sticks in his throat, and that one sound echoes out across the dead silent crowd. Regulus is strangling his hand, at this point. James can feel pressure building in his chest, in his head, and Hodge's mother is weeping, silently. Curio has Vanity's eyes. "I'm—I—"

"James," Regulus whispers, speaking low, intimate, trying to keep him on track.

James releases a strangled noise and, for the very first time in his life, he pulls away from Regulus. He quite literally just snatches his hand from Regulus' grip and shuffles away from him, getting closer to the microphone as words start spilling out of him in a rush that he can't figure out how to stop.

"I'm sorry," James chokes out, looking right at Hodge's mother, forcing himself to witness her grief, knowing he is the cause of it. "I'm—I am *so* sorry. I—I know that can't make up for the loss of your children, because nothing will *ever* make up for it. They were too young, and it was not fair. Hodge—he was just scared. He was scared, and trying to survive, and it's not fair that he didn't. He should have never been there; he should have never been forced into that arena. I didn't mean to push him; I—I never wanted to hurt him. I'm sorry. He didn't deserve that, not any of it. I carry my regret with me every day, but I know it pales in comparison to your grief. I would give anything for him to be fifteen."

Hodge's mother reaches up to cover her mouth, her eyes squeezing shut as tears spill steadily down her cheeks. She never makes a sound. Behind her, on the screen, Hodge smiles.

"And Vanity—she—" James' eyes burn as he looks to her family, unable to speak for a moment from the surge of emotion that suffocates him. Curio has Vanity's eyes, and they're full of tears. "She wasn't just a fellow tribute, not to me. I tried to protect her, and I failed, and I'm sorry. She was incredibly intelligent, and so bright, and I—I miss her. Every time I see a bug, I miss her. Every day, I miss her. She deserved better, and I'm sorry she didn't get it. I'm sorry I couldn't save her. She should have gotten to live, to grow up, and what happened to her was *wrong*. She was—she was so young and she—she—"

James can't finish, can't figure out where it ends, because all of it is so unfair and so fucked up, and he's crying too hard to locate the words that deserve to be spoken for Vanity and Hodge. Words that won't even bring them back. Words that wouldn't have kept them going in the first place.

Maybe it doesn't matter, because Regulus is suddenly right there, tugging James away from the microphone and basically shoving his head down in the crook of his neck. James slumps against him and hides there, weeping, barely hearing the calm, steady words that fall out of Regulus' mouth.

Something about James' guilt. His grief. A flimsy cover for all that James has said already, for all the ways in which James has just spoken out of turn, gone off script, brought them closer to danger in his need to do what's right.

James is crying, and he doesn't know when he is. It feels like Vanity and Hodge have just died, and the world is crumbling down around him again. Time warps around him, and he is

not wearing his glasses, and Regulus is whispering in his ear as he ushers him off the stage, out of sight.

In the distance, faint and background, the previously silent crowd are chanting, over and over, "Hallow is hollow."

~•~

James is not doing well. He's rattling against Regulus and crying so hard that he's not breathing properly. He's not keeping it together, and Regulus doesn't know how to help. Regulus' skin is crawling because James is pressed up against him, and he hates feeling this way. For James, he tolerates it.

"Sirius. *Sirius,"* Regulus hisses frantically, feeling helpless and inadequate, mindlessly rubbing James' back as he stares over at his brother desperately.

Unfortunately, Sirius is discussing damage control with Mayor Matilda, offering advice as her district continues to get more and more restless and rowdy by the second. According to Mayor Matilda, there has never been issues between those in the district and the Aurors, but the growing dissent is a cause for concern. Sirius and Pandora are talking with Mayor Matilda to basically coach her on how to best handle this situation, no doubt trying to cover up and smooth over how severely James just fucked up.

The thing is, Regulus doesn't even blame James. He *can't* blame James. Vanity was too young, and so was Hodge, and everything they went through wasn't fair. They should have never been there; they should have never died.

Regulus isn't angry. He is scared, though. There is a chance that James just brought trouble down on their heads, even though Regulus did his absolute *best* to fix it. He tried. He really tried, despite the fact that it made him hate himself more. He should have stood by James, regardless of fear, regardless of consequences. James deserves someone who would stand by him through anything, no matter what.

James makes a sort of weak, helpless noise against Regulus, a fucking wreck from head-to-toe, and Regulus responds to his distress like he's preparing for battle. He wants to fight it, whatever it is that's upsetting James, but he can't. This isn't something he can kill, and it leaves him feeling lost and useless and terribly out of his depth.

"Sirius!" Regulus calls, louder and more frantic this time.

That thankfully snatches Sirius' attention immediately. He abandons Mayor Matilda with Pandora in less than a second, which doesn't seem to matter anyway, because seconds later, Mayor Matilda is quickly ushering off to the stage to address her district and calm them again.

"Okay, okay, hey," Sirius says, his voice soft as he stops next to them and carefully reaches out to put his hand on James' shoulder, ducking his head closer to him. "James, listen to me. I need you to listen to me, alright? You're in district eleven. It's six months after the hunger games. You're not in the arena. You're on the victory tour."

This does not seem to matter to James. He doesn't calm down.

"We're going back to the train," Sirius declares, lifting his head and meeting Regulus' gaze. "Now. We need to go now. We need to get him away. Keep a firm hold on him."

"Keep a—what? Sirius, *what?"* Regulus blurts out.

"Just trust me," Sirius grits out. "Come on."

And so, they go. Sirius calls something to Pandora, who is apparently staying behind for a bit to speak to Mayor Matilda again. On the way out, they pass Dorcas and Marlene, who watch them go by with wide eyes. Marlene is looking right at James, all traces of lingering anger nonexistent. There's respect there, in her gaze, as well as shock. There's something in Dorcas' eyes that Regulus can't put a name to, something strangely calculating, but he doesn't have the time or the focus to figure out what it means.

About halfway to the train, Regulus understands what Sirius means about keeping a firm grip on James. With no warning whatsoever, James just—loses it. He goes from sobbing to lashing out like his life depends on it, fighting against them and trying to get away.

Sirius curses as starts dragging James along faster, making Regulus rush to keep up. They don't let go until they're on the train, and as soon as they have, Sirius is pushing Regulus back so they give James a wide berth.

He's like a bull unleashed in a figurine shop. Dazed and confused and crashing into things. Everything he bumps into, he shoves away from him, breaking things and knocking them over. Sirius continues to steadily push Regulus back every time James swings out in their vicinity, and Regulus peers around his shoulder, his heart lodged in his throat.

It's bad. Very fucking bad. Regulus can tell that James is out of touch with reality, with time, right now. He doesn't think James knows where he is, or who is with him. Multiple times, he says Regulus' name. He goes on a tangent about looking for his hatchet, chanting *where is it, where is it, where is it?* He starts looking for it, and at one point, he legitimately just tips the table in the middle of the train car over, sending dishes clattering and shattering on the floor.

Regulus feels—small. He isn't sure why, exactly. Maybe it's because Sirius is standing in front of him, one arm reaching back to keep Regulus there, shielded, like there's a threat in the room with them. There is. It's just James, and yet, there is.

It ends when James' leg gives out. There's no warning for that, either. James' leg just abruptly buckles, sending him right to the floor, thankfully not in a pile of glass. As soon as James is down, he drags himself back against the wall of the train car and curls into himself, hunched down and eerily quiet.

Sirius peels away from Regulus to go to James, kneeling just out of range, murmuring low to him. Again, he tells James where he is, when he is, and what he is doing. He assures James that he is not in the arena. He does it again and again, until James finally responds.

Slowly, stiltedly, Sirius coaxes James out of the corner and to his feet, keeping him steady as he limps. James takes one look at Regulus and immediately starts crying again.

Regulus can only stand there, feeling numb as Sirius leads James out of the compartment, towards where they're sleeping in their own separate train cars, or where they will when they're traveling through the next two nights.

Hands shaking, Regulus moves over to pick up the table. His mind is blank and his eyes are burning. Time passes. He's not sure how much, but he moves around to clean up what bit of the mess that he can. It's like a tornado came through, but it was just James.

Regulus feels like he's going to be sick. He remembers in the arena, saying that he didn't want James to be changed. Looking back now, he realizes how naive that desire was. How unfair it was, to a degree, even though he couldn't help it. He was so in love, even then. *I loved you there,* he thinks. *I love you here,* he thinks as he picks up glass.

Sirius eventually comes back, alone. He sees Regulus cleaning up, takes a deep breath, then moves over to help. They're silent for a long time, but it's Sirius who speaks first.

"I knew this was going to be hard for him," Sirius whispers, squeezing his eyes shut. "This district, specifically. Hard for you, too, no doubt, but I—I didn't know how to fix it. I don't think this is something I could have ever fixed."

"You helped him," Regulus murmurs, swallowing thickly. His chest feels too small to contain all he is inside it. "You knew exactly what to do. That's more than I did."

"Don't do that, Reggie," Sirius says softly, looking as exhausted as Regulus feels.

Regulus can feel his eyes itching, his breath shaking in the walls of his throat. "I didn't even know he—I mean, I'm assuming that this is fairly common, since you were so familiar with it."

"It's not always this bad," Sirius tells him quietly. "He just… Well, it's worse when he's having a bad day. Most of the time, when he can't figure out when he is, he's sort of calm. The first time was when he discovered the hatchet outside. He thought he was back in the arena, got confused and scared, nearly took my fucking head off. But it's—it gets better, with

time. Less and less the further away from the arena you get. These things pass, eventually, for the most part. It will for you, too."

"But it never goes away," Regulus whispers. "Not completely."

Sirius sighs. "No, it doesn't."

"I wasn't there for him. I wasn't there for you, and I haven't been there for him," Regulus croaks, feeling his stomach lurch with that reality. Because it's true, and this time, he chose it.

"Stop it," Sirius orders firmly, holding his gaze. "I didn't *let* you be there for me, mostly because I didn't know how, and I was scared. That's—it's done, alright? You're here for me now, and that means something. And—and even if you weren't here for me, if you couldn't be, that would be fine. We're okay. We're always going to be okay, me and you, no matter what."

"I should have been there for you," Regulus insists.

"Yes, well, I shouldn't have left you behind," Sirius replies, and Regulus deflates a little, feeling like an exposed nerve, tender and raw. "We both have things we regret, and we both wish we could have done things differently than we did, but we're here now anyway. That's enough, isn't it? For me, it is."

"Yes, it's enough," Regulus says softly, staring down at his hands, at the broken teacup lying in his palms. "But James… I haven't—he deserves more. He deserves better."

"You know," Sirius croaks, "Remus taught me something very important about what it is to give anyone anything. He can't bring me flowers every day. He can't sleep with me at night and hold me through the nightmares. He can't be with me where anyone can see. He has no possessions, nothing he owns, and even his time isn't his to freely give. He can't give me everything, and yet, he has given me something that no one else ever has. All that anyone else could offer is meaningless, because they're not him, and that—simply that Remus is the

one I love—outshines anything else. Has it ever crossed your mind to think that maybe, just maybe, you give James what no one else can just by being you?"

"It's not about what I can give him. It's about how I will do it," Regulus says. "I don't know how. I'm not—I can barely stand to be touched, and I can't even fucking shower, and I ask for too much while always giving so little, and I'm scared—I'm so—Sirius, I'm so scared—"

"Okay, Reggie, it's okay," Sirius cuts in quickly, shuffling over to gently pluck the glass out of his hands, which is for the best because Regulus was unconsciously curling his fingers around the shards, dangerously close to drawing blood, and then all of this would have gotten so much worse. "Listen to me, you're not required to do anything with James, not ever. Just—I mean, all of this acting for the Hallows is one thing, but the truth behind it is something else. Stop putting so much pressure on yourself, okay? *James* isn't. He doesn't expect anything from you. If you're ready someday, then brilliant. If you're not, if you never are, then that's—that's a tragedy, yes, but it's not your fault, or his."

"I want to love him right," Regulus chokes out, "and I don't know if I'll ever be able to."

He thinks he could have, once, but that was a long time ago.

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They find out by the time they get to district ten that the live feed for the tour was cut right at the end of Regulus' speech smoothing over James' mistake, so no one watching saw the entire district come very close to a riot before their mayor stepped on stage and calmed them all down.

District ten was easier, admittedly, because again, James and Regulus never interacted with the tributes. They stood on stage, held hands, and gave their speeches like what happened before in district eleven never actually did.

It felt hollow, in the aftermath, James thought. All those people, all those gazes latched right onto him and Regulus, somehow they felt accusing, even demanding. James feels a deep

sense of moral obligation to do more, to say more, to address the fact that all of these people didn't deserve to die, to call attention to the fact that the Hallow is in the wrong.

But he can't.

In retrospect, James realizes how big of a mistake it was to lose it like that in district eleven. It hits him later, but his parents are still in danger if he fucks this up. Sirius and Regulus, too. Their parents. Anyone they all care about.

By the time they reach district nine, James feels like an empty shell, scraped out with painful grooves on the inside of his chest cavity. It's not helping that he and Regulus have to present themselves as a couple on camera, holding hands and standing close, sharing looks and warm smiles. It's all fake. It's all meaningless, as hollow as everything else.

When the cameras aren't on, Regulus will barely have anything to do with him. Won't talk to him. Won't look at him. After he lost it on the train, James can't blame him, even if it hurts.

It's not something James is proud of, when it gets that bad. It scares him, honestly, and leaves him a nervous wreck after the fact. He's just—he doesn't mean for it to happen, and he can't stop it. The very first time, he'd swung a hatchet at Sirius and pretty much instantly had a panic attack as soon as he realized what he'd done. For three days, he wouldn't let Sirius near him, and he shied away from his own parents, but Sirius had a really bad nightmare one night that had James calming him down, reassuring him that the hallucinations weren't real, holding him through his lashing out.

That sort of reminded James that it's not his fault, because it's not Sirius' fault. It's an exchange, the way they take care of each other, the way they look out for one another. James has taken hits from Sirius that brought tears to his eyes from how much it hurt, and he never let that stop him from going back to take care of him when he needed it. So, James lets Sirius take care of him, too, because he does need it. Sometimes, he needs it more than he knows how to handle.

But Regulus… Well, he's never seen that, something James has been secretly grateful for. James knows it's a bit hypocritical of him to be ashamed, considering he doesn't fault Sirius or find what he goes through shameful at all, but it's a lot harder when it's you over anyone else. James is so kind, but at times, he doesn't know how to grant himself that same kindness.

So, yes, on his worst days, James is ashamed. Sometimes, he's even ashamed of his leg, of his nightmares, of this ever-present loneliness that seems to exist in his very bones, even when he's surrounded by the people he loves. He thinks, sadly, that the world is always going to feel a little more lonely without Vanity in it. Without Peter. Irene. Mathias. Hodge. Evan.

But, with Sirius' help, he works on being kinder to himself. He reminds himself that his struggles aren't something to be ashamed of. It's hard, yes, but he's doing his best, and that's something to be proud of. Some days, it's easy to believe that, to really feel it. Other days, it's nearly impossible to. The bad days are when it's hardest, and it's been a bad day. He's worried it's a bad day for all of them, and he's scared it's going to get worse for Regulus, especially.

District nine is going to be another tough one, James is sure. He doesn't need to talk to Regulus to see that it's weighing on him. He's already more tense, more withdrawn, the moment they arrive. This was Evan's district.

Emmeline and Sirius greet each other warmly, with a hug, and then she makes a point to go directly to Regulus and request rather bluntly to shake his hand. Regulus, already so on edge, doesn't respond or take her hand. Emmeline doesn't seem offended by it.

It's towards the evening when they arrive, so they do the speeches first. Regulus clings to James' hand throughout the entire thing. Juniper has a family on her stage, parents and siblings. Evan has no one. His stage is empty.

When it's Regulus' turn to speak, he just—doesn't. He doesn't step closer to the microphone. He doesn't even open his mouth. His gaze is latched onto the stage where no one stands; he looks a million miles away, like he's not even here, like maybe he's over there on that stage for Evan, standing in tribute to him, suffering the grief of his loss. The district is quiet, so quiet, and James fumbles through Regulus' portion of the speech for him. When they leave the stage, James has to tug Regulus along, because he resists, still looking back at Evan's empty platform, and James has to give a forceful pull to make Regulus trail after him.

They get dinner out of the way with Emmeline and the mayor, which is where they find out that Evan genuinely had no one. He was an only child, and his parents passed away in the same year, when he was only nineteen. Not that he was ever close to his parents, because apparently it's just a known fact that they were abusive as he grew up. He didn't give them

funerals, and he left his childhood home empty and abandoned when he got the chance. He never had friends. Just one. Just Regulus.

After the meal, they get to linger a little bit in the district before they disembark to travel through the night to district eight. They'll sleep overnight in the train, then start on the rest of the tour tomorrow. Emmeline approaches Regulus to talk to him in front of everyone, completely shameless.

"I want to take you somewhere," Emmeline informs Regulus, holding his gaze.

"Em," Sirius says warningly, "he's not really—"

"I think Evan would have liked you to see it," Emmeline cuts in, staring right at Regulus. "Of course, you don't have to, I can't make you, but if you're up to it—"

"Yes," Regulus murmurs, "I'll go."

"Reggie," Sirius starts.

"I'll be fine. I'll meet everyone back on the train," Regulus tells him, shaking his head, and then he leaves with Emmeline without pausing to look back.

Sirius is clearly worried, but he's right there with Pandora to charm the mayor, while James stands off to the side with Dorcas. They all end up going back to the train, Pandora going to the conductor to let them know to wait and Dorcas slipping away into her own train car. James sits with Sirius in heavy silence, waiting for Regulus to come back.

"He'll be fine," James mumbles, eventually, because Sirius is growing more concerned by the minute.

"Right, but—but Evan is just…a really sore subject for him," Sirius says quietly. "Emmeline is lovely, don't get me wrong, but she can be a bit blunt at times, so I just worry…"

"Regulus likes blunt people," James points out. "He doesn't like…fake things."

Sirius glances at him, and his face softens. "Hey. I haven't really asked. How are you doing with…all of this? With Regulus, I mean."

"You want to talk about that?" James asks wearily.

"If you need to," Sirius says simply, "or just want to."

James swallows, looking down at his hands as he fiddles restlessly with his fingers. "Do you want to know the worst part about it, Sirius? The absolute worst part of all of this? It's horrible, but there's a part of me that—that is just so happy to hold his hand, to have him close, even knowing it's just a performance. Of course I hate it, that it's not a choice, but I can't help it. I just—I love him, you know. I really do. It's wrong, being even a little bit grateful, I know that, but I'm—"

"Human," Sirius murmurs, and he gives James a sad smile when he looks up, startled. "You're human, James. Of course you're going to be happy about being with someone you love, in any capacity—that's just being human, alright? But, the thing is, past all the feelings, you know the reality of it. You're not happy about the circumstances, and you're respectful. That's important, especially to him."

"It hurts, too," James rasps. "I'm not—Sirius, I don't blame him, but sometimes I—I get so angry, because it's—none of this is fair, and I just want to—I want it to be different, and I want to fix it, and I want to try because that's all I know how to do, but I'm so tired, most days, and there's a part of me that wishes he would try so I could take a break, and I know that's not right, not fair to him, I *know* that—"

"James," Sirius interrupts gently, reaching across the table to cover his hand and essentially shut him up. Sighing, Sirius shakes his head. "Look, it's alright to feel like that, yeah? Just, I

want you to know that he—he does try, in his own way. It's very different from how you do, not as easy to notice, but he does. And I need you to hear me on this, okay?"

"Okay," James croaks.

Sirius nods and holds his gaze. "Just like he is under no obligation to do anything, neither are you. You're not *required* to keep holding on, if it's best for you to let go. He wouldn't want you to, and he wouldn't blame you for it. Or if you just need the break, that's okay, too. If you need to take a step back, if you need distance, all of that is okay."

"It's not fair," James whispers, his eyes burning. "It's just letting them win, and I—I don't want to do that. I don't *want* to give in, Sirius. Maybe—maybe it is defiance, maybe that's what a part of it always was, because I think I'd burn the Hallow down if that would give us the chance we should have gotten to have. I still want that chance, even now. I still love him. I can't just—stop. I don't know how."

"Oh, James," Sirius sighs out, looking rather fond, his lips curling up in the corners. "That's not at all what I meant, but it's nice to hear anyway. Really reassuring, as his older brother and whatnot. A bit sappy, honestly, but—"

"Fuck you," James says with a weak chuckle.

"I didn't mean you had to…give in, as you put it," Sirius tells him. "I just meant that you can take your time, and you can stop putting pressure on yourself, just like him. You don't expect anything from him, but you expect everything from yourself. You've got to stop that. It's only hurting you."

"Hypocrite much?" James asks wryly.

"Don't you start. We're not talking about me. And don't deflect—Remus taught me to see the signs of that, you know."

"Drat. Remus' infinite wisdom comes back to bite me *again.* When you see him, tell him I have suffered for it."

"I'll be sure to," Sirius says, lips twitching at the corners as his eyes fill with that immediate fondness he always gets whenever Remus comes up in conversation—which is often, because Sirius sometimes never shuts up about him. Frankly, James finds it adorable. "But I meant it, what I said."

Sighing, James nods. "I know. I just… I don't know. I'm scared it's always going to be this way between me and him, because I don't think we'll ever have our chance for as long as we're still entertainment for the Hallow, and you said—you said it could be a long time. And I don't know the future. It's shit. All this jumping around in time I do, and I never get to jump ahead."

"Well, you know, we get there when we get there," Sirius mutters with a sigh, patting the back of James' hand in a clear sign of solidarity. James' heart pangs when he remembers that Sirius is enduring an entire year without even getting to see Remus. Time is cruel to him, too.

Time is cruel to them all.

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Regulus likes Emmeline. She's very blunt. She doesn't talk to him like he makes her uneasy, and she doesn't treat him like he's going to break every time she mentions Evan, even if maybe, just a little, he's worried he will.

In any case, he doesn't. He actually likes hearing about Evan from her. Emmeline is honest, admitting that they were never friends and, in fact, once got into a terrible argument in school when they were both fourteen—turns out she and Evan were the same age, the same age as Regulus—that ended with her calling Evan a prick and shoving all his textbooks off his desk, to which he retaliated by tripping her when she walked by.

They never spoke again after that, not until Emmeline became his mentor, and Regulus is learning that Emmeline has no use for holding back the things she wants to say. She admits that she went right to Evan and told him, before he could even ask, that their past argument when they were children would have no impact on her duties as a mentor. Evan apparently liked that, and pretty much immediately respected her after that.

They never became friends, not really, Emmeline says, but she doesn't deny that she cared for him as a mentor, just the same that she did for Juniper. She isn't scared to say that it had hurt when they died, and Regulus is grateful to hear it, to know that someone out there other than him hurts for Evan, too.

"Evan got a job tending to the cattle," Emmeline tells him as she walks down a long, winding dirt road with thick red clay with a smattering of dust that stirs in the heated breeze. It makes Regulus want to cough, but he refrains, walking beside her with his hands stuffed in his pockets. "It's good, honest work, I suppose, if you're into that sort of thing. I don't really think Evan was, but he was allowed to live in the top part of the barn on the farm."

"The barn," Regulus echoes incredulously.

Emmeline shrugs. "It was his choice, rather than going back home. In any case, he really spruced the place up. It was tidier than my house, and I have cleaners that come by twice a month. All of his things have been discarded or donated now, but the real reason I'm bringing you here isn't because of anything he actually owned. See, there was something everyone knew about Evan Rosier, and it was that he loved to climb. That's the real reason he got this job."

"I'm not following," Regulus admits.

"When we were all kids, really little, we'd come play out in the fields here. It never bothered the moo-moos—"

"Sorry, the *what?"*

"The moo-moos. Cows." Emmeline shoots him an odd look, like he's the strange one. "What the fuck do *you* call them?"

"Cows?" Regulus says slowly, bewildered.

"How dull," Emmeline murmurs. "Well, in district nine, we call them moo-moos, and Evan did, too. Anyway, when we were kids, we'd come running out here after school, and the moo-moos didn't mind, so the owners of the farm didn't care much either. They had kids—lost all three to the games over the years, a pretty hard loss, but that's besides the point. The *point* is, we all came out here, but Evan? He didn't come out here to play. He came out here to climb."

"Well, no wonder he didn't have friends," Regulus says wryly, and Emmeline snorts, her lips twitching. He can almost see Evan's grin in his head.

It becomes apparent what Emmeline is talking about when they finally break past the fields, because the property is lined with trees all the way around. Regulus isn't surprised at all that Emmeline is leading him to the tallest one.

"This was his favorite tree," Emmeline announces when they come to a stop in front of it. "Everyone knew it. We all thought he was fucking mental to love it so much, and he climbed it practically every day. I came out here once, about a year ago now, not too long before his name was called, and that's where he was. Just perched in the tree, throwing acorns and swinging his legs, looking pleased as pie to be right where he was."

Regulus stares at the tree. It's alarmingly tall, and the first branch isn't low enough to be in range to just swing up on it, meaning Evan—the fucking lunatic—hauled himself up using the cavities of the trees, or the random mounds in the bark that serve as footholds. When Regulus tips his head back, he half-expects to find Evan sitting in a branch above them, grinning down at them from up high.

He's not there. He's never there.

Regulus can picture it, though, in startling clarity. In fairness, he's been seeing Evan in trees since he met him, and now he sees it often in his dreams. They talk a lot, him and Evan. Or

Evan's ghost. Regulus tells him secrets that he's never told another soul. Evan is his best friend, so why shouldn't he?

It's strange, the way grief takes shape in people, different for everyone. For Regulus, after so many conversations with Evan in his dreams, the sting of losing him has almost become gentle. It hits him worse on some days, compared to others. Most of the time, it doesn't feel so heavy, his grief. Really, he just misses Evan, and the way he copes with that *are* his dreams, he thinks. They always turn into nightmares by the end, but before that, he cherishes those moments where Evan is just chatting with him in ridiculous, convoluted metaphors as advice for all the problems in his life that Regulus does admittedly ignore most of the time.

Evan is always talking about the view. About climbing to that view, getting to it, and that view is always, inevitably, Sirius and James every fucking time. Regulus never moves from the branch, and it always breaks. But the view? Evan lives and dies by the promise that the view is worth it.

What was Evan's view? This was his favorite tree, ergo this was his favorite view.

Regulus heaves a sigh. "I have to climb it."

"The tree?" Emmeline asks, startled.

"Unfortunately," Regulus mutters, grimacing. He glances over at her, but she just shrugs and sweeps her hand out in the universal gesture of *be my guest.*

"Aren't you afraid of heights?" Emmeline muses as he approaches the tree *very* cautiously.

"No," Regulus snaps defensively, then pauses and kicks lightly at the base of the tree. In a mumble, he confesses, "Yes."

Emmeline coughs. "You'll be able to get back down, right? Without falling, I mean. Because I don't fancy Sirius having a go at me for letting his baby brother climb a tree and get stuck, or

worse, fall and break his neck."

"Thank you, Emmeline, for making me feel better about this decision," Regulus says flatly.

"I try," Emmeline replies, amused. "No, but genuinely, should I go get a ladder, or something?"

"That feels like cheating."

"Well, who's going to know?"

Evan is going to give me so much shit for this the next time I see him in my dreams, Regulus thinks precisely five seconds before he looks over at Emmeline and mumbles, "A ladder, you said?"

Emmeline grins.

Fifteen minutes later, Regulus is cheating on tree-climbing, which rather ridiculously makes him feel mildly guilty, but he's very sure that's the only way he's getting up in this tree. Emmeline holds the ladder for him, keeping it steady, and he's *still* uneasy the higher he goes.

It doesn't go as high as he needs it to. He can *see* the tallest branch above him, and he knows for a fact that's where Evan would have gone every time, because it's the last place Regulus wants to be. He's wisely not looking down to see how far down Emmeline is right now, and he spends probably five minutes at the top of the ladder, just clinging to it.

"Regulus?" Emmeline calls up.

"Just—just give me a minute!" Regulus calls back down, taking a steadying breath as he reaches out and places his hand on the branch. Under his breath, he mutters, "Evan, you

fucker, if this kills me, I'm—well, maybe that's karma. Right. Okay."

So, Regulus coaxes himself off the ladder, bitching at Evan the entire time, even though he's not there. Something about it soothes him. He can hear Evan's voice in his head like an echo, laughing at him, insulting him and encouraging him the entire way. Eventually, Regulus is perched on the branch, feeling so stiff that he's pretty sure he'd drop like a stone to the ground if he so much as tipped to one side too much.

Next, Regulus is supposed to stand up and climb higher, climb to that top branch, climb to the view that Evan climbed for every day. Evan deserves that. Regulus can do that for him, after all that Evan did for him, and maybe—just once—he can feel Evan's presence somewhere other than his dreams.

All he has to do is climb.

Regulus doesn't move.

As much as he tries, as hard as he wills himself to do it, Regulus can't get his body to unlock. He begs himself, he berates himself, he starts and stops over and over. He starts shaking, and his frustration manages to climb higher within him, and then he's suddenly crying very, very hard.

Regulus turns his head away and covers his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut and crying silently. The branch is sturdy under him, and it does not break. He goes no higher. When he chokes out an apology, Evan isn't there to accept it.

A bit later, Regulus takes the ladder back down, his eyes gritty and his chest feeling more hollow than ever. If Emmeline heard his breakdown, or noticed that he cried, she doesn't mention it. She puts away the ladder, then walks him all the way back to the train.

"Reggie? What happened? Are you alright?" Sirius blurts out the moment Regulus enters the compartment.

"Fine. We can go now. There's nothing for me here," Regulus rasps, then ducks his head and goes to his train car, not looking at anyone on the way.

No one bothers him that night, for which he's grateful. Even when the train starts moving, Regulus is left to his own devices. He sees James, Sirius, and Pandora file to their own rooms eventually, their voices murmuring on the way past. Dorcas must already be in bed.

Regulus turns over and tries to sleep.

He doesn't manage to do that either. It's clearly a bad night, and usually, he has Barty's help with that, or he just…doesn't sleep. But, tonight, Regulus really wants to. A part of him is afraid to, but another part of him is desperate to see Evan in his dreams and apologize, because he tried. He really did, but he couldn't do it, and he needs Evan to know.

Evan is dead, Regulus' brain reminds him. *He doesn't know anything anymore. All he knew was that no one thought to look up, and you proved him wrong. Why? Why would you do that? He had no one, no family, no friends—just you, and you dragged him down. You drag everyone down, because you don't know how to climb. What the fuck is wrong with you?*

Regulus doesn't know. Too much is wrong with him. So much that he isn't sure where to start.

The night ticks on. The train doesn't rattle; it rides smoothly, like a cloud on tracks. Regulus tries to sleep, but he can't, and it's making him restless. As the hours drag by, the shadows in the corner of the room start to take shape, and the fear starts to sink into him like the cold, ruthless hands from the river. He's so close to being paralyzed from panic in this bed, his heart racing and the memories coming to get him.

Gasping, Regulus bolts up from the bed and practically dives for the door, darting out into the aisle between rooms. It's as quiet and dim out here as it was in his room, so he's still shaken. He swallows, staring at the room across from him. It's Dorcas'. Next to hers is Pandora's. Across from Pandora's is Sirius'—next to Regulus'—and on the other side is James'.

All these options, some wiser than others.

And yet, Regulus slides open James' door very carefully just a few minutes later, slipping inside without making a sound. James isn't asleep, though, but he does look very sleepy, like he's dangerously close to drifting off. He blinks at Regulus as if he's not entirely sure that he's there. Regulus doesn't speak, or move, just standing there and feeling so very small.

"Reg?" James mumbles cautiously.

"I'm—I'm sorry to bother you," Regulus croaks, swallowing past the lump in his throat. "Could I—would it be alright if I slept with you tonight?"

James doesn't immediately respond. For a long, long moment, he's just staring at Regulus with his eyebrows furrowed, lips pressed into a thin line. It's at this precise moment that Regulus realizes that some part of him expected James to instantly agree in that earnest way of his, because James always has. But that's clearly not the case anymore, and Regulus can't even blame him.

It's indescribably selfish of Regulus to come here, demanding comfort and security from James when he offers absolutely nothing in return, not even the simple courtesy of not ignoring him. They're in this together, they've been through *all of it* together, and Regulus has only repaid James' reliability with indifference and distance. He doesn't mean to be cruel; he wishes he didn't need James as much as he does, especially when he can't figure out how to give him what he deserves.

He failed. James needed better from him, and just like he knew he would, Regulus failed to give it to him.

But Regulus is here, and he's internally pleading for James not to refuse him now. He wouldn't blame James if he did, if he needed his space, if he needed distance, too. This is hurting him, all of it, Regulus knows that. He asks for too much from James, when James asks for nothing from him.

I'm going to lose him, Regulus thinks, the realization hitting him at full force, and it's like having his heart broken all over again. *I'm already losing him,* Regulus thinks next, and it sends a fresh wave of panic through him.

The worst part is, he's never really had James at all.

James exhales a quiet sigh, reaching over to throw his cover back, shaking his head slightly as he says, "Come on, then."

"I shouldn't have asked," Regulus croaks.

"Probably not, but you did," James replies simply, patting the bed beside him. "It's fine, Regulus."

"Is it?" Regulus murmurs.

"It'll have to be," is James' response as he lays back, and the inviting curve of his body, the memory of his warmth and how it feels to be in his arms, is a temptation Regulus is far too weak to resist, especially now.

"I'm sorry," Regulus whispers as he pads over and slips right into the bed next to James, feeling safe the moment that he's there, like he always has. It's different at night, when he's trying to sleep. Touch always is. He isn't sure why it's bearable now but isn't any other time. Right now, he doesn't care.

"I've had a really bad day, so anything I say to you won't be nice, I don't think, and I'll just regret it later," James informs him, curling his arm up around Regulus' shoulders.

Regulus swallows and tucks himself closer, practically embedding himself into James' side and the curl of his arms, hiding his face as he mumbles, "Are you angry at me?"

"Regulus," James says, his voice strained.

"Please don't be angry at me," Regulus rasps, his voice going wobbly and cracking in the middle against his will. "I really fucking hate it when you're angry at me."

James takes a deep breath, holds it, then blows it out explosively and releases a groan as he turns slightly and gently bangs his head against Regulus' shoulder. "Oh, don't do that. Come on, that's not *fair.* You sound so sad…"

"I am sad," Regulus admits.

"Oh, fuck off," James complains. "This is—emotional manipulation. I will *not* fold."

"I'm not…asking you to. That's not what I'm trying to do. I just—I came here because I've also had a very bad day, and I can't sleep, but you—you make me feel…" Regulus trails off, struggling for a moment, because it's so *vulnerable.* But, after everything, he can admit this to James. He's going to, because James should know. He deserves to hear it. "You make me feel safe, that's all. That's why I'm here."

"Alright, I'm folding," James declares with another sigh, then he gives a weary chuckle, sounding tired, even as he wraps his arms more firmly around Regulus and pulls him closer.

Regulus probably shouldn't feel smug about that, but he does. He can't help it. A tiny smile curves his mouth, pleased, and he hides it against James' shoulder. They're all tangled up together like this, their legs entwined and their arms wrapped around each other with basically no space between them. It feels so good. So safe. Regulus' eyes flutter shut as a soft sigh escapes him, everything in him settling down all at once. Oh, he's missed this.

James is so warm. He's so, so warm. He smells good, too, and Regulus is lost to sensation and the steady pulse of *I miss you, I miss you, I miss you* and *I'm so happy to be home, I've wanted to come home for so long, please don't make me leave.*

They lay there, warm and wrapped up together, and Regulus is more settled than he's been in a long time. He breathes in and out, listening to James doing the same, feeling his steady heartbeat against him, strong and alive. So alive. Regulus is so grateful that James is alive.

It's the last thing he remembers thinking, and then he remembers nothing because he sleeps. He doesn't dream.

He won't see Evan in his dreams again for a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you coming for the warning/explanation for james' issue with time: i don't really know the term for what it is, honestly, or if there is a term—but he essentially gets triggered by grief over vanity and hodge, and it makes him lose time and his own placement for where he is. sirius knows what it is and gets him safely alone the best he can, with regulus' help. it's from regulus' POV, so we don't see what james is thinking, only what he's doing. he bumps into things and knocks them over, turns over a table looking for his hatchet, and basically wrecks a train compartment until his leg gives out and sirius can take care of him and help him. no one gets hurt. it's just very upsetting for everyone involved. it's also mentioned that this has happened in the past once where he found a hatchet in his backyard and swung it at sirius' head. we do see james' feelings on the matter after it happens, and they're not—kind to himself, which he KNOWS, but he also does make the effort to be kinder to himself about it.

to everyone else...

right, so this one was rough, huh? let's talk about it.

first, dorcas and marlene my beloveds <3 they're complete shit at being friends lmaoooo. this is both a Good Thing, and also a Bad Thing. we'll see more on that later! HOWEVER. me back at it again finding a way to have dorcas give marlene a ring. hey, at least im consistent 💀 LEAVE ME ALONE OKAY I LIKE WHAT I LIKE STOP BULLYING ME FOR BEING REPETITIVE!!! you can rip "dorcas gives marlene her ring" from my cold, dead hands. also, that ring features quite a lot in this fic, so really, it's important to the plot.

okay, james and marlene being Stiff and Awkward with each other—fear not, they get along later! just, marlene is a new mentor, and james DID technically kill one of her tributes, so like. it's not as if they're going to get on easily from the very beginning.

sorry, but sirius carried this chapter!!! an icon! he is the moment. giving so much good, supportive advice. remus really changed him 😭😭😭 like, he spent 2 weeks with remus and came out the other side a healthier person. noooo, im gonna sob

but sirius reassuring james and regulus to do what they can and not force what they can't, and just—do what's best for themselves? i love him.

right, and then you've got james, who had a very Bad Day. not doing well, not at all, but this is to be expected after everything. and like, the impact sirius has on him is so, so important in this, because it helps him actively combat the things he struggles with. having an injury, having trauma, having grief—these are not things to be ashamed of. please never think it is.

onto regulus and his struggles with failure, as well as evan. yeah, he's...not doing well either, clearly. the fact that evan genuinely had NO ONE until regulus is fucking heartbreaking, even more so now that regulus has come to appreciate having evan in the only way he can (in his dreams), except that's been taken from him too. he really won't dream of evan after this for a VERY long time. so, ya know, to everyone sad about seeing the evan mentions, well, be careful what you wish for.

the horrible part is, regulus tried his absolute best to climb that tree for evan, and he couldn't do it. all he wanted to do was apologize, and he didn't get to. just. shit, that's so sad :(

him being absolutely TERRIFIED that he's losing james 😭😭😭 i want to drive off a fucking cliff. like, james is trying to do what's best for him (he's not very good at it lmaoooo and we see his struggles with that), but regulus is over here PANICKING bc he thinks he's going to lose james. devastating, honestly.

but they still cuddled, so. *waves hand* they'll be fineeeee. HELP NOT REGULUS BEING SAD AT THE THOUGHT THAT JAMES IS MAD AT HIM 😭😭😭 he really hates that shit. he's so valid, i would too. and him being smug because james "folds" for him. that little shit, i love him so much.

HONORABLE (?) MENTIONS:

-marlene nearly cutting her finger off and just stitching it herself. im in love with her
-mayor matilda minding her business, as she should
-the near-riot in district eleven (These Actions Will Have Consequences)
-sirius blocking regulus from james (this shit was so sad to me, im sorry)
-EMMELINE!!! I LOVE HER!!!
-cows being called moo-moos in district nine
-regulus cheating in tree-climbing with a ladder and STILL failing at it (im foul for saying that 💀)
-regulus telling james that he makes him feel safe
-regulus thinking of being in james' arms as coming home 😭😭😭

yeah, that's it, i suppose! i wanted to say thank you to everyone for all the comments and support <3

Riots and Reunions

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-one line about vomiting (not in detail or graphic)
-references to past deaths
-brief and vague mention of child death
-brief and vague mentions of implied deaths
-depictions of guns/gun violence (fairly brief)
-mentions of blood
-depictions of violence (also fairly brief)
-mentions of violent nightmares (not in the present)
-a character being uncomfortable due to another character complimenting/touching them (it's just because of the character who is doing the complimenting and in the way it's done. the character is doing it on purpose in an attempt to be intimidating. the touching is brief, just someone sitting in someone else's lap, and it is VERY quickly handled)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

District eight is hard for James, because it's home to his first kill. The man's name was Cole, he was twenty-four, and he had a wife and two children. Two little girls—one still so young that she's held by her mother, and the other so small that she barely makes it to her mother's knee. Both of them are enamored by their father's picture on the screen behind them, reaching for him with small hands and tear-stained cheeks.

James throws up after they leave the stage.

District seven is an easier one, home to two tributes they never spoke to, but one of them was a child, which is always hard to handle. James and Regulus stand on stage, giving their speeches, their hands clasped between them.

They bypass district six—home—but all of them (Sirius, James, and Regulus) stare wistfully as they go by, even if it does signal that they're basically halfway through the victory tour already.

District five is where things get interesting.

~•~

Sirius is delighted to see Frank, and Frank doesn't protest when Sirius pulls him into a hug. Frank was in his games years and years ago—only two years after Sirius, and two years older than Sirius, so he was twenty when he won—but he didn't become a mentor until five years ago, when he finally talked his mother into retiring and letting him take over.

Emmeline has been around a while, too, in much the same way. She's a year younger than Sirius, and she won her games three years after Sirius won his. Since she was eighteen, she could become a mentor straight away if she was willing, and apparently she was, because she did. Sirius had only been a mentor for a year by that point, so he was still very wary of basically everyone and so new to everything. Learning to navigate the struggles of being a mentor, as well as the expectations the Hallows had for him.

When Frank came in, though, he was friendly with anyone who was friendly to him, very easy to get along with, but also not someone to underestimate. He's a good man, but he's brought home a Victor twice—his very first year as a mentor and the year before James and Regulus' games. That may not seem like much, but two Victors in five years is a big thing when you're not training up death eaters.

Sirius is admittedly closest to Marlene, purely because he couldn't help but want to ease her transition into being a mentor, something she was struggling with. Sirius had struggled with it, too. A lot. So, he tried to help, just like Alastor Moody helped him when he was just starting out, and in doing so, he and Marlene got pretty close.

Emmeline and Frank are close in the same way, if not for the same reasons. But, really, they're all a close little group between the four of them, offering comfort and solidarity every single year when the torture swings back around. Sirius is grateful for them all, and grateful to see their homes, to see them safely somewhere other than the Hallow.

So, yes, he pulls Frank into an enthusiastic hug, much like he did with Emmeline and Marlene. Just like them, Frank meets him halfway. They all have this thing they carry

between them that no one else can understand.

"It's good to see you, Sirius," Frank says warmly. "You look well. Been doing alright?"

"Carrying on well enough," Sirius assures him, smacking a kiss to his cheek and grinning when Frank immediately presses the back of his hand to his forehead and pretends to swoon. They burst out laughing immediately after.

James clears his throat. Loudly.

"Oh!" Sirius says, perking up. "Frank, this is James, and that's Regulus. You know Pandora, of course, and Dorcas is the best damn stylist you'll ever see. Everyone, this is Frank."

A chorus of polite greetings go around, excluding James, who is—for some reason—glaring at Frank like he's kicked his cat. James doesn't even have a cat. His cat is dead. Has been for years, so Sirius isn't sure what that's all about.

The mayor shows up, then. A very frenzied man, short and stout and babbling before he even introduces himself. Sirius is amused by the poor man, admittedly, because he's quite possibly the most disorganized person Sirius has ever seen, and he owns a mirror. Mayor Larch has to feed them lunch before James and Regulus have to give their speeches, and then they'll be on their way to district four, which they'll reach by the evening, then they'll be heading overnight to district three where the tour will pick right back up the next morning.

For now, though, Mayor Larch goes on a long tangent full of apologies for the wait, because they're a bit behind schedule, so lunch won't start for another half hour. Sirius doesn't mind, and says as much, happy to keep chatting with Frank.

So, Mayor Larch darts off again with promises to return and escort them to lunch as soon as it's ready. Dorcas pretty much instantly goes out to have a smoke, and Pandora marches off after the mayor with the clear determination to organize that poor man's entire life, which maybe he needs, honestly.

James and Regulus stay behind, standing with Sirius as he talks to Frank. Regulus, as always, doesn't provide much input; he's never been much of a conversationalist anyway, but he seems content enough to just lean against the wall and listen. James, on the other hand, apparently has *a lot* to say.

He repeatedly shoves his way into the discussion—verbally, of course, not physically—even when Sirius knows for a fact that James has no idea what they're talking about. Frank likes to tinker a bit, same as Sirius, though he works more with welding and such that Sirius doesn't, most of the time. But some of the things they've done or worked with have some overlap, which makes for a very good debate on the benefits of one technique over the other. James doesn't know his way around a kiln, so Sirius is a bit confused as to why he suddenly has some very aggressive opinions, all of which contradict Frank's…even when Frank is right.

Regulus, for some reason, looks like he's having the time of his *life.* Genuinely, he's delighted. He keeps coughing into his fist, clearly disguising laughter, which is odd. Sirius has absolutely no idea what's so funny.

By the time Mayor Larch has returned—being led by Pandora, who is no doubt in charge now—James has practically melded himself to Sirius' side, which Sirius doesn't have an issue with, of course, but it does cause an awkward moment when Mayor Larch mistakes Sirius for Regulus because he assumes that he and James are a couple, and Regulus is known to be the boyfriend. Due to the fact that James has an arm around his shoulders and seems bound and determined to remain by his side, this is possibly not an unfair assumption to make.

"Oh, go on," Sirius tells James, nudging him away. "Just stand with Regulus, yeah? The poor mayor is confused as it is, and I'm fine with Frank."

James stares at him, mouth hanging open, but Sirius is already walking forward to catch up with Frank and head to lunch. He hears Regulus wheezing behind him and briefly glances back to make sure he's not, like, dying; he's not, he's just laughing really hard at James, for some reason. Sirius leaves them to it.

Lunch is fun for Sirius, who parks himself in a chair next to Frank and talks to him the entire meal. Frank has countless stories about his mother, who Sirius does remember as a rather frightening woman. The fact that she had to mentor her own son and help him survive the hunger games is just another fucked up thing the Hallow sees no issue with. Nonetheless, Augusta handled it and helped her son get home.

According to Frank, all his mum does these days is yell at the children who run through the Victor's Village and grumble about all the gossip she learns throughout the district. Also, she fusses at Frank for something that's not even true.

"I swear I've told her a million times that Alice and I aren't together; we're *just* roommates, but she doesn't believe me," Frank complains in distress. "She'll show up unannounced, all suspicious-like, as if she's trying to catch us in a compromised position, and I haven't a clue how to make her stop."

"Have you…told her to stop?" Sirius asks.

Frank looks aggrieved, the poor sod. "One doesn't just *tell* my mother to do *anything.* She means well, she does, but she's genuinely just fighting shadows, at this point. She doesn't approve of Alice for me—which is a load of rubbish, because Alice is brilliant—but that's just it! We're not even *together."*

"Do you *want* to be together?" Sirius asks, arching an eyebrow at him.

"No, honestly, it's not like that between us. Alice is brilliant, but they're just my best friend," Frank says, heaving a sigh. "Mum doesn't believe it, though."

"Ah, well…" Sirius clicks his tongue and reaches out to clap Frank on his shoulder. "Mothers, am I right?"

Frank sighs.

Across the table, James angrily stabs at his food with his fork.

Regulus is grinning. He looks so entertained, which Sirius doesn't really understand, but it's nice to see him like this, so he's not complaining.

All of Sirius' confusion gets cleared away a bit later, before James and Regulus are to go onto the stage. Sirius leaves Frank to go check on them, as he *always* does before they head out to give their speeches, but James is in a mood, clearly.

When Sirius asks if he's alright, James scowls off to the side and mutters, "Oh, I'm grand. Don't let me keep you. I'm sure you and Frank want to talk about stupid blowtorches or the difficulties of bad parenting."

"The—I—what?" Sirius blinks. James just scowls, then whips around and marches off to apparently go talk to Pandora. Sirius looks at Regulus, who tucks his lips in with amusement dancing in his eyes. "What am I missing?"

"James is jealous," Regulus informs him.

"Jealous?" Sirius arches an eyebrow. "Someone sniffing around you, Reggie?"

Regulus breaks out into a grin again, one so rare that Sirius feels his heart clench just looking at it. "Not jealous because of *me,* you idiot. He's jealous of *Frank,* because of *you."*

"What?" Sirius blurts out, bewildered. "But Frank is—I mean, we're just friends." He pauses, then frowns. "Wait, James wouldn't care if Frank was more than a friend anyway."

"Sirius," Regulus says, struggling not to laugh, "he's jealous because you and Frank *are* friends. James is your best friend, remember? He feels threatened."

Sirius opens his mouth, closes it, then shakes his head in disbelief. "Does he really?"

"Yes. I'm having a great time," Regulus says with a happy sigh, genuinely looking pleased. "It sort of feels like karma, you know? He's also being terribly adorable about the whole thing, but don't tell him I said that."

"But that's absurd," Sirius mutters, blinking rapidly and swiveling his head to locate James.

Regulus snorts. *"I* know that, but James is a possessive idiot who's having a rough week. Give him a break." Regulus smiles slightly and nods towards James. "Go on, go reassure him that he's your one and only bestest friend forever and ever."

"You're teasing, but he really is, you know," Sirius feels compelled to point out.

"Mm, yes, I know. It used to make me terribly jealous, too, in very different ways for both of you," Regulus admits.

"Well, that's absurd, too," Sirius tells him, rolling his eyes. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go and reassure James that he's my one and only bestest friend forever and ever. Wish me luck."

"Luck," Regulus says, chuckling quietly, still so amused.

So, Sirius drifts over to appease James with less subtlety he should grant the situation, but James is blissfully oblivious and just happy to be reassured. Sirius is perhaps a little too doting, because James honestly *is* having a really bad week—they all are, frankly, but James truly does have it coming down on him from all sides, so he deserves a little extra love anyway. Sirius gives it to him in heaps, splaying out all over him dramatically and announcing to everyone within hearing range that James is the best best friend anyone could have, including Frank.

James finally relaxes, and something about the whole situation sort of breaks Sirius' heart. For one thing, it agitates him that he didn't even notice. For another, Sirius is pretty sure that James is just…trying to hold onto what he doesn't want to lose, because this week is just a brutal reminder of all the things that have slipped through his fingers, and all the things that he can't actually have or hold onto.

In any case, once he's put at ease, James falls back on his usual casual charm with basically everyone, and he ends up falling prey to Frank's friendly demeanor. It's not long before he's giving in and getting along swimmingly with Frank, and it's obvious that James is sheepish about his previous actions because he instantly attempts to make up for it by being rather aggressively nice to Frank. This sort of comes off as flirting, if Sirius is honest, but Frank—ever easy-going and happy to adjust to the flow of things—matches James stride-for-stride.

And, honestly, Sirius has never given any thought to whether or not he'd fuck Frank. To be fair, Sirius has never given any thought to whether or not he'd fuck anyone but Remus, but he tentatively approaches the idea in his mind very carefully, mostly out of curiosity. As suspected, the desire just isn't there, no matter how objectively good-looking Frank is, but he tries to figure out *why.* There is, of course, the rather large brick wall he runs into in the form of Remus, who he's very head over heels in love with, but past that, what is it?

Sirius tries to get the bottom of it, wondering if it's because of his internal disgust with anything sexual that's not faked, due to the Hallows; or is it just because he doesn't trust Frank? Well, that's a little unfair. Sirius *does* trust Frank, but with sex? No, he's not sure that he does, honestly. He had to build that trust with Remus, adjust to it, before he really felt the true desire to do it. Frank is his friend, but that's not the sort of trust they've ever built between them.

Meanwhile, James has no such requirements, so he's not immune to the effect Frank can have when he gives an easy grin and lazily tucks his thumbs through his belt loops, eyes sparkling with laughter. The flirting is almost a competition at this point, and it doesn't surprise Sirius at all when Regulus abruptly pops up like a bad habit, practically materializing out of thin air, no longer looking amused.

It seems to hit Frank and James at the same time what they were just doing, as well as why that's a supremely bad idea for everyone involved, much to their shared chagrin. *Sirius* knows neither of them really meant anything by it, knows it was all in good fun, but *Regulus* does not. He is not pleased, and poor Frank is obviously now on Regulus' shit list.

There's not much to be done about it, really. Regulus and James have to go out on the stage anyway rather soon, so they wander away, leaving Sirius with Frank while Pandora and Dorcas fuss over James and Regulus, making sure they're presentable and ready, as they always do.

"You're all a rather complicated bunch, aren't you?" Frank muses, tilting his head in vague curiosity.

Sirius snorts. "You have no idea, Frank."

"No, I get it," Frank tells him. "I come from a district of complicated, head-strong people, Sirius. I mean, my mum? You met Alice last year when they won their games. Irene and Mathias, too. Even me, a bit, I suppose. Born and raised in district five leads to some rather tenacious people."

Sirius just hums, because Frank is right. He's never met someone from five who wasn't resilient, even the tributes over the years that never got to be Victors.

It makes him wonder if the residents of district six, his home, have anything in common. As hard as he thinks about it, he can't come up with one thing they all share.

~•~

James is pretty sure Regulus is trying to break his hand. He's holding it so firmly that James is struggling not to wince. Right, so it's not a good idea to get caught up in flirting with beautiful people when Regulus is around. Noted.

It's not like it meant anything, of course. For James, it never does. Or, well, it hasn't seriously meant anything since his last relationship, when he finally came to the conclusion that Regulus was it for him. Besides, Regulus has no right to be jealous, the fussy prick. *He's* the one who told James to move on ages ago. Easy in theory; not so simple in practice, is it?

It's a little bit satisfying, honestly. James has seen Barty at Regulus' house *a lot* over the past six months, showing up and staying overnight, leaving the next morning for work. He's even seen Barty in the background through the window when going to drop off the daily flower, shuffling around while Regulus sits right there at his desk. James is not proud of the rather violent urges he's had many times to just go inside and drag Barty out by his fucking throat.

Nice to know Regulus finds it difficult to keep his head about him where James is concerned, too.

However, it does bring the subject to mind that they sort of *can't* be with other people, not really. Not for as long as the Hallow is infatuated with their love story. Sure, maybe they can do it in secret, *maybe,* but it'll always be a risk. James has no desire to be with anyone else, but that doesn't make him ignorant to how fucked up their predicament is.

What if Regulus could be happy with someone else? Barty, perhaps. Or just someone in the district he's never bothered to talk to, but possibly will some day. The mere thought makes James wilt in honest dejection and hurt, but at the same time, he'd never begrudge Regulus happiness, wherever he found it, even if it isn't with James.

Now isn't the time to stress about any of that, though, because they're out on stage, and there's the banners displaying Irene and Mathias. Irene has a family, just a mother and a father, while Mathias was apparently raised by their grandparents. Neither of them had siblings. They seemed to have found that in one another.

Like all the ones before them, district five is quiet as James starts the speech, but it's not a solemn sort of silence. No, this is tense. James can *feel* it, the restlessness of the crowd, the sharp gazes demanding something, furious for change. No one ever looks happy through this, but there is usually an overhanging level of defeat and resignation, just simple compliance, but district five doesn't seem to have that, at least not this year, for whatever reason. There's an energy over everyone that James can feel settling in his gut like a stone.

Despite this, James doesn't really expect anything to happen. He fully expects for them to get through the speech as they have in every district before, excluding district eleven, just as long as they don't lose it again. It's hard not to, seeing Mathias and Irene's faces, their families, forced into remembrance.

But they do it anyway, not missing a beat, because the lives of the people they care about are at stake, and James has already messed up once. It feels like a betrayal to Irene, to Mathias, but James just keeps thinking about his parents, about Sirius, about Regulus. He can't risk them. He won't.

It's going as it should for a bit, at least until someone, from somewhere in the crowd, raises their voice to shout, "This is bullshit! It's the same fucking Hallow-made speech with no heart! Hallow is hollow, Hallow is hollow, Hallow is *hollow!"*

James falters over his words, eyes going wide as the rest of the crowd picks up the chant, growing in volume and in rage. He stutters to a halt, clinging to Regulus' hand now, his heart racing in his chest as everything proceeds to go to shit all at once, so quickly that no one can do anything about it.

The Aurors standing at the front suffer the brunt of the crowd as they all seem to shove forward at once, and chaos unleashes practically everywhere. Someone breaks through, with others following, and the Aurors are severely outnumbered. There's a loud smattering of guns going off, bullets flying wide, people dropping to the ground but no one stopping.

Regulus moves fast, shoving James back and roughly tucking his head down as they go stumbling off the stage. Someone slams an Auror into the steps, wrestling with their gun, but it doesn't go off. James isn't even thinking as he wraps his arm around Regulus' waist, hauling him clear off his feet and swinging him around to shield him as they frantically flee.

Sirius has a hold of them in seconds, yanking them close and hastily shoving them further and further away until the screams and gunshots are muffled in the distance.

~•~

It's quiet on the train.

Regulus feels like he hasn't moved in years, like he's been sitting in the same spot that Sirius put him, and he's aging at a rapid rate, withering away too quickly to keep up with. Sirius won't let them leave the room—the train car he's been sleeping in—so they're all sort of just packed in together. James is sitting on the bed right next to Regulus, and Sirius has claimed the floor, closest to the door like a guard dog.

They're technically on lockdown, according to Pandora, who has been going in between the mayor and them to keep them updated on the entire situation. Lockdown means that they

can't travel, and they're not allowed back into district five either; they're all just waiting for news from the Hallow.

Regulus can still see the line of bodies that fell to the ground, littered with bullets and blood. He can still hear the furious chant, as well as the following screams. All he keeps thinking about is Riddle and his cold, cold eyes.

"This is bad, isn't it?" James whispers, the first to break the silence after hours of it.

"It's—it's definitely not good," Sirius admits, his eyes locked on the door, likely waiting for Pandora to return, or maybe for Dorcas to join them. She'd said she was shaken by the violence and begged off to her own train car to take some time to calm down, grateful for Sirius' offer to stay with them, but needing time alone. Regulus can't blame her for that. It's probably the closest she's ever been to danger, as a Hallow.

"That was live. Everyone in the world saw that, didn't they? Or some of it," James croaks, sounding distressed.

Sirius grimaces. "I was watching the live feed and it didn't cut out until the gunshots started, so…yes."

"Oh, this is so bad," James mumbles, anxiously circling his cane between his hands, because his leg has been hurting since he essentially scooped Regulus up with one arm and ran off with him. He said he needed it, and Sirius got it for him. Occasionally, James has to stand up and pace slowly back and forth, leaning on his cane the whole way.

"I was talking to Frank," Sirius tells them, "and he says that the district has been feuding with the Aurors for years now. It's—it's a really defiant district without our involvement as it is, but seeing what happened in eleven and the fact that Irene and Mathias were adored by so many people… Well, this was just where the pot boiled over, basically. You didn't—neither of you did anything wrong, alright? This isn't on you."

"But it is," Regulus says softly, staring down at his knees, picking lazily at the seam on his outer right thigh. "It's going to come back on us, somehow."

"We don't know that," Sirius counters. "It's—yes, it's a possibility, but the victory tour isn't over. Nothing is going to happen before it is, for one thing, and there's still time. We stick to the plan, alright? The Hallow has been carrying on in blissful ignorance for years, and they'll continue to do so. Things will calm down. They will."

"Sirius," James chokes out, "Mum and Dad…"

Regulus feels a lump form in his throat, strangling him. He's not proud of it, but that same fear James has for the fate of his parents exists within Regulus for his own, because even after everything, he still… Well, honestly, he doesn't quite know what he feels for his mother and father; he just knows that the thought of them being hurt, or killed, scares him so much that he feels like he's choking on it.

Sirius doesn't have words of comfort for either of them. He just closes his eyes and sits on the floor, rocking back and forth, back and forth.

~•~

Eventually, Pandora comes back with news that the situation has calmed down and they've been cleared by the Hallow to continue on with the tour, so they disembark to head to district four. As the saying goes, the show must go on.

It's the last district for the day, and they show up late, way behind schedule. The entire square that would usually be full of people is empty, and the families of the tributes that died also aren't there on the platforms. It's Quinn and another tribute they didn't know. The cameras focus on James and Regulus only, and they're essentially just standing there, giving a speech to no one. It's disconcerting and as hollow as everything else. As they leave the stage, Regulus kisses James on the cheek, and then he pulls away as soon as they're out of sight from the cameras. He doesn't have anything to do with James after that, and he doesn't ask to sleep with him again.

The next morning, they have breakfast on the train, and then it's into district three they go. James is not at all looking forward to it, because it's Peter and Bernice.

There's something very fucking odd about having to stand up and give a speech in a district home to the deceased tributes that you, at some point, actually had issues with. With Cole and Hodge, James didn't have any prior problems with them before he killed them. Technically, James didn't kill Peter or Bernice, but he was right there for their deaths.

Things are back to normal, as far as the crowd returning and the families waiting in tribute for the fallen. Bernice, shockingly, had a fiance and a baby. She was a mother. Twenty-three years old, and her baby is still so small, can't be more than a year old, still held in the arms of their father. It strikes James that Bernice likely had between three and six months with her baby before her name was called, and she never mentioned her child, never talked about being a mother in interviews or called attention to it at all.

Peter only has his mother to stand on the platform for him. She's a short woman, and she seems even shorter from the way she hunches in on herself, never lifting her gaze to look up, not once. *I'm sorry he didn't get to make it home,* James thinks as he looks at her, his heart clenching violently in his chest.

On James' worst days, he is angry with Peter as much as he can be with anyone or anything he's ever felt any semblance of love for. It'll burn within him until he's *seething,* until he's wishing he can go back and kill Peter himself, and those nightmares are the worst. The ones where he has Peter's throat between his hands, squeezing harder and harder no matter how much he begs. It terrifies him, disturbs him, even if Sirius has told him many, *many* times that his dreams aren't a reflection of him and he has no control over them.

On James' best days, he can admit to himself that those dreams don't make him a bad person, because the truth is, he doesn't wish he had killed Peter at all. He wishes he could have saved Peter, but he couldn't; he was never going to be able to. On those days, the good ones, James misses Peter a lot, his laughter and his warmth and the way he cared for Vanity like James did. The reality of it is, Peter makes him sad; the entire timeline from start to finish, because maybe James deluded himself into believing that Peter could represent something good and true in that arena, when it was never fair to put that on Peter, who only wanted to survive.

James pulls away from Regulus first when they leave the stage, and he retreats into his room when they're all back on the train, refusing to come out until they reach district two.

Another difficult one, because this is Axus and Willa. Axus has a few siblings and both parents on their platform, while Willa was an only child being raised by her father, who looks completely indifferent—almost bored—by this entire process. Axus' family, at least, seems to be grieving still, and if they're even the slightest bit ashamed about all the things Axus got up to in the arena, there are no signs of it. James stands on stage, still using a cane *because* of Axus, and yet he honestly can't even blame Axus' family for not seeming bothered about the things Axus did. It was the hunger games. Axus wasn't a very good person there, but who knows what they were like outside of it? James doesn't, and he'll never know.

There's a different feeling in the districts closest to the Hallow, more Hallow-like, in fact. They seem actually touched by the speeches, and they're responsive, cheering for their fallen tributes and the Victors on stage before them. Somehow, this is almost worse than the hollow feeling.

District one is yet *another* difficult one, Mulciber and Avery, but Sirius and Regulus seem to grow more and more restless the closer they get. James can't really work out why until they arrive, and then all he can think is *oh.*

"I wasn't aware that this would be a family reunion," James whispers to Sirius, wide-eyed.

Sirius' smile is more of a grimace as the mayor comes along to meet them, three people drifting along with her. Only one man that James vaguely recalls Sirius pointing out to him in the Hallow as Mulciber and Avery's mentor, Lucius Malfoy. Of course, James knows that *technically* Lucius is Regulus and Sirius' cousin-in-law, but Sirius had made it clear that this was not something he was pleased about in the least.

Other than the mayor, there's two other women that James only slightly recognizes from memories when he was a child. Bellatrix and Narcissa (and Andromeda) lived in the Victor's Village with their father, so James actually knew them way before he knew Sirius, but only in passing. He saw them sometimes, and one time he caught Bellatrix trying to hit his cat with his broom, so he burst into tears and called for his mum, who got into a rather uproarious fight with Cygnus about actually watching his daughters.

In any case, the cat was fine, Bellatrix was just a bored teenager tired of a random stray sneaking in through her window, and life went on. James maybe had a small crush on Narcissa when he was really young, but he has *never* told a soul about it, not even Sirius. He

grew out of it as it was, but he can appreciate the irony in his apparent affinity for having a thing for younger Black siblings.

James never saw Regulus or Sirius in the Victor's Village before he met Sirius the first time, which he thinks is due to the fact that Cygnus was a dreadful bastard who barely liked to let his own daughters in his house, let alone children that weren't his own. James recalls vividly the one time that Cygnus came home to find Alphard passed out, drunk, on his front porch; Cygnus had dumped him into the ditch and just—left him there. His own brother.

"Sirius," Regulus hisses, "why are they here? It's just supposed to be the mentor and the mayor."

"I worried they would do this," Sirius mutters. "Lucius probably had something to do with it, the prick."

"Will it really be so bad?" James mumbles. "I mean, they're your family."

"That's why it's going to be bad," Sirius says flatly.

At that precise moment, the approaching group catches sight of them, and Bellatrix tosses up her arms and calls, "Oh, there he is! My favorite little munchkin. Reggie, look how *big* you've gotten," before promptly moving right up to Regulus to reach out and pinch his cheeks as she coos, like he's a small child.

James blinks.

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Kill me, kill me, kill me, Regulus thinks on repeat, his face scrunching as Bellatrix snatches him into a hug and ruffles his hair, still talking to him in that stupid baby-voice.

When they were children, Regulus was admittedly Bellatrix's favorite between him and Sirius. In Bellatrix's words, Sirius was a loud-mouthed little shit who had more hair than he had brains. Sirius once made Regulus cry, and Bellatrix pushed him down the stairs. And though Regulus would never admit it out loud, Bellatrix was always his favorite, too. He's pretty sure it's because he's a younger sibling, while she's the eldest; she always coddled him, spoiled him a bit, and Regulus was not immune to liking the fact that he could pretty much do absolutely no wrong in her eyes.

Sirius, of course, was Andromeda and Narcissa's favorite. They spoiled him, let him get away with murder, fussing at Bellatrix when she was mean to him. It's strange, because Regulus knows for a fact that Sirius always favored Narcissa over Andromeda, at least until they got older, and then his feelings changed. Maybe that's not strange at all, in retrospect. The things you feel as a child morphs when you grow, because you can suddenly understand all the things you didn't before.

For example, Regulus did not understand when he was a child that Bellatrix is fucking insane. He understands *now,* of course, and funny, isn't it, what difference time can make?

"It's good to see you, Sirius. You look well," Narcissa greets as she comes closer, but she doesn't go in for a hug, even if she's smiling. Regulus envies Sirius so much right now, because Bellatrix is still fawning all over him. "Bella, let him be, would you? He's massively uncomfortable, can't you tell?"

"Impossible," Bellatrix protests, though she thankfully does pull away. It's disconcerting how much she looks like Andy, or how much Andy looks like her, really. Narcissa has always been the odd duck, as far as shared traits in the family goes. There was a rumor for a long time that their mother had an affair with another man in the district, but no one ever dared to say it where Cygnus or Bella could hear. The rumors did stop when the man spontaneously went missing one day and was never seen again. No one knows what happened, but Regulus distinctly recalls a look of satisfaction on Bellatrix's face when the news broke out.

Regulus didn't understand what that meant back then, but he does now. He's quite sure his oldest cousin killed a man to make her little sister's life just a bit easier. The thing is, she hadn't even gone into her games yet.

"You look well, too, Regulus," Narcissa comments, smiling at him, small and demure, but her gaze is sharp. Clear. Pools of blue that cover more in their depths. Maybe it's a younger

sibling thing, but much like Regulus, she's always been good about hiding things. The only difference is, she hides behind dainty smiles and gentle words, soft-spoken and pretty like artfully constructed glass you lock away so no one can touch it, so they can only look, because it's so fragile.

Narcissa is not, and never has been, fragile. Oh, she pretends to be, sure, but she's as dangerous as her sisters, especially because you don't expect it. Regulus remembers her games. People thought she was fragile, and she proved them wrong.

"Sirius," Bellatrix greets with much less enthusiasm than she showed to Regulus.

"Bella," Sirius replies mockingly, which makes Bellatrix's eyes narrow into slits, and Regulus releases a muted sigh.

This is going to be a long lunch.

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Sirius does not want to be here. He really, desperately does not want to be doing this right now. Fuck, why did Bellatrix and Narcissa have to come? It *is* supposed to be the mayor and mentor only, but it doesn't surprise him that Narcissa and Bellatrix took the opportunity to come, and he doesn't doubt that Lucius had something to do with making that possible.

See, it's no secret that the Black family has…issues between the members that are estranged. There was a massive fight that took place before Narcissa and Bellatrix left the district, one that ended with Andromeda in tears, Bellatrix suffering a black eye, and Narcissa threatening to kill Cygnus.

It was all very dramatic, from what Sirius remembers, which honestly isn't much with his poor memory. He's been able to piece most of it together, though. Basically, Cygnus was an abusive piece of shit, particularly to Narcissa, who he was never sure was his daughter or not. Their mother died before Sirius was ever born, when Narcissa was still rather young, and it pretty much fell onto Bellatrix and Andromeda to take care of her. Mostly Andy, because Bella was and always has been truly unhinged.

In any case, Andy was the first to leave the house with a man the family didn't approve of, and Bella took that as a personal affront, while it hurt Narcissa deeply. However, as soon as Narcissa saw her chance to leave, to get out, she took it, too. As far as Sirius knows, she had no plans to take Bellatrix with her, not at first, but maybe Bellatrix just…invited herself along. He's not clear on the details, honestly. Andy doesn't like to talk about it very much, because it's still a sore subject.

Cygnus died not too long after all his children abandoned him, and Alphard followed behind him fairly quickly. Sirius has always wondered if part of Alphard's steady deterioration in those last months was because his older brother was dead. But, then again, Alphard had been killing himself on booze and drugs for so long by that point that it was never clear.

So, yes, the Black family is riddled with complications and generations of hurt, and as a family inclined to a flair for dramatics, this is easy to notice to those who pay attention. Lucius is unfortunately rather observant. Not only that, but he has insider knowledge as Narcissa's husband, Sirius is sure. He doesn't doubt that Lucius wants them here solely to get back at Sirius and Regulus for showing him up six months ago.

Lunch is painful.

Mayor Delores is just—well, Sirius doesn't think he's ever disliked someone so quickly in his life, which is saying a lot, considering the fact that he spends plenty of time with some very shifty Hallows. Somehow, Mayor Delores is worse, prim and proper and sickeningly sweet in that fake way that's so transparent that it may as well be air. She clears her throat in an infuriating little *hem-hem* every time she catches Sirius or James putting their elbows on the table.

Sirius is so fucking uncomfortable right now, even more so when making small talk with Bella and Cissa like they're not practically strangers to him. He does remember them, a bit. He remembers never liking Bellatrix very much, most of all.

All of this reminds him of stifling dinners with his parents, forced around the last people he wants to be near, stuck with the constant reminder of what his family is like. It's always either secrecy or complete madness with them. There's never been a Black that isn't, in some way,

royally fucked up. He is unfortunately included in that, and doesn't at all appreciate having to confront it.

Pandora, the lovely jewel that she is, does most of the heavy lifting with keeping the conversation going. She's using what Sirius has decided to label her 'Hallow' voice. Meanwhile, Dorcas doesn't even bother pretending like she gives a shit about appeasing them, which Sirius really likes about her. She's bold, there's no denying that.

There's not much commentary about all of their respective times in the arena. He doesn't remember Cissa's at all, and he only vaguely recalls Bella's because it was the first one that the Hallows were actually excited about after the Quarterly Memorial that took place five years prior. People were still talking about the 60th hunger games by the time the 65th came around, but that faded into the background when Bellatrix got on screen, the first Black to go into the games since her father, decades before that.

Sirius wonders if, like him and Regulus and James and Effie and every other Victor he's ever known, Bellatrix and Narcissa don't like to talk about their games. They don't bring them up, and they don't bring up Sirius or Regulus' either, for which Sirius has the space in him to be grateful about.

Either way, the moment Sirius sees his chance to sneak off, he does just that. Lucius *was* making snide comments to Regulus and James, which had Sirius bristling, but Narcissa shockingly shut him down with one look, and he stopped and turned his attention to Mayor Delores instead. Pandora is somehow entertaining Bellatrix, while Regulus and Narcissa quietly eat and occasionally exchange the random comment or two. James is safely and wisely talking to Dorcas.

In other words, Sirius has his chance to flee, and just like his older cousins, he doesn't hesitate to take it.

He taps Dorcas on her shoulder as he goes by, and she doesn't miss a beat, passing him her pack of cigarettes and lighter that they've admittedly been sharing for days now.

Sirius stands outside and chain-smokes like his life depends on it. One right after the other, ignoring the distant sounds of conversation and clinking silverware drifting out to him.

He's not free for long, though.

"Got another one of those?" Narcissa asks as she sweeps outside to join him, leaning up against the pillar across from him with a small, tempered smile.

Sirius sighs, but he passes her a cigarette and flicks the lighter, watching her inhale and look off thoughtfully to the side as she exhales smoke. "I thought you would have quit by now."

"There are some things you don't grow out of," Narcissa replies. "I gave you your first puff of a cigarette, you know. You were ten. Do you remember?"

"Mhm," Sirius hums vaguely, even though he does not.

Narcissa seems to notice. "You caught me with one and begged me to try it, thought it was cool, but you always thought anything I did was cool. You took one puff, started coughing, looked disgusted, and swore never to do it again." She glances at him, her eyes drifting over him with something oddly sad. "Look at you now."

"Well, there are some things you *do* grow out of," Sirius mutters, pointedly taking a puff and blowing out rings slowly, one-by-one with expert precision, holding her gaze as he does.

"How's my sister?" Narcissa asks softly, and for the first time, Sirius wonders if this is why she's truly here.

Sirius purses his lips. "Being a raging bitch in the other room. Why do you ask?"

Narcissa's lips twitch. "Not that one. The other one."

"Andy's marvelous. Thriving, really," Sirius informs her, possibly a little too defensively. Narcissa doesn't look offended. "You have a niece."

"A niece," Narcissa whispers, her breath hitching so quietly that he almost misses it. "Do I? What's her name?"

"Nymphadora," Sirius mumbles.

"Now why would she do that to that poor child?" Narcissa asks, shaking her head as she inhales again.

Sirius can't help it. He snorts. "Honestly, I asked the same thing. No normal names in this family, you know the rules. In any case, we mostly call her Dora."

"I see." Narcissa falls silent for a bit after that, pensive, still smoking. Sirius steals a few glances at her, unable to help it. His memories are all faded and out of order, but she does star in more than a few of his older ones, some he's not even sure are actually real. "You've offended Lucius, you know."

"Ah, lovely, happy to hear it," Sirius declares, breaking out into a grin, defiant. He's expecting her to get annoyed, but she only chuckles. "If you think I'm going to apologize—"

"Don't bother. We both know it'd be a lie, and frankly, I'd expect nothing less. Lucius is a proud man about senseless things that only exist in his head."

"Not very high praise, coming from his wife."

"You know why I married him," Narcissa says bluntly.

An escape, Sirius thinks. "Yeah, I do. Regret it yet?"

"If only it were so simple," Narcissa muses. "He wants to try for a child. Preferably a son, he says."

"He—what?" Sirius balks, blinking at her in surprise. "After all this time, he still hasn't worked out that he's married to a woman with no desire for sex?"

Narcissa clicks her tongue, but she's slow to reply. She continues to smoke, and Sirius continues to stare at her in disbelief. He remembers this about her, and he's fairly sure it's not a memory he's just making up. The first time he was ever exposed to the topic of sex was because he'd caught Andy kissing a boy and went running right to Narcissa with about a million questions, which she dutifully answered. He was so young, but he remembers Narcissa telling him rather bluntly that she had no such desires, as her sisters did.

"Lucius always knew this about me. He also knew that I preferred the romantic company of women over any other gender, and no one sexually. That was never a secret."

"You're telling me that never bothered him?"

Narcissa arches an eyebrow at him. "No. Lucius never wanted me for sex, or for romance. *He* knows why I married him, has always known, and it was never about saving me, not to him. It's about power. He feels he has power over me, and I let him believe it. That delusion keeps me comfortable, and he has plenty of people to warm his bed to keep *him* comfortable."

"That's…" Sirius grimaces and shakes his head. Honestly, he hates the sound of it, but it's what Narcissa chose. It's what Narcissa made happen, on purpose. Lucius was nothing more than a puppet on her strings, and likely still isn't. "Right, if that's the case, why ask you for children?"

"Well, we're married, so he'd like his child to come from his wife over anyone else," Narcissa explains.

Sirius raises his eyebrows at her. "Are you going to do it?"

"I'd love to be a mother. I may have no desire to have sex, but I do enjoy it from time-to-time, though never with men. I could likely talk him into other options, insemination perhaps, but I won't do it," Narcissa murmurs. She takes a harsh pull on her cigarette, cheeks hollowing out, and her eyes flash as she exhales. "I want to raise a child. He wants to train a Victor."

"He's scum, you know that?" Sirius says in disgust, instantly getting what she means. Not that could he really miss it, seeing as she has put it so bluntly. He can appreciate that she has no plans to indulge Lucius' wish, though.

Narcissa just hums and looks away. "And you, Sirius? The Hallows heartthrob. You have your own scum stuck to the bottom of your shoe while daring to judge mine."

"I didn't step in mine on purpose."

"Didn't you?"

Sirius clenches his jaw. "For survival, nothing more."

"Yes, same as me, but of course you don't see it that way."

"You could have stayed, you know."

"No, I really couldn't," Narcissa replies. "There was nothing for me there."

"And what do you have here?" Sirius challenges.

"Almost everything," is Narcissa's quiet response, still blowing smoke, the cloud drifting away in the distance, an echoed distance in her eyes. Sirius thinks that, in the distance of her gaze, she's looking for Andromeda.

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Regulus is going to kill Sirius. How dare he abandon him now? With *her*. Regulus understands that family is particularly hard for Sirius, especially now that he knows Sirius has memory issues, but Regulus would feel a lot better if he was here.

Bellatrix is a menace.

It's hard to describe, because at times, she seems so genuinely fond of him. In other moments, it appears her fondness for being a raging lunatic outweighs that.

Case in point:

"So, Regulus, what have you been up to as of late?" Bellatrix asks as she falls right into Sirius' empty chair in between him and James, leaning back and kicking her feet up on the table without a beat of hesitation.

Regulus stares at her.

Bellatrix is unperturbed by his silence. "The last time I saw you, Reggie, you were so sweet. Still as shy as ever, clearly." She waits, then chuckles when he continues to stare at her. "Oh, go on, tell me all that I missed. How *were* the teenage years? Dreadful time for us all, of course, but give me all the sordid details."

"There's not very many," Regulus lies flatly.

"Oh, sure there are." Bellatrix frowns slightly when he, once again, offers no response. "Cheer up, munchkin. Turn that frown upside down; I remember you smiling a lot more than this. Where'd that go?"

"Hem-hem," Mayor Delores says, clearing her throat over and over until everyone looks at her. She gives Bellatrix a simpering smile. "Feet don't go on the table, dear."

"Forks usually don't go into eyeballs either, but I can make that happen, too," Bellatrix tells her, lifting one foot and dropping it back down to send a fork sailing up from the table through the air, which she snaps her hand out to grab. She grins at Mayor Delores, staring her down, and Mayor Delores goes pale and silent as soon as she recognizes the threat. Bellatrix gets to leave her feet on the table. "Anyway, Regulus, you were saying?"

"I wasn't," Regulus murmurs.

"Oh, alright, if you don't want to talk about any of that, I suppose I'll just meet the boyfriend, shall I?" Bellatrix swivels her head. "Potter!"

At the loud, shrill call of his name, James jolts and jerks around in his chair, blinking rapidly. "Er…yes?"

"My, you did grow up handsomely, didn't you?" Bellatrix says in apparent amusement, lazily tossing the fork on the table before reaching towards James with clear intentions to touch his face, likely to swivel him by his chin to examine him.

She doesn't quite make it, because Regulus' hand snaps out to catch her wrist, his voice sharp when he declares, "Don't touch him."

"Oh?" Bellatrix's eyebrows fly up, and she looks thrilled instantly. "So, it's true, then? I didn't really believe it, honestly, that you two were *actually* together, but look at you being all protective and whatnot." She drops her face into a scowl and lowers her voice, mocking, *"Don't touch him.* Goodness, someone's possessive. Let go of me, would you? I just want to have a little talk with him. Give him a speech about being good to you like any respectable older cousin would."

"Bella," Regulus hisses, "leave him *alone.* I'm not joking."

"Or what?" Bellatrix teases, grinning at him.

Regulus squeezes her wrist tighter, too tight, but she doesn't even flinch. "If you touch him, the only one getting stabbed with a fork is you. Now stop being so…"

Honestly, he doesn't even know the word for it.

"You're no fun," Bellatrix complains with a pout, slumping in her chair and flapping her hand lazily until he lets go. She still looks at James, though. "Fine, I won't threaten to peel your skin off your bones if you don't treat my little munchkin right, but tell me, you do have good intentions, yes?"

"Only the best," James tells her, his gaze flicking towards Regulus briefly before looking away.

"You turned out really handsome, you know. How old are you now? Mid-twenties, yes?" Bellatrix tilts her head, considering him closely. "Grew into quite the man."

James coughs. "Ah, thanks?"

"Bella," Regulus snaps, because James is clearly uncomfortable at the moment, and it makes Regulus feel…shame? He's not used to feeling ashamed of his family when it comes to James, because his parents have very little to do with him, and Sirius has only ever been good to him.

"So *jealous,"* Bellatrix coos, even though Regulus honestly isn't. "Look at you, munchkin, so feisty. Love makes us crazy, doesn't it? Or so I hear. How mental does it make you?"

"Trust me, you really don't want to find out," Regulus says.

Bellatrix tuts at him. "It's been *ages* since I've had any fun, you know. Everyone is so boring, and Cissy is always around to scold me, so actually, I'd love nothing more." She promptly stands up and turns without warning to kick James' chair back, dumping herself right into his lap and draping herself over him. James chokes, his hands flying up as he holds them palm-out, eyes bulging as his mouth drops open. Bellatrix laughs. "Look at this, you've found yourself a loyal man, Reggie. He won't even touch me, which is a sha—"

The rest of her sentence is drowned out by her sudden screech as Regulus fists her by the hair and quite literally drags her right out of James' lap, dumping her ruthlessly on the floor. James gapes up at him where he's standing, and Bellatrix lets out a long string of curses as she starts to pick herself back up. The moment her hand lands on the table to brace herself, Regulus plucks up the fork and slams it down into the back of her hand, because he told her this would happen, and she did not listen. Her fault, really.

"Fucking hell, Reg!" James blurts out, scrambling up from his chair as Bellatrix howls from the floor.

"My word!" Mayor Delores gasps.

"Sirius!" Dorcas shouts, while Pandora covers her face with both hands, muffling a loud groan.

Bellatrix snarls as she cradles her hand to her chest, the fork still buried in the back of it, blood dripping. "You ungrateful cunt of a bastard! I was *testing* him, you little shit! See if I ever do anything for you again! You stabbed me! You fucking stabbed me for a stupid *man,* you cock-slobbering slag!"

"I *told* you what would happen if you touched him," Regulus reminds her defensively, looking desperately at Sirius, who is rushing into the room with Narcissa right behind him.

Bellatrix rips the fork right out of her hand and lunges at Regulus with a shriek, and hell immediately breaks loose as Sirius and Narcissa frantically dive into the fray. Narcissa has to wrap her arms all the way around Bellatrix and drag her back while Regulus has to turn around and do the same thing to Sirius, who apparently needs no context to take the first opportunity to beat the shit out of her, especially if she's trying to poke Regulus' eye out with a fork.

Sirius and Bellatrix hiss and spit at each other like feral cats, growling and snarling like wild dogs, both trying to get at each other while everyone else seems to be yelling all at once.

Lucius is smirking in satisfaction.

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"You're my favorite brother."

"I'm your only brother."

"I know. I'm so proud of you."

Regulus rolls his eyes and turns his head away, but James can see his lips twitch up at the corners. Pandora is stifling what seems to be a mildly hysterical laugh behind her hand, and Dorcas is shamelessly grinning at Sirius, who genuinely does look proud of Regulus for stabbing Bellatrix with a fork. The train continues on, heading for the Hallow.

"Wouldn't be a family lunch without a fight," Sirius announces cheerfully, his spirits high since leaving district one. They had been swiftly escorted to give the speeches, then asked to leave immediately after. The goodbye between Narcissa and Sirius had been fine, almost… warm, James would say, but that was about it as far as familial affection went, by the end. Well, excluding Sirius and Regulus, because Sirius spent about a solid twenty minutes roaring with laughter after the whole thing was over, and he's been praising Regulus ever since.

"Not one dull moment," Dorcas says. "There has not been *one* dull moment this entire tour."

"It's not over yet," Pandora reminds her, clearly having reached the point where she's given up trying to make this entire experience go smoothly for everyone. It was sweet of her to try,

though. She's always putting in the effort.

"I still can't believe you literally stabbed her with a fork," Dorcas insists, shaking her head as she stares at Regulus in a clear mixture of disbelief and admiration.

Regulus sighs. "I warned—"

"Yes, you warned her you would, so you've said," Pandora cuts in, amused, "but that's still not a thing most people just *do."*

Regulus isn't most people, James thinks, gazing at him helplessly. He's reminded of Mulciber again, how Regulus cut his hand off when he didn't heed Regulus' warning not to make James flinch. This, at least, was a bit less violent, less bloody, less of a mess. It was also in an entirely different situation and setting. That means James can fully appreciate it, and as such, he can safely say he's never been so desperate to get on his knees for someone the way he is right now, for Regulus.

James coughs and pushes to his feet, mumbling, "Excuse me."

Sirius frowns in concern as he goes by, but James just shakes his head at him, assuring him that nothing is wrong. He knows he's been exceptionally quiet, but it's for the best, because he can't really trust himself to speak at the moment. He's afraid he'll open his mouth and say something stupid, such as repeatedly confessing his love like a broken record.

Instead, James goes into his train car, shutting the door and blowing out a deep breath. After a beat, he looks down and gives a very stern (and internal) lecture to his cock about appropriate responses to certain situations, including how there's a time and place, and surrounded by friends is *not* it.

James continues mentally berating his own desires—honestly, he's starting to wonder if he should be more concerned by the things that arouse him—but it does little good.

No matter what he tries, his body and heart are sure about one thing over anything else, and that's Regulus Black.

"This is the second worst week of my life," James declares miserably, then slowly and repeatedly bangs his head against the door while he begs his body and heart to realize why.

They do not.

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When they reach the Hallow, there's not much time before the interview is supposed to take place. Dorcas dashes off almost immediately to go get prepared, demanding the others to follow as soon as they're settled into their suite.

Pandora is walking swiftly, leading the charge, which Sirius is more than happy to let her do. As always, being back in the Hallow is not a good time for him, nor do James and Regulus seem to be ecstatic about it.

In any case, the settings are familiar as ever. Well, mostly. They're set up in the penthouse this time, according to Pandora, who leads them into the lift. It's a long, boring ride up, and Sirius does an internal checklist for what all needs to be done next. Get settled into the suite, usher Regulus and James off to get ready for the interview, watch the interview, then they're free for the night until tomorrow.

Simple enough.

"Right, so, you two are more than prepared for the interview, and Dorcas assures me that you'll both look lovely," Pandora chatters as they get off the lift and head for the penthouse, which is right up the hall. And she's right, James and Regulus have been prepped for this interview even more than their last ones, so Sirius is actually fairly confident that they'll do just fine. "After the interview, we'll head back here, and then the most important thing tomorrow is the party, which *will* be a very big event, so you'll both need to listen to me."

"We're staying here after the party, too?" Regulus mutters in audible complaint. "Can't we just leave that night?"

"No, you stay one last night, then head out the next morning," Pandora says firmly. She stops in front of the door and flashes them a smile. "Alright, hurry up, we don't have a lot of time."

Sirius snorts as Pandora throws open the door and reaches out to grab his shoulder, practically shoving him in. He can't help but chuckle fondly in her direction before turning to examine the penthouse curiously, never having seen it before, and then his laughter catches in his throat and dies.

Everything else immediately slips away, the whole world shrinking down to the man across the room from him, standing like a shadow near a wall with his hands tucked behind his back and his mask firmly in place. But that's him. Sirius would know him anywhere. He didn't forget.

Remus.

He's there with his head ducked forward, his side profile on display, and Sirius' ears are ringing because he doesn't understand. They—they don't get servants for this. They get in too late on the first night, and they're at a party for most of the second day, and they won't get dressed here before the events, so they won't be needing anyone to cook for them, or do their laundry, and they won't really even have the time to make a mess unless they're trying very hard at it, which would make them look bad, so of course no one would, and—and—

"Surprise," Pandora says softly from behind him.

At the sound of her voice, Remus' head lifts and swivels, and Sirius inhales sharply at the sight of a scar across his face in a jagged diagonal line above his mask and disappearing beneath it. Their eyes meet, and Sirius feels that lurch in his center, the whole world tilting on its axis.

Slowly, Remus steps forward and lifts his hand to unclip his mask, pulling it off as he releases a deep breath. He never looks away from Sirius, and what he says—the very first

thing he says—is a soft and breathless, "Hi, sweetheart."

Chapter End Notes

REMUS REMUS REMUS!!!

okay, ill get to that in a minute. sorry, just had to get that out of the way.

james' first kill. cole. a father. that's rough, buddy 😔

FRANK LONGBOTTOM HEY BESTIE!!!! i adore him. i have fallen in love with him quite a bit through this fic, if im honest, more so than any other version of frank ive ever written.

james being jealous of frank and possessive of sirius as his best friend, he's so real for that. if i had claim to sirius in ANY capacity, i would also be beating bitches off with a stick. also regulus was LIVING for it, that little shit. he was genuinely having the time of his life, like: SEE? HOW DOES IT FEEL HUH??? NOT SO NICE IS IT? also you're cute 🥰 pls regulus is so valid i love him

but then james and frank flirting. first of all, frank making EVERYONE jealous, icon behavior, king shit. he's just out here Existing, and everyone is like: that man is a threat to everything i love and hold dear, look at his SMILE. i just know frank had that ooey-gooey smile that gives everyone little flutters. well except for sirius. and also regulus "if you even look at james potter i will stomp you to death with my hooves" black.

anyway, jealous regulus!!! strangling james' hand!!! get his ass, king! also jealous james wanted to drag barty! go off, babe. theyre both so stupid im obsessed

tone shift. the riot :/ not great. it's not Looking Good For The Team. but sirius is right, the tour isn't over yet! they've still got time to make up for it! hope prevails!

and then the family reunion. bahumbug...

starting with bellatrix. she... she??? well, she's a bit. complex lmaooo. idk how yall are gonna feel about her, but well. feel how you feel, i guess. whatever it is, it's valid. but i think a lot of us can relate from regulus' position of growing up and being Absolutely Appalled by how utterly embarrassing family can be. that poor man wanted to crawl under the table and hide 💀

but he stabbed bellatrix with a fork, because of course he did. he always warns these people, and they never listen. like??? does he look like he's joking? ever? does he look like the type of man who has ever told a joke on purpose? come on now. she deserved that, honestly.

also sirius ready to throw hands with bellatrix IMMEDIATELY with no context pls he's so 😭😭😭 i love him more than anything

sirius just Suffering the entire family reunion is so real. me too, my love, ive been there. but his little moment with narcissa was like. really interesting, i think. just like a further insight to different family dynamics and sibling dynamics. narcissa looking for andromeda... ow

narcissa in this is very interesting to me! like, the whole background of her possibly being born to a different father, her marriage of convenience with lucius, the way she basically manipulates him similar to how sirius does the hallow, or close to it, and her desire to be a mother but her refusal to do it due to the fucked up world and also how lucius would raise/treat the child. like, she has LAYERS.

back to james, he is Doing His Best to have boundaries, but this poor man is Struggling. regulus isn't making it easy for him either. threatening someone and following through on that threat for him, AGAIN??? james was ready to risk it all. reggie, please, he is trying so hard 😭😭😭

and finally. FINALLY!!! the real main character of this chapter!!! the man, the myth, the legend!!! REMUS FUCKING LUPIN!!!! HE'S BACK!!!! HE'S HERE!!! he had one fucking line, and he still stole the show. i love him so much. he means the world to me. i am gushing like i am sirius black, and i don't regret it.

i would just like to say, for all those people talking about remus maybe losing his memories after he was tortured, YOU'RE FOUL FOR THAT!!! you all talk about me being a menace and coming up with angst, and then there you go COMING UP WITH SOMETHING MORE SICK AND TWISTED THAN ME??? shame on you. shame on your cow. i am joking, obviously. you are all evil geniuses. go write fic, sew chaos into the world, make people cry <3

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-frank having Mother Issues and sirius just being like "welp. mothers, am i right?" lmaooo he's so funny. he really went: mommy issues? you too? 💀
-mayor larch shipping prongsfoot, go ahead king, i support you
-regulus and james saving each other Without Hesitation when the riot broke out
-umbridge, we see you, and we do not like you
-lucius...alright, you won thIs round, you prick, BUT JUST YOU WAIT
-pandora just covering her face and groaning when the family drama spirals out of control STOP I LOVE HER
-dorcas and pandora being delighted by regulus stabbing bellatrix with a fork, and sirius being a proud big brother
-james giving a stern lecture to his...desires 😭
-pandora's surprise <3

The Letter

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past torture
-references to past murder
-references to past violence/gun violence
-implied sexual content

this chapter is honestly probably the sweetest/lightest one i have written for this fic. it does have angst dropped in, but like. overall it is so, so happy.

enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus barely even gets to take another breath before Sirius is throwing himself across the room at speeds that would be alarming under any other circumstances. The mask clatters to the floor just seconds before Sirius is on him, and it's like they practiced it, the way Sirius genuinely just launches himself right into Remus' arms, legs wrapped around him, and Remus catches him without even stumbling.

It's been so long. *Oh, there you are, here you are, hi,* Remus' heart keens, a steady throb of relief that floods his veins. As hard as he tried to cling to the memories of how it felt to have Sirius in his arms, it doesn't compare to the real thing. Nothing compares to this, to the warmth of him, the weight of him, how he smells and feels and breathes.

Sirius' hands fly up to frame his face, holding him there, and then he's quite literally just dropping kisses off all over Remus' face with undeniable enthusiasm. He kisses Remus' forehead, his cheeks, his nose, above and below each eye, even the scar. If it bothers him, he shows no signs of it, just kissing down the length of it from where it starts at the inner-corner of his left eyebrow and drags down over his nose, halting at the right corner of his top lip. When Sirius reaches the end, he kisses each corner of Remus' mouth, then full on the lips, hard and bruising and fast, pulling away to speak.

"Hi," Sirius chokes out, then immediately kisses him again, and Remus isn't making it easy for him with how he's breaking out into a grin; his first smile in six months. "Oh, hi. I've missed you, Remus. I've missed you so much."

"I—" Remus starts, but doesn't get to finish.

"Shut up, don't talk to me, I'm so happy you're here," Sirius declares breathlessly, his eyes bright. "Oh, the moon is so jealous of you. You're here. You're—hi, you're here."

Again, Remus tries to speak around his bubbling laughter, feeling ridiculously exhilarated and giddy, but Sirius cuts him off once more, with a kiss again. This time, Sirius kisses him once, twice, a third time, and then he doesn't pull away. The close-mouthed kiss fades into an open-mouthed one, and Sirius makes a truly indecent (and loud) noise while shaking in Remus' arms, rattling like he's about to fall apart.

Remus keeps a firm grip on him and turns around to promptly leave, which is probably a little rude, considering that the others are here and may wish to greet him, but he honestly can't bring himself to care about that right now.

No, instead, he stumbles along up the hall to find the first door he comes across, deciding it's just going to have to be Sirius' room, because he's not wasting time to go any further. He throws open the door and kicks it shut with his foot as he moves inside, Sirius' trembling fingers slipping into his hair.

The bed is thankfully not far, and Remus wastes no time in getting them to it. He's careful, lowering Sirius down with care, like he's precious, because he is. Oh, he is. Remus is shaking, too, barely even able to fathom that this is real, that this is actually happening, not just some dream.

For a long time, they literally just lay there and kiss like that's all they're going to do, like that's more important than oxygen. Sirius has his arms wound tight around Remus' shoulders, fingers tangled in his hair, and Remus isn't managing much more than cradling Sirius' cheek with one hand while the other grips his leg on the outside of where he lays in between Sirius' splayed thighs, his knees bumping into Remus' hips.

The moment they break apart for some air, Sirius starts frantically fighting with his coat, his chest heaving, face flushed in a way that makes Remus' blood sing with joy. Because Sirius seems to be genuinely struggling, Remus props himself up and does his best to help, perhaps a little rushed as well. He practically shoves Sirius' coat off and flings it a little bit. An envelope falls out and lands on the bed, but Remus just picks it up and tosses it across the room carelessly with one smooth flick of his wrist.

"Wait," Sirius blurts out, eyes bulging. "Wait, that's important, Remus. Where did it go? I have to—"

"Can it wait?" Remus cuts in, reaching up to push his fingers into Sirius' hair, his breath hitching. It's as soft as he remembers, so soft and so lovely.

Sirius bites his lip, and Remus' gaze zeroes in on it. "I—well, we really shouldn't wait, and I'm a terrible person for even considering it, but *technically—"*

"Good enough for me," Remus declares, because truly it is, and he dives back in to kiss Sirius again, knowing that nothing could be more important than this, than Sirius.

"Oh, fucking hell," Sirius mumbles against his mouth, releasing a choked noise deep in the back of his throat, and Remus knows the moment he's given in and decided everything else *can* wait, actually, because he legitimately shudders and arches closer eagerly.

In a move Remus doesn't see coming, Sirius abruptly rolls them, pushing himself up and over and practically slamming Remus' back to the bed. Remus blinks, admittedly a little dazed, but he's not complaining. In fact, he's rather pleased.

Sirius doesn't falter, doesn't show any signs of embarrassment about essentially taking charge, as it were. He seems singularly focused on having what he wants—which, in this scenario, turns out to be Remus—and Remus is more than happy to give it to him. He runs his hands all over Sirius, his arms and chest and thighs where he straddles Remus' hips, watching him with hooded eyes, letting him do whatever he wants.

They're a bit limited on sexual resources at the moment, but Remus knows that's hardly stopped anyone before, because there are countless other things to do. Sirius seems to be in the same mind in this regard, because what he apparently wants involves kissing his way almost frantically down Remus' throat, his chest and stomach through his shirt, heading further and further down while tugging at Remus' belt.

Remus closes his eyes and buries his hand in Sirius' hair.

~•~

"Well, that's going over well," Pandora declares brightly, beaming as the muffled moans from down the hall drifts out into the otherwise quiet room.

Surprisingly, it's Regulus who looks at her and says, very softly, "We don't deserve you, Pandora."

James is in full agreement, and to prove so, he reaches out to capture her hand, pressing a smiling kiss to the back of her knuckles. She looks so pleased, so touched, a little teary-eyed as she smiles brightly. "That was such a kind thing for you to do, truly. Regulus is right. We don't deserve you."

"Thank you," Pandora whispers.

"I thought getting a servant wasn't…allowed?" James asks as he squeezes her hand before dropping it.

Pandora chuckles. "Well, servants are only ever allowed out during assignments, and when I checked the roster, he was indeed in the lineup for servants who will be working at the party tomorrow. That worked in my favor, because I may have lied a little and said that Sirius hasn't been feeling well, so he'll need tending to, and then I very casually suggested that they send us the servant we had before to handle it. In any case, he's technically feeling under the weather—Sirius, I mean—so he won't be joining us for the interview and such. I sort of figured he'd get distracted by Remus the moment he saw him anyway."

"Ah, brilliant," James chirps. "You're brilliant."

"You two don't mind, do you?" Pandora asks cautiously. "That I sort of excluded him out of today, I mean. I know it makes you feel better to have him around, but I thought…"

"We can stand to let Sirius have some time for himself for once," Regulus murmurs, which is rather mature of him, James thinks. "We don't mind. It's fine, Pandora. Good, even."

Pandora perks up. "Lovely. Then we should be going, I suppose. Let's leave them to it."

A beat later, a broken moan and the disjointed sounds of Remus cursing up a storm drifts out to them faintly, and James can't help the way a laugh builds up from the pit of his stomach, rising up through him until his shoulders are shaking. Pandora's eyebrows fly up, and Regulus' nose wrinkles rather adorably. They all usher quickly from the room, indeed leaving Sirius and Remus to it.

On the way, James glances back with a grin, internally wishing Sirius all the good things, because no one deserves them more.

~•~

Remus is quite convinced that Sirius' mouth is capable of magic, and there's absolutely no evidence to support the contrary, because he's *seen* Sirius charm people with a few simple words, and this—well, he didn't even have to speak to leave Remus' brain leaking out of his ears.

It's strange, because Remus has had people do this to him that were certainly more practiced, but he's still very certain that he's never had better. A common theme with Sirius is that what he lacks in experience, he makes up for in enthusiasm, especially when he's focused on whatever he's doing.

Remus collapses back against the bed and tries to catch his breath, sort of limp as Sirius zips Remus' pants and crawls up the length of his body to stare down at him, hovering above. For some reason, Remus' brain can't quite work out why Sirius looks so bashful right now. No, this is the time that Sirius should be feeling very smug. Instead, he's blushing and eyeing Remus warily, like he's expecting a bad review or something.

The moment Remus reaches for him, as soon as he's got his wits about him enough to remember the importance of reciprocation, Sirius leans back and shakes his head.

Remus blinks. "No?"

"No, I…" Sirius clears his throat. "I mean, thank you, truly, but I don't really want...that, right now. I just—I wanted to do what I did, but I—well, I'd really just like to be held and kissed, if that's alright."

"If you're sure," Remus murmurs. "I just thought, because you're—well, I can feel that you're —"

Sirius' face glows even brighter. "Yes, ignore that, it will go away. It's—I mean, just a body thing, but *I* don't want…"

"Of course," Remus says simply, opening up his arms without missing a beat, biting back yet another groan of relief when Sirius sinks into his side and curls up against him. "You don't have to explain, Sirius. It's okay. And—and I hope this goes without saying, but you didn't have to—"

"No, no, I know, but I wanted to," Sirius assures him quickly, shifting to tilt his head so they're looking at each other. He's still very red, but Remus is pretty sure that it's because he's telling the truth. Oh, he *really* wanted to. "I definitely—um, I suppose it was…for me, too. Did you—was that okay?"

Remus can't help it. He huffs a soft laugh and reaches up to hook his hand around the back of Sirius' neck, drawing him in to press a kiss in between his eyebrows, where they're wrinkled with uncertainty. "Trust me, it was lovely."

Sirius seems to relax all at once, settling down with a hum as he falls uncharacteristically quiet, studying Remus' face with focused intensity. Remus is equally quiet, helpless to stop himself from taking Sirius in, hungry for each second where he gets to trace Sirius' features with his gaze. The fading color in his cheeks; the natural aristocratic arch to his brows; the dark eyelashes framing his bright, yet softened eyes; the lovely set of his mouth, the tilted lines perpetually at the corners like he's always seconds from breaking out into a grin, his bottom lip a bit more plump than the top one, both equally biteable.

Sirius reaches up and carefully drifts the pads of his fingers over the scar on Remus' face, whispering, "This is new."

"Yes," Remus confirms, in case Sirius is worried that he's forgotten it, even if it didn't sound like he was unsure.

"This happened in Azkaban?" Sirius murmurs.

Remus closes his eyes, humming quietly and just feeling Sirius' caress, basking in it. "Yeah. They, ah… Well, I'm pretty sure it was something to do with the next games, or maybe just a medicinal thing. Servants are often used as test subjects; I was just the unlucky sod that got picked out that day."

"They tortured you," Sirius says softly, but there's an edge to his voice, and when Remus opens his eyes, Sirius' are sharp and gleaming with anger.

"I was taken to the lower level and injected with something, made to inhale something else, and—well, I was a bit off my head from the pain, honestly, so I broke the restraints at my head and hit the tray next to the chair with my face." Remus scans Sirius' face, his mouth dry at the cold rage growing brighter in his gaze. *I almost died,* he doesn't say. He doesn't want Sirius to know that, to be upset about it. The next words out of his mouth are a bold-faced lie, but it's one given with Sirius' comfort in mind. "I don't really remember most of it."

Sirius' throat rises and falls on a harsh swallow. "I'm sorry."

"It is what it is. Just another crater among many," Remus murmurs, offering Sirius a tiny smile. "I do recall you saying something about the moon being jealous of me…"

"Oh, the moon is *so* jealous of you," Sirius declares, breaking out into that grin of his, the one that instantly steals Remus' breath because it's been so long since he's seen it. "The moon is beautiful, don't get me wrong, but it has nothing on you."

"You like my new crater, then?" Remus teases.

"I don't like how you came by it, but you're only more glorious for it." Sirius grins wider when Remus starts laughing, shaking his head incredulously. "No, I'm not joking! Really, it's sexy. Makes you look…raffish."

"Raffish?"

"It does!"

"Of all the words," Remus chokes out.

"Rakish, then," Sirius says. "Rugged. Roguish. Rapscallion."

"Rapscallion."

"Mhm. Absolutely. I stand by it."

Remus' lips curl up. "Well, if you say it, it must be true, then. That's me. Remus, your regular rapscallion."

"Remus the rugged. Remus the rakish. Remus the rapscallion."

"You're so entertained by this."

Sirius releases a shaky laugh and presses closer to him, sliding his hand up and down the side of Remus' neck. "I almost don't know how to act. I thought—I didn't expect—I wasn't prepared for you at all, but I wasn't the first time either, so now I suppose I'm too giddy to be anything other than silly. I'm just—I'm really, *really* happy that you're here."

"You have Pandora to thank for that," Remus says fondly.

"She's absolutely—" Sirius abruptly freezes, and then his eyes bulge before he gasps and bolts up in the bed, scrambling over himself to get up. "Shit, shit, *shit—"*

"Sirius?"

"Fuck!"

"Sirius," Remus calls, louder this time, but Sirius is still stuck in a tirade of curses, berating himself as he dives for the door. Remus heaves a sigh, then gets up to follow him.

"Oh, I'm late. I'm so late," Sirius is groaning in the main room, when Remus catches up to him, a frazzled mess that fills Remus with such fondness he can only smile. "I wasn't even thinking about—I actually forgot—oh, Remus, the *interview,* how'd I completely forget the fucking—"

"Sirius—"

"They already left. They just—left. Fuck. I have to—"

Remus steps forward and reaches out to grab Sirius by the shoulders, halting him, then sliding his hands up to squish Sirius' cheeks, making his lips pucker. He blinks, eyebrows folding together, so unbearably lovely that Remus can only dip in and steal a quick kiss. Sirius leans into it, but Remus doesn't drag it out past a short peck.

"Breathe," Remus orders gently, and Sirius does. "Relax. The others can do one interview without you. They will be *fine.* I'm quite sure if they needed you, they would have waited, and it's clear that they didn't because they wanted to give you time to have a break. And see me."

"But James and Regulus feel better when I'm there," Sirius protests weakly.

"Yes, they do, but I bet they'll feel better knowing that you're taking some time for yourself. Pandora has them. She'll make sure they're alright," Remus assures him.

"I—" Sirius visibly hesitates, glancing at the door before looking back at Remus, chewing on his lip. "Yeah, they—they probably won't mind, right? Pandora knows what she's doing."

Remus chuckles. "Exactly."

"Sorry," Sirius mutters, fully deflating. "I'm not trying to run off and leave you. I'm supposed to be giving you a—" He suddenly stops, and in a mimicry of a few moments prior, his eyes bulge as another gasp rips from his lips. He reaches down to grab Remus' hand, and then he's on the move, dragging Remus along behind him. "I can't believe I forgot!"

Remus could not be more in love if he tried.

"What is it *now?"* Remus asks with rising affection as they reach the room and Sirius drops his hand to dart around with all the finesse of a tornado, frantically searching for something.

"I just—oh! *Aha,* there you are!" Sirius announces in delight, carelessly tossing his coat aside and scooping up the envelope Remus threw across the room earlier. Remus raises his

eyebrows as Sirius whips around towards him, eyes bright, chest heaving. "Okay, sit down. Now."

"I'm sat," Remus says, once he is indeed perched on the edge of the bed, watching Sirius curiously. "What is it?"

Sirius comes over to sink down next to him, taking a deep breath. "I—I have something for you. I didn't think I would get to give it to you until—well, I thought it'd take another six months, but no need to wait now."

"Alright," Remus muses, flicking his gaze down to the envelope, then right back up. All he can think is that Sirius wrote him a letter in the last six months.

"I'm not even sure where to start to explain," Sirius mumbles.

"Uh huh." Remus snorts. "Oh, come on, out with it."

"I…" Sirius swallows, then blows out a deep breath and sits up a little straighter. "I met your dad."

Remus freezes, his smile fading as his heart seems to give a harsh kick in his chest. Sirius watches him closely, and Remus feels a cold drip of fear slide down his spine. "You what? You met him? *How?* You—you don't know what district I'm from."

"Twelve," Sirius says quietly. "You know how the victory tour works, Remus. I met him the very first day when we—"

"But there's no way you could have known, Sirius, not unless you—you asked around to find out, and you can't *do that.* You can't—that draws attention to him; it puts him in danger!" Remus bursts out, his heart hammering in his chest. "I purposefully didn't tell you which district I was from—"

"Yeah, you purposefully didn't tell me a lot of things," Sirius cuts in coldly, his gaze sharp enough that Remus instinctively snaps his mouth shut, dread sinking into his gut like a stone.

"Sirius," Remus croaks.

Jaw clenched, Sirius shakes his head sharply. "No. Don't. Not now. Just—look, I didn't go asking around about you or your dad, Remus, I promise. In the mayor's office, there was a picture of your dad, and you look a bit like him, so that's how I knew. I did ask a few people in the district for directions, but I was very discreet, so no one thought much of it."

"You didn't ask anyone in the Hallow?" Remus checks.

"No, I'm not that fucking stupid, thanks," Sirius snaps.

Remus grimaces. "I wasn't—"

"I met your dad," Sirius continues, his voice losing the edge to it with every spoken word. "He's a lovely man, by the way. We talked for a bit, and I offered to bring you a letter from him."

"No," Remus whispers, his gaze dropping to the envelope as a lump forms in his throat. "That's—that's not a letter from him. He didn't write me a letter. He *wouldn't."*

"Remus—"

"No, Sirius, you—you don't understand. My dad would never take that risk, especially not for __"

"But he did," Sirius tells him, his voice softening, likely due to the fact that Remus has just choked on his words. "He did write you a letter, this letter, and took the risk for you. He loves you, Remus, so very much."

Remus' shoulders wrench up as he chokes out a harsh breath, his eyes stinging as he ducks his head. It takes everything in him not to break down crying immediately, and some part of him still doesn't understand, doesn't fully believe it. Lyall has never, would never, do anything defiant to the Hallow. Not out of loyalty, but out of self-preservation, and he spent years trying to get Remus to be the same way for his own safety.

"Remus," Sirius whispers, "take it."

"I—I—" Remus swallows with difficulty, blinking the tears out of his eyes as he lifts his head. Sirius is watching him with so much compassion, holding out the letter. Remus' fingers tremble when he reaches out to grab it. "Is it really him?"

"It is. I promise," Sirius murmurs.

Remus stares down at the envelope, slowly turning it over in his hands. A beat later, he looks up. "You didn't open it."

"Of course not," Sirius replies, frowning. "It's yours."

I love you, Remus thinks, and he almost just blurts it out, only refraining because he has the feeling that there's a lot they need to talk about before love comes up in conversation.

He does love Sirius, though. Loves him dearly, with every defiant bone in his body. This man, who doesn't even realize the importance of what he's just done by giving Remus an unopened envelope. Remus, who owns nothing. Remus, who has nothing. Remus, who is not granted privacy or freedom for anything like this, for anything at all.

"Thank you," Remus chokes out.

Sirius gives him a flickering smile and leans over to kiss him on the cheek, squeezing his arm gently before standing to his feet. "You know, your dad went off to write that letter alone, so I suppose it's only fair you get to read it alone. I'll go out and make us some tea. You come out whenever you're ready, yeah? Unless you would prefer me to stay?"

Of course Sirius gives him options. *Of course.* "No, I—I'll be out there soon," Remus says. "Um, a bit of milk and two sugars for my tea, if you don't mind."

"I remember," Sirius tells him, flashing him a quick smile, and then he walks out and shuts the door gently behind him.

Remus stares after him for a long time once he's gone, just breathing, and then he looks down at the envelope. A part of him wants to rip it open frantically and devour the words in an instant, but a much bigger part wants to go slow, to savor every stroke of ink on the paper.

To someone who has not had anything to genuinely claim as their own, other than the very mask that symbolizes each restriction he'll never escape from, this letter means the world. Remus is so very careful when opening it, refusing to cause even the slightest rip in the envelope, let alone the letter. When he draws it out and opens it, he does so slowly, delicately, like it could turn to ash at a moment's notice.

My son, the letter starts, and that's all it takes. The first two words, and Remus already has tears spilling out of his eyes.

I hope this letter finds you as the one delivering it has assured me it will. I would like for this letter to be long and full of all the countless things I desperately wish I could tell you, but I think brevity would serve us all well. To be honest with you, I fear no words I could write would ever properly express how much I miss you every day, nor provide adequate summary for the love and concern that I feel every time you cross my mind. I'm proud to admit, as a father, that not a day goes by where I don't think about you. Days of thinking of our last fight has taught me many things about regret, and I want to tell you now that the only regret I truly have is not assuring you, even in our differences, that I would always love you and support you through anything. If you doubt anything else, do not doubt that, because I will always love you, no matter what; I will always be proud to call you my son. I, too, can only be grateful to hear that you have found happiness in possibly the last place I could have ever

expected it to exist, so smile and laugh and love, and never stop, never change who you are, not for anyone.

Remus folds over the letter and cries so hard that his stomach constricts; deep, gasping sobs spill out of him as he cradles the paper to his chest and misses his father like a small child.

It's been years since he's allowed himself to think about Lyall, to miss him, and it's hitting him all at once now. He held it at bay, like that proved something, like if he didn't let himself feel this way, it meant that he wasn't looking back on the past, on who he was determined to be, with regret. Still too proud to be wrong, too proud to admit that maybe, just maybe, he does wish he could go back and do it all so differently.

Because admitting that—facing it—can't change anything now. It's too late. He's already here, and he'll never see his dad again. He'll never get to go home.

When Remus was very young, Lyall used to pack Remus his lunch for school every day, and each day, he left a little note for him to read. Just three sentences every day, only three, because they had made up a little code between them. Every second word in a sentence made up a secret message. Every day, that secret message was *I love you.*

Slowly, Remus unfurls and reads the letter over again, slower, noting the second word in each sentence, and by the end, he has to fold forward and weep again as the secret message echoes through his head, and through his heart.

Hope would be proud of you, too.

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Sirius gets an odd sense of deja-vu when Remus comes into the kitchen, because for a moment, all he can think about is how Lyall looked after writing the letter. Remus, too, clearly cried over it, and it's obvious to Sirius that he doesn't want to acknowledge this fact, much like his father.

There's also another source of deja-vu, which comes from seeing Remus enter the kitchen, like he's seen many times before, just six months ago. Sirius is still marveling over the fact that he's here; he's really, actually here. That outweighs everything else, all the questions banging around in his head, all the countless things that Sirius wants to talk to Remus about. Genuinely, it feels like all he can truly do is just stare at Remus and be amazed that he's here.

Two days ago, Sirius learned that Remus killed people, and somehow that seems so trivial when Remus is within reach. It's not a trivial thing, or maybe it shouldn't be, but Sirius can't find it within himself to make it a priority. Basically everyone Sirius knows is a murderer, so really, that doesn't bother him very much.

Of course, Sirius *does* have a simmering level of upset bubbling within him, countless questions, and a growing need to make sure Remus knows that Sirius is angry with him. It's just… Well, there's a lot of layers to his anger, so he's not even sure where to start, and Remus eyes him a little warily like he's picking up on all those layers, every single one.

"I feel like I'm in trouble," Remus mumbles as he approaches the counter, stopping a few steps across from Sirius, clearly debating on whether or not it would be a good idea to come closer at this particular moment. He chooses to stay right where he is, which is a wise decision.

Sirius pushes Remus his cup of tea and says, "Oh, you are, but that can wait. First, are you alright?"

"I'm—yes, I—" Remus struggles for a moment, his throat bobbing, and then he exhales explosively and looks at him with soft eyes full of something warm and adoring that does admittedly weaken Sirius quite a bit. "I can't even begin to thank you for what you did, Sirius. You—you have no idea how much this means to me. I'm—thank you. Just. Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me," Sirius murmurs. "I wanted to do it, Remus. You deserve that, and more. That's all I could do, so that's what I did."

"You are the most considerate man I have ever known," Remus whispers, looking down at his cup of tea, but he doesn't lift it up. "I'm not going to lie, that makes me feel a lot worse about the fact that I'm currently in trouble."

"You sure you want to talk about this now?" Sirius asks, unable to keep the sharp edge out of his voice.

Remus takes a deep breath, then blows it out and looks up at Sirius. "What did I do?"

"You tell me," Sirius retorts.

"Yeah, I was worried you'd say that." Remus' eyes sink shut, and he turns to lean back against the counter, rubbing both palms over his face. When he drops his hands, he opens his eyes and glares at the wall. "I thought you said you didn't give a toss what my crime was, and I didn't have to tell you."

"You passive aggressive *prick,"* Sirius hisses, plopping his tea down. "Don't you dare turn this around on me. I never demanded a damn thing from you."

"Really? Because you're rather pissed off about not getting something for someone who didn't expect anything," Remus snaps, crossing his arms.

Sirius can feel his blood beginning to boil. "Maybe I'm pissed off because you didn't feel it was important to mention anything before you *fucked me."*

"What does that have anything to do with this?" Remus asks in disbelief. "My crime—what, are you saying that I'm not allowed to have sex just because I—" He stops, blinking, and then he looks over at Sirius. "Wait, is that part of the reason you struggle to let yourself accept pleasure, even though it was *literally not your fault?* Sirius—"

"Don't fucking lecture me right now!" Sirius bursts out, raising both hands and flapping them around. "I don't know all the reasons, but that's probably one of them. And—and it doesn't *matter,* anyway, because my acceptance of pleasure is entirely separate from my sexual desire; they're two different topics, and we are not talking about *either* right now."

"What *are* we talking about?" Remus asks sarcastically. "If I'm honest, it's not very clear."

"You know what?" Sirius huffs out a weak laugh and shakes his head, running his tongue over his teeth. "Doesn't matter. Forget it; knowing me, I probably will anyway."

The moment Sirius starts to turn away (and stomp off in a fit of dramatics), Remus groans and calls, "Wait. Just—okay, wait, I'm sorry. Come here. Don't leave."

"If you're not going to have a fucking conversation—"

"No. No, I will. I promise I will. I'm just—I don't…"

"Do you want to know why it's so upsetting?" Sirius asks, turning back around, lips pressed into a thin line. "It's not because I ever secretly wanted to know. I didn't go to your dad's expecting to find out what you did; I went just so I could do something for you, and for him. That's it. *He's* the one who let it slip. I didn't ask, and *then* I didn't let him explain further, because I wanted to hear it from you. And yes, this does have to do with sex—not my acceptance of pleasure, but *sex.* Because I need trust to have sex, Remus. Not just me trusting you, but you trusting me, and it feels like I fooled myself into thinking it was there, but it turns out it wasn't."

"What?" Remus rasps. "No, it was. I—I didn't keep it from you out of mistrust, Sirius. It wasn't that."

"Are you sure?" Sirius challenges. "Because when I stood before you and told you about how *I* felt about being a murderer, you didn't say a word. And I didn't get a choice, Remus. I didn't get to decide to keep that from you, or anyone, because it was live for the whole world to see. You knew that about me from the beginning, all of it, everything. What did I know about you? Hm? Your mum and dad's name. Your best friend's name. A few little details here and there, but that was it, and you know *everything* about me."

"So, you did expect more from me," Remus whispers.

Sirius feels like he's about to pull his hair out. "No! That's not what I'm saying. You don't have to give me anything, not ever. I didn't ask for anything, or push you, not once. But that doesn't mean you're completely blameless in this. You know so much of my problems, especially around sex, and I'm upset because you—you let it happen *knowing* that the trust wasn't an equal exchange, and that's not fair. I'm upset because I trusted you, and I don't know if I can anymore."

"I told you, it wasn't mistrust, not to me. I—I didn't see it that way, so I didn't even *think* about it like that. If I suspected that it would hurt you, I would have never allowed it to happen, Sirius, you have to know that. I need you to know that," Remus tells him earnestly, almost desperately. "I swear to you, I trust you more than I trust *myself,* honestly."

"Then—then what was it?" Sirius asks, completely at a loss, confused now because he genuinely doesn't understand.

Remus swallows harshly and tips his head back, blinking hard and rolling his jaw. His voice is thick with emotion when he starts speaking. "Sirius, I told you once that you see me at my worst every day, and it's true. I'm a servant. A criminal. I have nothing to offer, nowhere to go, and literally no value as a human being in the eyes of the Hallow. You were the first person to look at me like I was worth something in five years, and I—I just wanted to be someone who deserved that. I wanted to—I wanted to exist outside of what I had done. I wanted to be free from it."

"Remus," Sirius whispers, stricken, all of his anger evaporating on the spot when it clicks, when he finally understands that Remus keeping this to himself had nothing to do with Sirius at all. It really *wasn't* mistrust.

"I never once thought you'd look at me differently, or treat me differently," Remus chokes out, his eyes shining with building tears that wrench at Sirius' heart. "I just liked getting to be someone who was actually worthy of you."

"Stop it," Sirius croaks, shoving forward to reach for Remus just as Remus hunches in on himself and breaks down crying in earnest. Sirius reaches up and wraps his arms all the way around Remus' shoulders and where he tucks his head down against Sirius' chest. Remus folds into him and cries, and Sirius holds him, rocking him gently and ducking his face down to press it into Remus' hair.

For a long time, that's all they do. Sirius' heart is in tatters in his chest, because Remus crying and being upset genuinely throws him into instant distress. He rubs Remus' back and kisses the side of his head over and over, trying to smother him in comfort, but Remus seems to have a lot of backed-up emotional release he needs to work out.

Sirius doesn't try to stop it, knowing it's probably about a lot of things. His dad, missing Sirius, the torture he's endured, and possibly many other things that Sirius doesn't know about. That's alright. Sirius doesn't need to know to be sure that he wants to take care of Remus through it.

So, he does, and Remus eventually calms, his tears coming to a slow halt. He stays where he is for a bit, and then he lifts his head to choke out, "I'm sorry, Sirius."

"Shh. Listen to me. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Your worth is not measured in your past, or even your present, but rather in you, Remus, and you are invaluable," Sirius says softly. "To me, to this world, to anyone who knows you, you are *invaluable."*

Remus' expression crumbles all over again, his breath punching out of him in yet another harsh sob, and he tucks himself right back into Sirius' arms like he never left.

Sirius holds him through that, too.

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Remus sips his tea, failing to meet Sirius' eyes at the moment. It's very good tea. Just like he likes it.

In all honesty, Remus doesn't think he's cried that openly or that hard with another human being other than Lily. She's the only person he's ever trusted to do it with, but now there's Sirius, too. Because Remus does trust Sirius. They built trust between them, and despite this hiccup, he still believes in the foundation of it. There's nothing wrong with needing to strengthen it, though, from time-to-time.

"It wasn't just me," Remus announces abruptly, finally raising his gaze to meet Sirius'. "My crime, I mean. I didn't commit it by myself. Lily was there with me."

"Remus, stop," Sirius murmurs. "You don't have to tell me. I shouldn't have—I mean, I don't like to talk about the things I've done either. I'm not entitled to—"

"No, it's fine. I—want you to know," Remus cuts in, his voice thick. "His name was Fenrir Greyback, who I killed."

Sirius nods slowly. "And the others?"

"The others? I…didn't kill anyone else," Remus says, baffled.

"Your dad said *people.* He said you killed *people,"* Sirius explains. "As in—multiple."

Remus frowns. "Well, I didn't. Honestly, I only killed one man. I was there; I would know. I'm not lying—"

"I'm not saying you are," Sirius tells him quickly, raising both hands in surrender. "He—maybe he meant Lily? Or maybe he just…didn't know?"

"There were—I mean, people were chasing Lily, even after I was captured, so…maybe?" Remus can't be sure. He'll never have the full answers. "It was—well, it was people, yes, but specifically Aurors. Greyback was an Auror."

Sirius' eyes bulge. "You *killed* an Auror? Remus! That's—"

"Mental? I know," Remus mutters. "Trust me, I know. They're the enforcers of the districts and quite literally Hallow weapons, so this was insane of us to do, I'm very aware. It's not like we planned it. We—we didn't know it would come to that. If we knew, maybe…"

"Remus, you really don't have to talk about it."

"Yes, I know. It's not something I enjoy talking about, but I do think you should know, Sirius. Greyback had it out for my father for practically half my life, just because my dad had a bad day and said something he shouldn't have, just once. By the time I was twenty, the feud had shifted mostly to me."

"What did your dad say?"

"Well, Greyback was a part of the new wave of Aurors that came in after my dad retired, and remember I told you my dad didn't like how they did things? Yeah, so he made that pretty clear to Greyback, who didn't appreciate the sentiment."

"And you said that anger shifted to you?" Sirius asks.

"I was…" Remus licks his lips and tips his head to the side, huffing a soft laugh. "Well, I was a bit...mouthy."

"Why do I feel like that's understating things?" Sirius mutters dryly, one eyebrow sweeping up.

Remus scrunches his face playfully. "Yeah, it is, quite a bit. Ah, my craters? The ones on my back?"

"Greyback," Sirius says, eyes narrowing.

"Mhm," Remus confirms.

"Just as an aside, I don't even blame you for killing him. Like, I've heard enough at this point to not even need further context to understand why the world's better off without him."

"Yes, well, I'm going to give you context anyway."

"Alright," Sirius says levelly, nodding.

"Greyback regularly came into my home and did his little mandatory checks, which was just him basically tearing the place apart. He knew he wouldn't find anything, of course; he just loved the excuse to be a fucking prick. Mum and Dad took it with grace, generally, but I usually caused trouble. One day, he showed up to my house with his usual team of Aurors, but my parents were out. Lily was over. It was just me and her when they busted in. She knew these things happened to my family, but she'd never seen it before. Greyback only singled us out because of his hatred for my dad, and then me, so she'd never experienced anything like it."

"She was scared."

"She was *furious,"* Remus corrects with a snort. "Make no mistake, Lily was no flower. She was as wild and reckless as I was, at times. We were—I don't know, just always on the same wavelength all the time. When she was level-headed, so was I. When she wasn't, I wasn't either. We did everything together, sometimes even just—feeling."

Sirius' face softens. "I'm the same way with James."

"Yes, well, take it from me—be careful with that," Remus says quietly. "Perhaps if one of us had been level-headed, it wouldn't have gone as it did. We were sixteen when that happened.

My mum was still—" He stops. Starts again. "In any case, Lily and I were both upset and furious at the world, so we decided to—to find some way to get rid of him."

"Not by murderous means."

"That was not the original plan, no. Greyback was an Auror, and that comes with rules, all of which I knew intimately because my dad was one for over thirty years. I knew there was no way Greyback was following all the rules, because he was just not the sort who would. So, we intended to find solid proof and turn it in."

"I take it that didn't happen," Sirius says.

Remus sighs. "Almost. We found the proof. It took us three years. I mean, some of that time was just—everything being on pause after my mum died, but we never entirely gave up on it. I couldn't give up on it, especially because—" He swallows and squeezes his eyes shut. "On the day my mum died, I wasn't there. I wasn't with her in her last moments, because I was passed out at the whipping post. By the time someone let Lily know, and she helped get me home so she could take care of me, my mum was already gone."

"I wish," Sirius murmurs, low and dangerous, "that you hadn't killed Greyback. So that I could. Slowly."

"That might be the sexiest thing I've ever heard you say," Remus informs him, opening his eyes to stare at Sirius. He goes right to fury, not stopping to pity him, and Remus finds this unbearably attractive, honestly.

"Tell me he died slowly, at least," Sirius grumbles.

"Well, he didn't die peacefully, I can tell you that." Remus clears his throat. "After three years, Lily and I finally found the proof we were looking for. Solid, indisputable proof, I mean. We broke into his house and checked his computer, where we found that he'd been stealing money from district funds and sending it to a woman, who we assumed he was either in love with or paying for sex, and both were against the rules, as was stealing the money."

"You just…didn't get to turn it in," Sirius whispers.

"No, we didn't," Remus says softly. "That's actually what we were on our way to do. Just bad timing, because Greyback came across us, and he never really missed a chance to harass me. He wanted to search Lily and I, but we had—well, what we'd stolen, so we…resisted. Just tried to get him to let us go on our way, but of course he didn't. He started trying to pat me down, so I shoved him away, and things…escalated."

Sirius swallows, his eyes wide.

"He had his gun," Remus continues, his gaze drifting off to the side. "It—it all happened so fast. He was going to put it to my head and threaten me into complying, but we got into a scuffle, and the gun was—was waving around. We were both trying to keep it pointed away from us, and then Lily sort of just—started strangling him. I think she was trying to make him pass out so we could run, but the gun went off before that ever happened. It was me that pulled the trigger. To this day, I don't know if I meant to. I just know I didn't regret it."

Sirius blows out a deep breath. "Shit."

"Yeah," Remus agrees with a hoarse laugh. "We had to run. The others heard the gunshots, and they'd either kill us or take us, so we ran past the train tracks for the first time, and they chased us. It was—we couldn't both make it. There was no possible way with them closing in as they were, so I—I told Lily to keep running, not to stop for anything, and I gave her the gun. Then I circled back and made them chase me in the opposite direction. I got caught, and I never saw Lily again."

"Fucking hell, Remus," Sirius murmurs, reaching up to swipe his palm over his mouth.

"Do you want to know the worst part?" Remus whispers, a lump in his throat. "Every day, I'm so vividly aware that, if things had gone just a little differently, then it would be Greyback here instead of me."

"I'm sorry," Sirius breathes out, stepping forward to reach out and slide his hands up and down Remus' arms. "I'm so sorry that *any* of it happened to you, Remus. None of it was fair. He should be here, not you. You're not a bad person, you know. How could you think that this makes you less worthy? You didn't have any more control in it than I did."

"That's just the thing, though. I did. I could have stopped it, if I just left it alone, if I just… gave up. My dad was constantly trying to get me to stop causing trouble, and if I *listened—"*

"And what? Keep putting up with the harassment, the mistreatment, the abuse of power? You had *every* right to respond as you did. Just because it went wrong doesn't mean that *you* were. You weren't. You were right, and you don't need to feel like you're a bad person because of this, not at all."

"Except I don't regret it," Remus declares bluntly, his voice steady as meets Sirius' gaze, holding it. "I feel no remorse for killing Greyback. None. I'm glad he's dead, and I'm glad I'm the one who pulled the trigger."

Sirius clears his throat violently. "Yes, well, you're justified in feeling that way. Also, if you're expecting me to find that appalling—well, do I have some news for you."

"Oh, is that doing it for you?"

"It's—it's certainly doing something. We should—do you want to go back to bed? I can give you a blowie again. Can I?"

Remus stares at him. "I tell you all of that and your response is that you'd like to suck my cock?"

"Um." Sirius blushes that lovely blush of his, and Remus could never have imagined that he would be laughing after the conversation he just had, and yet, here he is.

He can't help it. He just cracks up, and Sirius groans, lifting his hands to cover his face, blatantly mortified. Remus is still laughing helplessly when he reaches out to tug Sirius' hands down and reel him in, grinning against his cheek, kissing him and kissing him in between breathless laughter full of relief.

Sirius' face is warm against his lips.

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"You said something earlier."

Sirius hums idly, eyes closed as he drags his fingers repeatedly through Remus' hair, his other hand drifting gently up and down the side of Remus' arm. Remus is all curled up against him, practically on top of him, and Sirius really enjoys the weight of him. He also finds it terribly adorable that Remus is essentially letting Sirius coddle him after the emotional upheaval of the last hour.

"About a difference between your sexual desire and your acceptance of pleasure," Remus continues in a mumble, picking lazily at one of the buttons on Sirius' shirt.

"Right," Sirius mutters, cracking open one eye. "Yes, and?"

Remus lifts his head and rests his chin on Sirius' chest, eyeing him carefully. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I mean, it's not—I never really thought about it, until you, but they're two separate things," Sirius murmurs, his eyebrows crinkling together as he tries to come up with the proper words to explain it. "I suppose I—well, for a long time, I sort of thought that my struggles to accept pleasure influenced my sexual desire, and perhaps it does make it more complicated, but I'm me because I'm me, not because of what's been done to me. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," Remus says softly, eyes clear, patiently listening.

Sirius purses his lips. "It's—I never really realized it, because I suppose I never thought about it, but it's always been this way. Not feeling sexual desire, I mean. Like, I went into my games at sixteen, but I'd never done anything by then. Not even alone, and you know, most people do at least do that, just to give it a try, or because it feels good. But, honestly, it literally never crossed my mind. I just…couldn't be bothered."

"No?" Remus asks curiously. "Because the moment I realized I had a right hand, it was over."

"Filthy," Sirius comments with a snort, and Remus grins at him, lopsided and flirty. It does make Sirius' stomach fill with butterflies, yes, but he can't be blamed for that. "But no, I just literally never cared to, or thought about it. Then, well, there was Mary. We'd been friends for years before I ever actually formed a crush on her, and it wasn't until I did that I actually had the desire to do anything at all."

Remus nods. "Tell me about her. Mary."

"Ah, she's lovely. Still a close friend to this day, someone I trust wholeheartedly. We grew up together, I guess you could say. We went to the same school, and we actually didn't live too far from each other before I moved into the Victor's Village. She was the first person who ever did my makeup when I was, like, twelve. So, by the time I was sixteen, I was pretty sure that she was…it, for me, you know?" Sirius muses.

"Not really," Remus replies thoughtfully. "I wasn't really the type to think in terms of settling down, not back then."

Sirius chuckles. "Yes, well, I'd never felt the way I did for Mary for anyone before. It was very new, and it was also really exciting, or that's how I remember it anyway. You can ask Regulus and James; I walked around for a solid month making everyone call me Mr. Sirius Macdonald."

"Stop, that's adorable," Remus chokes out, laughing quietly.

"A bit embarrassing, looking back. Mary was lovely about it, though. I never actually asked her out. I just failed to keep my crush a secret, and she eventually confronted me about it. Oh, I was so nervous, but—but in a good way, I think? I can't really remember most of it, but she was so nice about the whole thing. I think we dated for a week before I was ready to even kiss her, and she didn't mind at all."

"That's really sweet, Sirius. You two never…?"

"No." Sirius clears his throat and shakes his head. "I went into my games not too long after, and I wasn't… Well, we never actually broke up, technically, so I suppose you could argue that we're still dating, since we never had that conversation."

Remus arches an eyebrow. "Is your girlfriend aware that you have a little something on the side?"

"Believe it or not, yes," Sirius teases, grinning. "Mary knows me too well. She clocked me about two weeks after I got back. I never said a name or your position, just admitted that I met someone. She was happy for me."

"She sounds brilliant," Remus murmurs.

Sirius' face softens. "She is. In any case, we never broke up, but I was a mess after I got back from the arena. It was just one of those known things, I suppose. It wasn't until over a year later that we actually really sat down to talk, and it wasn't the same. *I* wasn't the same. She'd had a girlfriend at the time, too, so there were no hard feelings or anything. Most of all, we were friends, and we still are to this day."

"Does it make you feel…better? Knowing that your sexual desire and acceptance of pleasure is separate, I mean?" Remus asks, pressing his head up into Sirius's hand, silently asking him to continue running his fingers through his hair, because he'd gotten distracted enough to stop.

"Yes," Sirius admits, picking up the movement of his hand again. "I don't even know if it bothered me before, really, but I do like being sure now. I'd say that my acceptance of

pleasure, or my struggles with it, have nothing to do with my sexuality. I'd also say that my sexuality is probably another reason for my struggles to accept pleasure, realistically, but there's a lot of reasons for that, so it's not necessarily the fault of sexual desire itself. More like…it wasn't something I ever had to sit down and think about, or confront, because I never really cared to *have* pleasure, not for a long time."

"But you do now."

"I do now, yes, because of you. I did before with Mary, too, but that was a long time ago, and it didn't get to go anywhere. It also wasn't a struggle for me back then. I mean, I was nervous, yes, and I needed time, but I was—I don't know, innocently excited about it, I guess? There was no…guilt. Or shame."

Remus' lips tip down. "And there is now, even with me."

"Not *because* of you, or my sexuality. Like I said, that's entirely separate." Sirius sighs. "No, this is—it's the Hallows. Because of what they believe I am, and how bad it makes me feel to think it might be even a little bit true. I'm—I've gotten better about it, I think, especially with your help. I spent so long being exposed to everyone else's sexual desires that I sort of struggled to be okay with my own, but it's—it's really nice getting to be excited about it again."

"Are you? Excited?" Remus checks. "Because, earlier, you said you didn't know if you could trust me anymore, and I—"

Sirius *tsks* and tugs on his hair a little. "Shh, I know what I said, but that was when I was under the impression that *you* didn't trust *me.* I—I need a level of trust between us for sex to even be an option, a desire I have, and that's all I meant. But you do trust me. I know that now."

"I am sorry, you know."

"Hush, I know. It's okay, Remus. We talked about it."

Remus searches his face and mumbles, "Is that why you wouldn't let me reciprocate before? Because, at the time, you weren't sure about the trust?"

"I…" Sirius frowns, blinking. "You know, actually, I'm not entirely sure about that one. I don't think so. I *genuinely* didn't want to get off. Seems a bit mental, I suppose, but all I really wanted was to cuddle and kiss after making you feel good. I don't know, maybe that's odd to you, but for *me,* it's fucking exciting. Like, it's just all so…new, and I liked it. That I wanted to do that for you, *with* you, but didn't want it in return. And you just—let me. I like that, too. That you just roll with it, and you don't get offended or anything. Because I think it's going to be different; sometimes I'll *want* you to reciprocate, and other times I probably won't even want to do anything at all. I like that I can trust you just to be—okay with all of it."

"So, I'm—I'm getting it right?" Remus asks, blinking at him slowly, paying attention like this is very important to him. It is, Sirius realizes, and it makes his heart clench when he works out that Remus wants to treat him well.

"You're getting it right," Sirius confirms, ducking his head forward to press a gentle kiss to Remus' mouth, unable to stop himself from grinning in delight, full of love.

"I'm sorry I didn't get it right before," Remus says, yet again.

Sirius groans in exasperation. "Oh, stop it, would you? Please don't fret about it, Remus. It's —I mean, we've talked about it, and that's… Well, honestly, I think it's good that we did, and I think it wouldn't be good to keep clinging to it. I know you're sorry, and I am, too. It's okay. I promise it is."

"I—yes, well, you're right," Remus admits sheepishly.

"First time for everything," Sirius teases with a wink, ruffling Remus' hair playfully. "You have your mother's hair, you know. Saw a picture of her and you. She was beautiful."

Remus' eyes soften. "She was, yeah. I always looked more like my dad, though."

"Oh, yes, I noticed." Sirius wiggles his eyebrows playfully, breaking out into a grin. "If your dad is any indication of what I have to look forward to seeing when you get older, then I'm a very lucky man. I mean, *whew,* he is just—"

"Sweetheart, I'm begging you, please stop," Remus mutters, squeezing his eyes shut.

Sirius bites his lip, fighting a laugh. "He was wearing *suspenders,* Remus. I could barely contain myself."

"Oh, for fuck's sake—"

"No, really, I think I actually have a chance. We're on a first name basis, your father and I."

Remus opens his eyes and flatly says, "Are you now?"

"Mhm. He *likes* me," Sirius declares smugly. "I made him laugh. I bet if I put in the work, I could—"

"Literally stop," Remus cuts in, reaching up to cover Sirius' mouth with his hand.

"Alright, alright," Sirius mumbles, as soon as Remus lifts his hand. Sirius smiles at him softly. "Anyway, all jokes aside, your dad really was a nice man, Remus. I was very nervous about meeting him, and wanted to make a good impression, ridiculously enough. I think I got his approval, though."

"Did you?" Remus' eyes sparkle with amusement. "That's good to know. He's always been a good judge of character, so that doesn't surprise me one bit."

"I—I did make a complete fool of myself," Sirius admits sheepishly. "So, I may have accidentally told him that we had sex, just blurted it out like an idiot, and then I immediately started panicking as soon as I had."

"I—" Remus blinks. "How would that *ever* even come up in conversation, Sirius? You'd just met the man."

"I was fussing a bit about—well, it was after he let it slip about your *very justified* crime," Sirius explains. "I proceeded to immediately let it slip that I felt you should have at least mentioned it before we had sex, and then it all went downhill from there. I'm not joking, Remus. I *panicked."*

Remus huffs out a soft laugh and shakes his head in what Sirius knows is pure amazement. "You absolute mess of a human being. What did he say?"

"Well, honestly, he just said he expected nothing less from you, and also that it pleased him to know you were still being a rebellious little shit." Sirius pauses. "I'm paraphrasing."

"Obviously. Continue," Remus says, amused.

"He also—well, that's when I made him laugh. When I tell you I panicked, I mean I *panicked,"* Sirius insists. "I was scared he'd think I coerced you, and so I started rambling to explain that I hadn't, then freaked out because I kept accidentally cursing in his house. I confessed that I'm in love you before I ever got to tell you, and he just ended up laughing, but he seemed happy overall to know that you're—"

Sirius stops.

His hand freezes in Remus' hair.

Remus is staring at him, lips parted.

"—loved," Sirius finishes softly, his eyes sinking shut. "Fuck. *Fuck.* Oh, that's not—I didn't—I cannot *believe* that I just—"

"You're in love with me," Remus breathes out, and when Sirius opens his eyes, his heart flips over like it's falling over a cliff from the way Remus is looking at him. "You're in love with me, and you told my dad you're in love with me, and you're in love with me. You love me. You're in love with me."

"Wait, wait, go back," Sirius says weakly. "That wasn't even *close* to romantic. I—I wanted to tell you in a better way. Like, I don't know, with wine or…something. Oh, that was shit. That was absolutely the worst—"

"When did you know?" Remus cuts in, his gaze locked with Sirius', more intense and focused than Sirius has ever seen him. It makes Sirius get very warm, very quickly. "When did you realize? What was your *oh* moment, I mean?"

Sirius frowns slightly, then blinks. "I—I…don't remember." He shakes his head quickly when Remus briefly looks stricken, like he's horrified by the thought that Sirius lost that moment, which would be upsetting, except… "No, not in a bad way. There wasn't a moment that I just knew; it was just…there, as absurd as that may sound. I don't think it's something I lost, Remus. I think it's something I've always had."

There's only a second between the last word falling from Sirius' lips and Remus replacing it with his own, practically crawling up so he can reach, so he can fold over Sirius and kiss him like he's trying to pour himself into Sirius and disappear within him, exist with him always, stay and never leave.

Sirius tangles his fingers in Remus' hair and lets himself be kissed, lets himself be utterly obsessed and enamored with every second of it, lets himself want it and take it and moan into it. Remus kisses him like he's trying to devour him, and it's so good, it feels so good; Sirius can't get enough.

No, he literally hasn't had enough, and so maybe he whines when Remus pulls away, trying rather desperately to pull him back in, but Remus resists to whisper, "The day after the

hunger games, after Regulus got released from the infirmary, when you and I were taking a moment and you started giggling because I told you that you were precious to me. That was my *oh* moment. That's when I knew."

"When you knew that you—you—" Sirius sucks in a stuttered breath, his heart thumping hard in his chest, feeling shaky and faint with excitement and hope and love and want and so many things all at once, as Remus is prone to making him feel.

"When I knew that I loved you. That I love you. That I'm in love with you," Remus tells him.

"Come here, come here, come here," Sirius chants breathlessly, reeling him in and quaking beneath him like a fault line splitting open into a chasm, more space for things to flood into and things to spill out of. He feels so much, all of it good, and only Remus can do this to him.

"Sirius?" Remus croaks as Sirius starts snatching at his shirt and squirming underneath him.

"Sex," Sirius blurts out. "Sex, right now."

That's honestly the best he can do with how urgent he is at the moment, but that's apparently all Remus needs, because he immediately says, "Yep," and starts getting undressed.

Sirius loves him so much.

Chapter End Notes

yeah, that was 10k of nothing but wolfstar. i better not see one person asking about jegulus, or im coming for your kneecaps.

alright, time for me to Not Know How To Shut Up.

idk if all of you have seen the vampire diaries (im exposing myself here, shhh), but to those of you who have, you know that scene where bonnie makes it back from the other

side and she shows up to see damon, and then she just fucking launches herself across the room and literally hops into his arms, legs wrapped around him and everything, and he just lets out a sigh of relief and a happy little groan and clings to her? yeah, that's The Vibe for the hug that happened at the start between remus and sirius. to those of you who haven't seen that scene and have no idea what the fuck im talking about, sorry, you're missing out.

anyway, remus literally did not even say hello to anyone else, and he's so valid for that!!! THEY HAVEN'T SEEN EACH OTHER IN SIX MONTHS 😭 sirius, internally: a guillotine could not sever the head im about to give this man. good for them 😌

shoutout to my girl Pandora "*cough cough* he's sick" Unspecified Last Name for pulling the nursemaid card. she really said: the mentor im responsible for is SICK and i demand someone to come take care of him!!! her brain is so big. i love her.

remus and sirius just lying in bed and gazing at each other, like. they make me feel like i could fight god and WIN. i just wanna squish them and carry them around in my pockets.

the letter!!! THE LETTER!!! remus getting to know his dad loves him and is proud of him and that his mum would be proud of him too 😭😭😭 that's so special, im sorry, he needed that so much. my baby :(

not sirius being the man of everyone's dreams, like even when angry at remus, he's still like: we can fight in a minute, are you okay, do you need a hug? he's so!!! i need him.

but also, them bitching at each other 💀 HELP THEY'RE BOTH SO FUSSY, I LOVE THEM. sirius is so dramatic pls "forget it, knowing me, i will anyway" LIKE DAMN CAN HE BREATHE??? 😭😭😭 yeah, they're all sweet and cute, but i just KNOW they could go at it when pissed off. they're both Very Stubborn. however, mild argument aside, them being healthy and open and honest and just communicating is very, very important to me.

if someone ever called me invaluable to my face, i would also burst into tears, so remus is so valid for that, actually. like sirius is so lovely.

and finally, remus' backstory comes to light. remus and lily "be gay, do crime" chaos twins killing greyback because he was a piece of shit is actually so fair. as they should, honestly. like, it wasn't Planned, but they were not upset that it happened.

it's really fucking sad, though. like, remus wasn't there when his mother died, because he'd been whipped. him and his family suffered years of harassment and the backlash of blatant abuse of power. remus and lily were SO CLOSE to being okay, to never ending up where they are now. they didn't even get to properly say goodbye to their families or each other before it all went to shit, and then they never saw each other again. they didn't deserve that :(

yes im aware that i wrote it, leave me alone

and then, the talk about sirius' sexuality was super important and just like. it's good for him. it's good for both of them. also, just like the fact that sirius is now at a place where he can be comfortable with exploring his sexuality vs his acceptance of pleasure is just so, so very important and a lovely development!!!

finally, the accidental love confession. oh, sirius, you lovely mess, i adore you. he really just casually was like "haha i told your dad im in love with you before i told you" *pause* "WAIT FUCK—" 😭😭😭 he's so special to me. he means the world to me.

remus just being fucking ELATED!!! like, oh he loves me??? STOP THAT'S SO CUTE ☹☹☹ and sirius "unintentionally the funniest and most poetically romantic fucker alive" black just being like: i didn't lose the memory of loving you, ive always had it. GOODBYE THATS SO??? ITS SO SPECIAL??? im gonna cry they mean everything to me

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-james being a supportive best friend and wishing sirius All The Good Things
-regulus being supportive also, but still wrinkling his nose when he hears something he didn't want to
-james kissing pandora's hand (he and regulus are right, we do not deserve her)
-sirius remembering how remus takes his tea!!!
-remus the rapscallion
-sirius teasing remus about his dad
-the hidden message in the letter
-"does your girlfriend know you've got a little something on the side?" REMUS LUPIN THE MAN THAT YOU ARE
-sirius walking around demanding to be called Mr. Sirius Macdonald 😭😭😭
-remus literally not needing to be told twice to immediately have sex with sirius 💀

The Party

Chapter Notes

hello!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past torture (vague and mostly implied)
-discussion surrounding a family member being ill/dying
-references to past violence
-a brief mention of someone being derogatory to sirius about his "reputation" in the hallow—alluding to people thinking he basically uses sex to get what he wants with the hallows, even though he doesn't

that's... im pretty sure that's it, actually. it's a fairly lighter chapter, overall, but don't let that fool you. there is some angst mixed in!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"—and then he said that's when he knew, and we had sex, which was so good, *really* good, because he's actually a fucking marvel with his mouth; no, you don't understand the things he can *do,* James, I mean it," Sirius is rambling in a breathless rush, propped up on the bed with a pillow in his lap, hugged to his chest, eyes so bright that the star he's named after must dripping with jealousy at the moment.

James struggles not to laugh. He's happy for Sirius, truly, but he can't help that he finds it incredibly amusing how giddy Sirius is right now. James honestly doesn't think he's ever seen Sirius get giggly and starry-eyed over…literally anyone. He's so in love that it would be painful if Remus didn't feel the same—though, thankfully, that's not the case.

"What can he do?" James asks, very much engaged in this conversation, mostly because Sirius is so happy and excited about the whole thing. Sirius immediately launches into a detailed description of all the things Remus can do with palpable delight. James can't blame him. It's just so lovely being in love, isn't it?

Most of the time.

James firmly shoves down the rising thought of Regulus that is never too far from the back of his mind. Now is not the time. This is not about him, and it's not about James. No, it's about Sirius and Remus, who are happy and in love and deserve every bit of joy that they get to share between them.

Not that James would know anything about what that's like.

Oh, for fuck's sake, James thinks in exasperation, doing the mental equivalent of swatting himself on his head. He absolutely refuses to be bitter right now. No. Just no.

It's nice, honestly, getting to see Sirius so happy, especially about this. When James got back from the interview—which went well enough—it didn't take very long for Remus and Sirius to resurface from their room; Sirius checked on them and asked how the interview went, and Remus actually fully let them all reunite with him this time. Not that James can blame him for failing to before, because he was sweeping Sirius off to be alone with him. They both look so happy together, just glowing, quite frankly. It sears James open with joy.

In any case, it took less than twenty minutes for Regulus to murmur quietly with Remus, who ended up slipping off with him, much to Sirius' dismay. He did bounce back the moment he realized he could get alone with James, giggling and gossiping with him like they're still stupid boys who haven't been exposed to the worst of the world yet.

Really, Remus being here seemed to just…make a lot of things better, for basically everyone. James himself is happy to see his friend again and know he's okay, and he's especially happy because Sirius is happy. Regulus seems to be essentially feeling the same way, from what James can tell, and it appears to have lifted his spirits quite a bit.

That made for a *really* good interview. James and Regulus went into it with good moods, so they actually did extremely well, if James does say so himself. James was especially bubbly, and Regulus was just very quietly pleased in that secretive way of his that James loves dearly. They put on quite the show, sitting so close together that Regulus was practically in his lap, being delightfully soppy. And Regulus kissed him.

This whole time, they've kept up appearances as a couple, but it's not as if couples walk around kissing all the time, so they were in the clear for that. Regulus wanted to keep it to a minimum, and James has respected that this entire time, keeping his mouth very firmly away

from Regulus' face in literally any capacity. The one time he did anything was today, during that interview, because if there was ever a place…

Still, he only intended to kiss Regulus' cheek, that's *it,* but Regulus seemed to turn into it instinctively, so James caught the corner of his mouth instead, and for a moment, the entire room disappeared. Rita wasn't there. The crowd vanished. The cameras didn't exist. It was just Regulus, how close he was, the way James rested his forehead against Regulus' temple and let his eyes drift shut, just for a moment, feeling him, him, him…

And then James forced himself to pull away, but he didn't get very far at all, because Regulus genuinely just chased his mouth, fully kissing him on purpose, and James *knows* it was real. He knows for sure, because Regulus froze the moment he did it, and when he pulled away, James only needed one glimpse into his eyes to see that he *hadn't meant to.* He hadn't intended to do that, he just got so caught up, and he'd *wanted it,* and James felt like his heart was going to climb right out of his throat and fly around the fucking room. The Hallows, of course, had loved it, but all James could see was the rose-flush that dusted Regulus' cheeks.

In any case, Pandora was pleased, and she showered them in praise all the way back to the penthouse, so James knows they did as they needed to.

There's a knock on the door, and Sirius tapers off, his head lifting at the same time that James' does. Seconds later, the door swings open, and Remus pokes his head in.

"Room for one more?" he asks.

Sirius' face absolutely lights up so much that it's almost painful to look at. "Yeah, always. Where's Reggie?"

"He's upset that he doesn't have a balcony, I think, so Pandora is escorting him to the roof," Remus explains as he slips into the room and dumps himself unceremoniously on the bed, head and shoulders dropping right into Sirius' lap.

"Hes a fussy little shit," Sirius mumbles fondly, lips curling up as he stuffs the pillow under Remus' head and gazes down at him. For a long moment, they just grin at each other, and

James forces down the wistful sigh that rises in his throat.

Remus swivels his head to look at James warmly. "How have you been, James?"

"Been better, been worse," James admits honestly, giving Remus a crooked grin. "Putting up with Sirius being sensible all of a sudden, since he met you. You're a wonderful influence on him, you know. It's terrible."

"Oh, is that so?" Remus asks, sounding amused. He raises his eyebrows up at Sirius, his eyes sparkling with blatant mischief, lips curling at the corners.

"James is just upset because I don't let him be mean to himself, that's all," Sirius mutters, rolling his eyes. "I swear, he's as bad as Regulus sometimes. Never met two people so very different, yet so willing to do the same things."

"Yes, don't be mean to yourself," Remus agrees, clicking his tongue at James in disapproval. "The world is cruel enough to us on its own; we don't need to add to that."

Sirius hums smugly. "Didn't I say he'd feel that way?"

"You did say," James admits with a sigh.

"Oh, cheer up, James," Remus says weakly, reaching out to gently pat his knee. "Look at it this way, you'll get to drink tomorrow night."

"Sirius doesn't let me drink," James replies flatly.

"Well, don't say it like that, James. You make it sound like I'm a strict parent, or a controlling spouse," Sirius grumbles. "And I *do* let you drink, in moderation, when you're in a safe environment and in a good mental state. Don't forget to mention that *you* only let *me* drink within those same rules."

James purses his lips. "Can I drink tomorrow night?"

"Absolutely not," Sirius announces immediately.

"So, no, actually I *don't* get to drink tomorrow night," James informs Remus with a sigh. "To be honest, I'm not sure I'd want to anyway. Not at some stupid Hallow party. Will you be there, Remus?"

"Yeah, I'll be working," Remus assures him with a small smile. "Just a reminder, but you can't talk to me or interact with me at all, alright? It's—if it helps, most people will leave you alone if you're dancing. That's my advice; just take Regulus to the dance floor and don't leave it the whole night, that way no one can bother either of you."

"You've worked one of these before?" Sirius asks.

Remus nods. "Mhm. I was working for the victory tour before I ever got assigned to the actual games. It's only one night, one event, less of chance I'll fuck it up, so that's why I'm picked for it. I was surprised they picked me this year, honestly."

"Really?" Sirius asks.

"This…" Remus reaches up and gently brushes his fingers over the scar on his face. "Most of the time, servants with any notable, distinguishing markings or features are kept out of the lineup for events and such. But ah…there's also—I mean, technically there's a servant shortage at the moment…"

James blinks. "A—what? Like they're…running out? They're fucking *low* on—on—"

"They weren't, but there's been…a lot of experimenting, as of late," Remus says carefully, dropping his gaze. "Not everyone survived it."

Sirius meets James' gaze in seconds, and for a beat, they just stare at each other in heavy silence. James can read the concern, the *fear,* in Sirius' eyes as if he's feeling it himself. He is feeling it himself, because Remus is his friend, and the thought of something happening to him…

It's fucking terrifying.

"But I got off light," Remus continues, breaking the silence, once again reaching up to touch his scar. "Could be worse."

Sirius makes a small, unhappy noise and grabs Remus' wrist to bring his fingers to his mouth, pressing kisses to the pads of them. It makes Remus watch him fondly, his face softening, and then he releases muffled laughter when Sirius folds over to smack a kiss gracelessly to the middle of his face, where the scar is. That lightens the mood pretty much immediately, but Sirius has always been good at that.

"What did I say, hm? Remus the rapscallion." Sirius glances up with a grin. "Go on, James, isn't Remus just so sexy with his new scar? Makes him look raffish, doesn't it?"

"Very raffish," James says supportively. He winks at Remus and waggles his eyebrows. "In fact, Remus, if you ever decide we should ditch the Black brothers, I'm actually so down to __"

"Hey, fuck off," Sirius interrupts, reaching over to smack James on the arm with the back of his hand, frowning.

Remus props up on his elbow and tucks his hand under his chin, smiling at James, slow and warm and honestly a bit suggestive, and James would like to say he's immune, but he is not. Remus *is* very handsome, to be fair. "Oh, I thought you'd never offer, James. Yes, absolutely, we should—"

"I will kill all of us right now, do not fuck with me," Sirius declares, hooking his hands on Remus' arm to rock him back into his lap, ruffled like an offended bird.

James and Remus share a look before busting out into loud, uproarious laughter, and Sirius grumbles under his breath before snatching the pillow out from under Remus' head and whacking them both with it in reprimand.

It doesn't take very long before they're all cracking up and fighting over the pillow, wrestling around on the bed and talking shit like the cruelest parts of the world can't touch them. And it's not very long after that silliness that they're all sprawled out again, talking and joking and laughing like the cruelest parts of the world haven't touched them at all.

They have, of course they have, and they will again; but, right now, James finds that this matters more.

~•~

Regulus can't really figure out why being up on the roof doesn't frighten him. It's high up, after all, so by all means it should fucking send him into hysterics, but it doesn't.

Maybe it's the illusion of a secure ground beneath his feet. Trees don't really have that; branches always break. He thinks about it, the way this building could tip, or the roof could crumble in, and that does admittedly make him feel uneasy, so he stops thinking about it. In any case, there's an elevated ledge that wraps around the entire roof that he can lean against and use to look out over the Hallow.

Pandora is with him. She's leaning against the ledge, too, but not against him. She's quiet, sort of pensive, Regulus thinks. They haven't spoken, instead just looking out over the ledge, comfortable and solemn.

"Do you ever think about how big the Hallow is?" Regulus murmurs, sweeping his gaze over the lights bathing across the city, lighting it up like cheap stars in the dark.

If Pandora is surprised that he's open to talking to her, or talking at all, she doesn't show it. She just muses, "No, not really. I suppose I've never really thought about it because I'm…in it, if that makes sense. But lately…"

"What?" Regulus asks, swiveling his head to look at her.

"Well, lately, I've been thinking about how small the districts seem when they're broken up, but when you think to put them all together, they're bigger than the Hallow," Pandora says softly, her eyebrows furrowed. The breeze stirs her hair.

"I suppose you're right," Regulus replies, mildly startled. He's never thought about that, but… why would he? Like she's in the Hallow, he's just another person from a broken district.

Silence settles between them, mostly comfortable, but then Pandora shatters it with the last thing he's prepared to hear.

"My dad's dying, you know," Pandora whispers.

Regulus studies the side of her face, his heart clenching when he sees the column of her throat rise and fall on a harsh swallow. He doesn't know what to say, so he says nothing.

"And I go to work. Just. Keep working." Pandora huffs out a weak laugh, shaking her head. "I mean, he's alive, just very sick, but I still—I just…keep working."

"Pandora," Regulus says carefully, very carefully, because he honestly isn't prepared for the hurt in her voice.

"You said once…" Pandora turns to look at him, and her eyes are bright with tears. "Do you remember when we first met? And you said that—that Hallows thrive on death, and I said that it's a somber subject for us, too?"

"I didn't—I was just…upset about the circumstances," Regulus mumbles, a lump forming in his throat.

Pandora chokes out a hoarse laugh. "See, it's—it's funny, because I had the audacity to be upset with you for saying that. My dad was dying then, too, and that's the first person I thought of, but look at me now. I just get up and keep working. Hallow really *is* hollow. I—I feel so—"

"Okay. Okay, Pandora," Regulus whispers, tugging on her a little bit as her face crumbles, and she turns into him as soon as he makes it clear that she can.

Regulus doesn't—he isn't one for touching, obviously, but he's finding it more bearable the more it happens, and Pandora... Despite everything, he does nurse a gentle sort of trust in her. He respects her immensely, more than he ever expected to, and so if this is how he can comfort her, he will. She has done so much for them, all of them, and she deserves to be taken care of, too.

Pandora tucks her face against his shoulder and releases a horrible sob, suddenly clinging to him with all her might, rougher with him than she's ever been. He lets her do it without complaint, feeling her hair tickle his nose—smelling faintly of lemons—as she trembles and sobs against him.

Regulus is sure that her ignoring her father's impending death has nothing to do with her not caring, but rather just a symptom of how much she does. There's a reason denial is the first stage of grief, and acceptance is the last. She's not letting herself feel it, or break down, like that could make it less true. It doesn't make her hollow. It makes her human.

And now it's hitting her. The moment she gets still. The moment when the work day is done. The moment that she has nothing to do in the endeavor to avoid it. The day began with her father dying, and no matter what she did throughout, he's still dying by the end. There's no changing that.

"Pandora," Regulus says as gently as possible, not sure how to comfort her, but doing his best anyway, because she always does her best for them. "Hey, look at me."

Pandora shakes her head against him and hiccups out another sob, so he gives in and gives her more time. He keeps his arms around her and rubs her back, reflexively swallowing past the lump in his throat every time another hitched sob spills out of her. Regulus wishes he could go to that day on the train and take it back, what he so cruelly said to her, so carelessly.

"Well, death is a somber subject, generally, except to the Hallows, I suppose. James and I are going to be knocking on death's door soon enough, so you'll forgive us for being a bit...maudlin."

"Death is a somber subject to us, too."

"Oh, how shocking. I thought you Hallows thrived on that sort of thing, but only when it's people like us, right?"

People like us. Because there's an us and a them. Except, right now, us and them are embracing on a rooftop, knowing layers of grief in and out, laden with the weight of losing people in their lives they never wanted to be without. Us is holding them with an aching heart, and them is falling apart. The truth is, the only thing that stands between that us and them is the arena, and when taking the time to reach across that distance from each side, it's startling how not very far it is at all.

"I'm—I'm okay. It's okay. I'm okay," Pandora rasps, pulling away all at once with a sniffle to wipe her tears away and set her shoulders. "I'm—it's—"

"No," Regulus cuts in quietly. "No, Pandora, you're not. And I know what I said before, okay? But you're not hollow. I've never met a Hallow who cares as much as you, so don't you dare blame yourself for how you're dealing with this."

Pandora exhales shakily. "I—I haven't told anyone the details yet. Sirius knows, vaguely, but…I don't know. Talking about it makes it feel more real. They think he has between six months and a year left. A year from now he could be gone—he probably will be—and I don't know what to do with that. He keeps wanting to—to talk about funeral arrangements and final wishes and his will, but I just—I refuse to hear it."

"Do you have any other family?" Regulus asks.

"Just you, Sirius, James, Remus, and all the other tributes I reaped that never made it home," Pandora replies instantly, and Regulus feels his heart shrivel up like a crumpled piece of paper when he realizes that she means it, that she considers them her family. She's lost so much family already.

"Look, I'm not—well, honestly, I don't really know the whole process," Regulus admits slowly. "I've been to two funerals. My uncle Cygnus and my uncle Alphard's, but I was so young, and my family is…very fucking dysfunctional, as I'm sure you've noticed by now."

"Yes, I've noticed," Pandora confirms bluntly.

Regulus sighs. "Right, well, my mother planned both of those funerals and handled all of that. They were her younger brothers, and neither of them had spouses alive, or children around, so it fell on her. I was too young to really understand it, honestly, and I can't promise that I'll be much help—or that Sirius and James would, because I don't know—but, when the time comes, you can come visit us if you need to."

Pandora seems to relax all at once, blinking tears out of her eyes as she gives him a wobbly smile. "Thank you." She turns to lean on the ledge again, blowing out a deep breath. "We've come a long way, haven't we? You hated me at the start."

"Yes, well, it's a common theme with me to find that my hatred isn't as strong as I always convince myself it is," Regulus mutters with a heavy sigh.

"Do you want my advice?" Pandora muses, then doesn't wait for an answer. "Doesn't matter, I'm going to give it to you anyway. Despite the fact that all of this is shit—the pretending and such—I don't think you're as trapped as you believe you are. And I mean that as, like, you and James when you're alone. Maybe that could be separate from all this, if you tried to let it be. You don't gain anything from not trying at all, Regulus."

"No, but I don't lose anything either," Regulus murmurs.

"Don't you?" Pandora asks gently, and Regulus feels those words bounce around in his head and choke him on the way down, ricocheting through his entire body, ping-ponging between the high points of his shoulders and swinging around the rungs of his spine before settling into the cavern of his center, etched into the walls of that deep place neither in the gut or the back but that fathomless unknown that lives in between, where survival and want are sourced from.

Don't you? Don't you? Don't you?

Doesn't he? Isn't he always? Hasn't he lost enough?

Yes, Regulus answers internally. *Yes, and I am tired of it.*

~•~

Sirius has clearly never had to kick James out of his room or his space before, so it likely doesn't even cross his mind to do so, but Remus has no such qualms.

It's not done maliciously. Remus adores James, honestly, and it's not like James won't be able to come back later. Really, Remus just wants to say goodbye to Sirius alone, not entirely sure if he'll make it through without crying again.

So, he says, "James, I need you to leave," and admittedly gets a bit of a thrill from being able to announce that without even worrying if it's going to get him killed. He trusts Sirius, yes, but he also trusts James, Regulus, and Pandora, too. It's so nice having people in his life that he *can* trust, that he feels safe and secure with, that he feels at home with.

James takes this in stride. Actually, he has a very dirty mind, apparently, because he breaks out into a broad grin as his eyebrows fly up, and he says, "Oh? Sure, sure! I'll just leave you two kids alone. Have fun, don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

"You heathen, just like your parents," Sirius grumbles, shaking his head as if he's not smiling a little. "It's not like *that,* James. He just wants to say goodbye, obviously. It's almost time for him to leave, so *you* should say goodbye now, too."

"Oh," James repeats, this time with more dejection. "Well, that's shit. But yes, come here, let me hug you."

Remus stifles a laugh, but he dutifully crawls off the bed to let James give him a hug, unable to swallow the laughter anymore when Sirius calls out, "Watch the hands, Potter," and James almost immediately starts grabbing suggestively at Remus' arms and commenting on how firm he is. They both get smacked in the side of their heads when Sirius throws the pillow at them, absolutely ruthless with his aim.

James keeps the goodbye lighthearted overall, like he thinks he'll get to do it more thoroughly later, and Remus doesn't shatter the illusion. The only person who knows he won't be back tomorrow and will be escorted to Azkaban after the party is Pandora—and Sirius, here in a minute, when Remus tells him, because not telling him would be too cruel.

With a final smile towards them, James nudges his glasses up his nose and shuts the door, leaving them alone.

"Oh, stop pouting," Remus murmurs as he crawls right back onto the bed with Sirius, who is indeed sulking a bit. "Don't tell me you're actually jealous right now."

"I get jealous of your clothes because they get to be wrapped around you all the time, Remus. Of course I'm jealous," Sirius mutters, waving a hand lazily. "I know you two would never and you're just fucking with me, and it's funny, but also I'm a jealous little shit. James says I'm territorial, like a dog."

Remus snorts. "Well, you did lick his face once because someone else tried to claim him as their best friend."

"And I'd do it again," Sirius says unapologetically. He pauses, then looks amused. "He's not much better, and you think *I'm* bad? Oh. Oh no, Regulus is the *worst."*

"You have stories," Remus notes, and Sirius' eyes light up before he's promptly launching into those stories.

Remus gets to hear all about the situation with Frank, who apparently has a knack for making a lot of people jealous, which Remus does admittedly find amusing. This leads into Sirius explaining about how Regulus stabbed his older cousin in the hand with a fork for touching James, and Remus finds this incredibly delightful. Sirius rambles on and on about all that happened on the tour, talking a bit about his family, and Remus listens dutifully, pleased to catch up with him. He can't be there. He can never be there, so he appreciates that he's included like this. He also just loves hearing Sirius talk, adores the sound of his voice, which is so very lovely.

"What about you?" Sirius asks, by the end. "Are you jealous?"

"I wasn't, before you," Remus admits.

Sirius bites his lip, eyes sparkling. "Are you going to be jealous tomorrow, when I'm dancing with all those Hallows?"

"Yes," Remus murmurs.

"It's okay," Sirius whispers, leaning in like he's telling a very special secret. "The whole time, I'll be thinking of you."

"Promise?" Remus asks quietly, pushing up on his elbow slightly so he can get closer to Sirius, feeling drawn in and drunk on his proximity.

"I'm always thinking of you," Sirius breathes out, and then he holds his breath the moment Remus reaches up to cup his jaw, keeping him still as he rocks in closer. He doesn't quite kiss him, just leans in enough to catch Sirius' bottom lip between his teeth and *tug*. Sirius chokes on his own punched-out exhale, curling forward with a soft moan. He almost sounds startled when he croaks, "Oh, that felt really good."

"Like a bit of bite, do you?" Remus says, lips twitching, and that's about as far as he gets before Sirius releases a groan and practically tackles him back to the bed, kissing him with fervor, desperate, practically trying to climb on top of him. Remus isn't against this at all, and it feels devastatingly unfair that he has to stop it. "Yes, okay, noted. I—I will keep it in mind in the future. Promise. But, unfortunately, there's not much I can do about it now. Sirius, *Sirius,* we have to stop."

"Let's not and say we did," Sirius mutters into the bend of his throat, trying to sneakily slip his hands up Remus' shirt. "I don't even want to do anything, really. Just—maybe what I did earlier. That's all. It'll be so quick, Remus. Can I?"

Remus fucking *hates* being a servant. With a groan, he reaches down to hook his hands around Sirius' elbows to tug him up and basically just squish him down to his chest, wrapping his arms all the way around him. "Don't get me wrong, I would love to give you whatever you want, but I have to go."

"Oh. Right." Sirius deflates against him and makes fussy, unhappy noise. He turns his head to rest his chin on Remus' chest, lips pursed. "Well, there's always tomorrow."

"Sweetheart," Remus says softly, a lump forming in his throat.

Sirius studies him, then weakly mumbles, "The—the morning before we leave, then?"

"I'm sorry," Remus whispers, and Sirius' eyes sink shut. "I know, Sirius. Trust me, I hate it, too. I—I don't have a choice. I'll be with the rest of the servants at Riddle's castle all day tomorrow, setting up for the party, and then I'll be escorted back to Azkaban with the rest once the party is over."

"There's never enough fucking time," Sirius chokes out, tilting his face down to bury it in Remus' chest.

"Hey, I—I wanted to ask for a favor," Remus murmurs, running his fingers through Sirius' hair and waiting for him to lift his head, heart clenching when he sees that Sirius' eyes are wet. "My letter. I can't keep it on me, or they'll find it, but I was hoping that you'd hold onto it for me. I left it in the stand by the bed. It's mine, the only thing I really have, and I can't imagine trusting it with anyone other than you."

"Yes," Sirius whispers, blinking fast and hard. He gives a stern nod, like this is a very important mission—and, to him, Remus doesn't doubt that it is. "Of course, Remus."

"Thank you," Remus whispers back.

"Can I see you at the party?" Sirius asks, his voice strained. He looks so desperately hopeful. "I don't mean just seeing each other across the room, or when I grab a drink from a tray you're carrying. I want to—I want—"

It's risky. It's always risky, between them, no matter where they are or what they're doing. They take the risks anyway, because it's always worth it. Remus says, "Every hour, the servants will rotate out on sweeping through the other rooms on the floor to clean them in case anyone left behind glasses or plates or anything else, usually those who slip away with lovers and such. If you notice when I leave, you can follow. We won't have very long, Sirius, but it's—it's something…"

Sirius quirks a sad smile. "Something is always enough for me, as long as it's with you."

~•~

The day of the party dawns bright and busy, with Pandora waking everyone and rounding them all up at what James knows Sirius and Regulus consider an obscene hour. They're both similarly displeased about being awake, wearing twin scowls that make them resemble one another more than James has honestly ever seen. It's oddly adorable.

James is an early bird, so he's doing alright. A bit tired from waking up through the night with nightmares, but that's routine at this point. He's used to that by now.

Pandora makes coffee that they can all drown themselves in to wake up, except Regulus doesn't like coffee, so James gets up to make him a cup of tea since Pandora doesn't know, Sirius is close to falling asleep again, and Regulus just—won't. He's the suffer in silence type, James knows, and he can't really stand by and do nothing about it when he's aware of it. Does that make him pathetic? Well, he's always pathetic about Regulus. He's used to that by now, too.

The thing is, he doesn't resent it. Truly, he doesn't hold any resentment for his inability to ignore Regulus in any capacity. Most of the time, it actually comforts him. And, on occasion, it gives him little moments to fold up and keep warm in his chest, something to cherish.

Like now. Regulus looks genuinely startled when James brings him a cup of tea. He doesn't even seem to realize it's for him at first, but the moment it clicks, his eyes get a little wide and his cheeks get a little red. It feels like a reward, frankly, and James hides his smile as he turns away. Regulus cups his tea between both palms like it's the most precious thing he's ever been given, sipping it slowly and coming more alive while Sirius downs coffee like it's his life source right next to him.

Pandora gives a rundown on what to expect at the party, which amounts to what James was expecting already. He and Regulus are technically the guests of honor, so a lot of attention will be on them through the night. People will want to talk to them, dance with them, just… be around them. It's probably going to be unbearable, honestly, but once they get through this, they'll be out of the spotlight for the most part.

At the party, they have to eat at some point, so they won't be seen as ungrateful. They have to meet government officials, shake their hands, and basically charm them. They have to meet sponsors, especially those that donated for them in their games, and essentially express immense gratitude. They have to be seen mingling with the other mentors that are all traveling for the party today, including the mentors of those that they personally killed, like a further sign that the horrors of the arena are something people can just—brush off. During all of this, they have to be friendly, polite, and seemingly happy, all while putting on a show for their romance.

To say that James is nervous would be an understatement.

Nonetheless, the day slips by, and it's not long before everyone is ushered off to Dorcas, who will not be going to the party but looks absolutely gorgeous as always. She isn't wearing her *Hallow is Hollow* necklace, and James can't remember the last time he saw it, but she is adorned with plenty of pretty accessories that he keeps getting distracted by, quite literally enamored by shiny things. It makes her smile.

"You look beautiful," James tells her honestly. "Well, you always look smashing, honestly, but you get what I mean."

Dorcas chuckles. "I do, yeah, and thank you. Here, turn for me; ah, thank you, my love. You look beautiful, too, by the way."

"All thanks to you."

"Mm, no, true beauty has nothing to do with what we can see, James. It's something else entirely. You shine with it."

James feels ridiculously bashful. "You think so?"

"I do," Dorcas confirms.

"Do you think…Regulus thinks so?" James mumbles weakly, because he's a glutton for punishment and also very pathetic.

Dorcas swivels to stand in front of him, her face softening as she meets his eyes. "I'm sure that he does, even more than anyone else in this world, and I think it blinds him. I think, for him, you shine so brightly that it's hard for him to see you."

"I want him to see me," James whispers.

"Don't worry," Dorcas assures him, "he can't really ever look away, and I think his eyes are starting to adjust."

James can't stop himself from being pleased by the thought, ducking his head as he starts fiddling with his cufflinks, too struck with the hope she's invited into his heart to do anything other than rock back and forth on his heels and beam down at the floor. Dorcas gently tugs his hands from his cufflinks and gives himself something else to fiddle with—her tiny clutch that has a clasp he can click and unclick over and over while she flutters around him and finishes getting him ready.

Seeing as they're all arriving as a unit in one group tonight, making impressions as a team effort, Dorcas is essentially getting them all ready. By the time she gets through with all of them, they each look so pretty that James could honestly cry.

She's got Regulus in a fucking turtleneck made of that soft, cashmere material that makes him look warm and domestic, which makes *James* wants to crawl inside the material with him and just live there. As for Pandora, she's put in a pantsuit, except the coat hooks into a belt and flows into a bit of a cape or train sort of thing that James knows he'll be reminding himself constantly not to step on; it looks brilliant, though. And Sirius has been stuffed in black pants that look painted on and one of those silk shirts that swoop down in the front, not showing too much, but showing enough that people will wistfully dream of seeing more, no doubt; oh, and she's also trusted him in a pair of high-heeled black boots that make him actually taller than James for once, though only by an inch or two.

After that, all that's left to do is get escorted to the castle, which they apparently have to do in carriages again, even though James finds it a bit ridiculous when they could literally just take cars. It's annoying getting in and out of the carriage, which is so high up off the ground—higher than a car would be—and puts some strain on his leg. It makes him wish he had brought his cane. Also, the carriages are pulled by something called a thestral, which is just a very unnerving animatronic steam-engine horse-like creature that runs on technology that allows them to be coded to be revealed only to those who have seen death in person.

Sirius says it's a symbolic thing, like tributes coming in don't often get to see the thestrals during the introduction parade, and only the Victor can see it by the time the victory tour swings around. James thinks it's morbid, and it doesn't help his feelings that the thestrals are really fucking creepy.

The whole way to the castle, Sirius and Pandora keep giving him and Regulus reminders and encouragement, which is appreciated but doesn't help James' nerves. Though, honestly, James doubts anything could help anyway. Or, he thinks that until Regulus' fingers abruptly cover the side of his hand, hesitating only a moment before sliding up to push between the crevices of James' own. Their hands link together, and James forgets to be so nervous because he's too busy looking at how well their hands fit.

James' inner delight at having Regulus' hand in his is quickly dashed away when he realizes why.

They've arrived.

Pandora piles out first, and Sirius is right behind her, hopping out in heels like it's effortless. For a second, neither James or Regulus move, and then they share a quick look before making their way out of the carriage. Regulus goes first to help him down, for which James is grateful.

James is pretty much immediately overwhelmed the moment they make it into the castle. They're led into a huge ballroom full of people. It's all glitz and glam, flashy colors and eccentric styles, tinkling laughter and prying eyes. There's a very long table displaying so much food that James is sure is wasted on these people, as well as servants bustling around with trays of food and drinks. While there isn't a bar, there is a table full of different glasses of wine and champagne.

The first hour of the party goes by in a rush. James honestly doesn't have time to be worried about much of anything, because Sirius insists on them getting certain things out of the way first, just to be sure that it's done. Meeting the sponsors is first, and James doesn't even have to pretend that much to be grateful when talking to each and every one. Yes, they may have demanded a show, but they did nonetheless provide the money that saved his life—and helped Regulus as well.

Regulus clearly struggles with it, but James suspects he's going to struggle with everything tonight. This is basically a nightmare scenario for him. He *hates* socializing, James knows that, so he tries to do most of the heavy-lifting for him, and Sirius picks up a lot of the slack as well. They're very good at being charming, *especially* together, and they leave each person smiling and satisfied.

Pandora does the heavy-lifting with the government officials, which they get out of the way next. As a Hallow, she at least knows their names, and they all basically follow her lead. It's a different feeling, because these people have power.

James feels very, very dirty after shaking all their hands and essentially acting like what they do isn't wrong, like what they do doesn't trickle down and affect the districts, like what they do hasn't created poverty and death and suffering. They may not make all the rules, but they're happy to enforce them, very willing to keep others down so they can rise higher.

He's grateful when Sirius ushers them away and promises them that they don't have to seek any of these people out anymore. Just like that, they can avoid them the rest of the night. All that's left is mingling with mentors and dealing with any other guest that demands their attention.

Sirius and Pandora are there with them for the first half of the mentors. The ones that Sirius doesn't like, or isn't close with. Lucius and Yaxley, for example. It's about as tense as expected, honestly. Lucius is the worst.

"Be careful not to stab anyone tonight, Regulus," Lucius says, lifting his wine in a toast with a faint smirk. "This is a formal event, and I don't think your little…romance will be enough to keep you out of trouble forever."

"Fuck off, Malfoy," Sirius retorts sharply, before anyone else can say a word.

"You never know when to watch your mouth, do you?" Lucius replies, his lip curling up in distaste.

Yaxley snorts. "No, but he clearly knows how to use it." He nods at Sirius, specifically the mark on his neck that James knows for a fact Remus left there. "If their romance can't keep them out of trouble, Sirius using his body out sure will."

Regulus and James step forward at the same time, their hands breaking apart because they're prepared to use them, but Pandora swings her arm out to halt Regulus and Sirius catches James by his chest quickly, keeping him still. There's a tense moment where a group of murderers all stare around at each other, not opposed to adding a few more names to their lists. Oh, and Pandora is there, too, startlingly calm despite this.

"Yes, Yaxley, make it more obvious how bitter you are that the Hallows don't find you desirable in the least." Sirius flashes him a sharp smile. "You know they don't settle for less than the best, and it's not my fault that's clearly you."

"Some of us have standards, Black," Yaxley snaps, bristling.

"Is that what you tell yourself each time they turn you away?" Sirius coos, laughing when Yaxley glares and starts to move forward as well, only to be stopped, too. Sirius hums. "Well, we're done here. This year's Victors have more important matters to attend to, you understand."

"We'd understand better than you," Lucius declares. "After all, you've never turned a tribute into a Victor before, have you? Shame you didn't care about any of them as you do your best friend and brother, or you might have gotten them home."

Sirius goes stiff next to James, his expression hardening, and James feels such a strong wave of anger rock him that he doesn't even care when he finds himself saying, "Hey, Reg, remember that time you cut off Mulciber's hand?"

"Yes," Regulus responds immediately, his voice cold.

"Felt good, didn't it?" James asks lightly, watching Lucius' lips press into a thin line.

"Felt fucking fantastic," Regulus announces, without missing a beat. "I only regret that I didn't finish what I started."

James grins at Lucius, who is clearly pissed off. "That's alright, love, I took care of that."

"Mm, that's true," Regulus muses.

"But you handled Avery anyway," James says. "It's a shame their mentor didn't prepare them for us, huh?"

Regulus hums. "A real shame."

"Next year," Lucius hisses, looking right at Sirius, "I'll ensure your tributes don't make it past the first day."

"Oh, I'd be careful with that, Lucius," Sirius snaps, glaring at him. "Didn't work out so well last time, did it?"

Lucius steps forward, eyes flashing. "You little—"

"Like Sirius said," Pandora cuts in, "we're done here."

With that, Pandora gives Lucius and Yaxley such a cold, withering look that they actually stop and shut up, though that may be just because she's a Hallow. James isn't sure. Either way, Pandora says they're done, so they're done. No one protests when she sweeps them away.

They get through a few more mentors that Sirius only knows vaguely, and most of them are polite, but distant. A few are drunk already, which is sort of sad, honestly.

Sirius is lost to them the moment they come across Marlene, Frank, and Emmeline. He instantly asks Marlene to dance, only to receive a laugh and a simple *in your fucking dreams, Black* that makes him clutch his chest as if he's been shot. Emmeline takes pity on him after

that—or, well, she just steps forward and says she'd like to dance, so Sirius perks up and sweeps her off to the dance floor.

Marlene wanders away to go get another drink, apparently, and then there were four. Frank swings his head between James, Pandora, and Regulus.

Finally, Frank clears his throat and says, "So, James—"

"No," Regulus interrupts before he can even finish, his eyes narrowed into slits. He drops James' hand to clamp down on his arm instead, pulling him away without warning, leaving Pandora and Frank alone together.

"And where are we going?" James mumbles, helplessly amused, maybe a little entertained.

"We're dancing."

"Oh, are we? You know, typically people *ask—"*

"Shut up and dance with me," Regulus cuts in with a huff, clearly grumpy, unable to wipe the scowl off his face.

"Alright, alright," James says with a quiet chuckle, tugging Regulus in by his hand while slipping his arm around his waist to pull him closer.

Regulus is painfully tense in James' arms, stiff like he's struggling, like he's fighting some inner battle. What James would not give to join him on the frontlines and help him win, or die trying. He just doesn't know what to fight, so he can only watch from the sidelines and hope he can provide enough support that will help see Regulus through. In short, he keeps Regulus close, because he has to be close right now, in this setting, and he doesn't draw attention to the fact that Regulus is fighting at all.

They're surrounded by people dancing all around them, people that do double-takes when they realize it's *them,* and they're no doubt being watched by people on the sidelines, but thankfully, no one is close enough to hear what they're actually saying.

James still keeps his voice low when speaking anyway, just to be safe. "What are you even jealous of?"

"He likes you," Regulus grumbles.

James clicks his tongue. "Probably just as a friend, for one. For two, even if he did, it wouldn't really matter. You know that."

"Right, but he's—" Regulus abruptly cuts himself off, though it doesn't really seem to be on purpose. He's just finally turned his head to look at James, and now he seems quite stuck. All earlier annoyance is gone, like it evaporated on the spot. They sway slowly, and Regulus stares at James with his lips parted.

"What?" James asks.

Regulus swallows. "You look nice."

"You look like home," James whispers, because it's the first thing that falls out of his mouth, just the simple truth.

It's only four words, but they must be made of magic, because Regulus practically melts. James *feels* it. Regulus genuinely just softens all over and sinks into James, sliding his arms over James' shoulders to hook them together behind his neck, pressing them closer together. All the fight goes out of him, just like that. James adjusts, wrapping his arms around Regulus' waist. They keep on swaying, so close now that they can't even see anyone else.

"I'm sorry," Regulus rasps.

"For what? For kissing me yesterday?" James asks, watching him closely, because yes, he wants to talk about it.

"I—that was—it was necessary," Regulus starts, tension slowly seeping back into his frame.

James scoffs. "Don't lie to me. You think I don't know you well enough to know when it's just pretend, or when it's real? Give me a little more credit. I know that was real."

"Did you—did it upset you?" Regulus asks carefully.

James hesitates, and Regulus gets that panicky look in his eyes again, the same look he had the night he asked to sleep with him. It tugs at James' heartstrings every time, and every fucking time, James fails to turn him away. How can he? He loves Regulus. He doesn't want to reject him, not ever, even if it hurts to keep letting him close without having him at all.

"It's—it's complicated," James settles on.

Regulus takes a deep breath, and when it comes back out, it's a hoarse laugh. "Yes, things always are with us, aren't they?"

"Not this," James muses, pointedly pulling Regulus in even more to indicate what he means. "Do you think it's this easy in that other life of ours? I imagine this is how we dance in that life, just this close, by the firelight."

"I've been imagining it since I was ten," Regulus croaks. "In my head, we're always alone."

"We can be alone," James tells him. "We can leave right now and go somewhere no one can find us. I'm sure we have options in a castle as big as this one."

"We can't," Regulus says. "We're supposed to—

"I don't give a fuck what we're supposed to do," James cuts in brazenly. "You know what they'll assume we're doing."

"Running away," Regulus mutters.

James sighs in exasperation and fond amusement. "No, Reg. *Fucking.* They'll assume we've snuck off to find a corner to go fuck in."

"Oh," Regulus chokes out, a flush spreading in his cheeks, his eyes bright as he inhales sharply and holds his breath, biting down so hard on his bottom lip that James can see the white imprint his teeth leave behind. It's so tempting.

"Don't look at me like that," James whispers, every inch of him focused with full interest now, his stomach swooping as heat skitters beneath his skin and floods his veins.

"I can't help it," Regulus whispers back, shakily exhaling.

"Well, I need you to stop," James croaks. "Because I—I can't do this. I can't, Regulus, especially not now, not this week when we're pretending like this. I can't do it and know it doesn't change anything, not this time."

Regulus looks stricken. "Do you regret last time?"

Last time. Oh, last time. That last day in the Hallow, when it was just them, when it was their choice and their wants, even before they were ready. That was the last time they touched each other while not in front of a camera, or a crowd, until this tour. That deep and all-consuming kiss, and the many that followed. Looking back, James wonders if it was a parting gift, the finality in a goodbye to something they'd never get to have.

"Yes," James rasps, because he does. He said he wouldn't, and he does. It makes him ache. It makes him *yearn.* It makes him want it again, want it to hurt, want more.

"I knew you would," Regulus says, his eyes sinking shut.

"I can't help it," James murmurs, an echo to Regulus' earlier words. Regulus' eyes drift open. "I can't help how I love you."

Regulus makes a small sound, quiet in the back of his throat, and then he's melting forward further to try to bring their mouths together. James dodges it carefully, turning his head to press their cheeks together instead, ducking his face down as he squeezes his eyes shut. It's the first time he's ever rejected Regulus, ever turned away from anything he's offered, and it feels like it's breaking his heart, too.

"I'm sorry," Regulus chokes out. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, James, I'm so sorry. I know I'm—I know, I'm sorry."

"Regulus, hey, it's not—it's okay. Just breathe," James says, peeling back to watch him warily. "Look, I don't blame you for what you can't do, alright? Honestly, I don't think I can do it either, especially not during this, not here."

"I've been so cruel to you, asking for too much and giving basically nothing," Regulus tells him, almost frantic, his words spilling out of him. "I've ignored you, because I—because I'm so fucking scared all the time, and having to pretend just makes it harder, but I also can't leave you alone. I can't stop wanting—I still want—and I'm losing you over and over again. I keep losing you, and I hate it. That's why I hate you, because I can't have you, because even when I could have you, I'm not ready, or I'm too scared, or people want to claim it for themselves, or all three, and I hate everything. I—"

"Regulus," James cuts in quietly.

"I hate you, and everything, and everything except you," Regulus whispers, his whole body strung tight like he's about to crack in half. "I'm losing you. I know I am. You're getting tired

of me, I can *feel* it, and I can't even blame you because I'm tired of me, too. I—I hate me, most of all."

"Regulus, I need you to stop, and I need you to breathe," James tells him, rubbing his hands up and down Regulus' back, his heart clenching violently in his chest over and over. He swallows past the lump in his throat and leans in to press their foreheads together, breathing in and out, waiting for Regulus to copy him. "Listen to me, alright? I'm not getting tired of you. I could never get tired of you. I am tired, yes, but it's not because of you. It's because of the shitty circumstances, and me…setting boundaries and stepping back a little does *not* mean you're losing me."

Regulus breathes in and out, slowly, matching James' pace. Together, they inhale and exhale, repeating the cycle until it seems to feel more natural to him again. His fingers flex on James' shoulders, and he keeps pressing closer like he wants to open him up and crawl inside, maybe hide within him. He said James makes him feel safe, and James doesn't think anything has ever made him feel as simultaneously strong and weak as knowing that does.

Slowly, in increments, Regulus settles again.

"I know that our feelings towards ourselves are often more harsh than we deserve," James continues softly, "and I know that it's not as simple as deciding to love ourselves, but I do think putting in the effort to try is worth it."

"I don't even like myself," Regulus confesses quietly.

"That's a tragedy," James murmurs, "because you're one of my favorite people. I wish you knew yourself as I know you."

"What if you're wrong?" Regulus rasps.

James leans back and meets his eyes. "What if you are?"

Regulus looks at him, holding his gaze, and there's so much turmoil there in his eyes that James is sure he could get sucked into the whirlpool of complexities and never find his way out. He's really struggling with all of this, and frankly, James isn't doing much better, but in their own ways, they're trying.

Regulus swallows thickly and mumbles, with no warning or lead up, "Are you still going to bring me flowers?"

"Yes, Regulus, I'm still going to bring you flowers," James promises gently, his lips curling up.

"Okay, well, if—if you—just, if you ever knock, I'll invite you in for tea," Regulus says softly. "If that's okay. You don't—I mean, obviously you don't have to come in, but you can if you want. I'd like you to. I…hope you will."

"That'd be nice," James admits.

"Some days, I don't talk," Regulus informs him. "I just—can't. It's not as often anymore, but there might be some days where I won't be good company at all."

"You don't have to talk." James reaches up to grab Regulus' hand, loosely tangling their fingers together. "We can sit in complete silence, and I'll just be happy to be with you, so long as you want me around."

"I always want you around," Regulus murmurs.

"Well, you can have that any time," James assures him. "You don't have to give me anything to…earn me, Regulus. If you want to see me, then see me. If you want to sit with me, then show me to the proper chair."

"I want—" Regulus hesitates, then tugs on their joined hands, pulling them up to his mouth, though he doesn't touch. He peers at James through his eyelashes. "Can I?"

James swears his stomach goes tumbling down a hill, his heart shivering in excitement in his chest. "Yes."

Regulus closes his eyes and presses gentle kisses over James' fingers, the hills of his knuckles, the curl between his thumb and pointer finger. He does it with reverence, like James' hands are divine, meant to be worshiped, like they've never once been covered in blood. James has to hold his breath, every part of his body singing in pure delight.

It just keeps going, on and on, Regulus only getting more eager with each kiss, desperate almost. He nudges James' hand open to trail warm kisses down his palm, to the hill below his thumb and then over the bend of his wrist. He presses his mouth to the pulse there, right beneath the skin, lingering for a long time. James struggles to breathe.

James is scared he's going to cry. Like, actually? No, seriously, his eyes are stinging something fierce, and he's never—he hasn't ever felt anything like this. He desperately needs it to stop and simultaneously hopes that it never ends.

"Reg," James croaks, blinking hard.

"These hands—your hands should be worshiped," Regulus says, like it's just an offhand comment, and he actually looks slightly displeased that there aren't shrines built in his hands' honor. "I adore your hands."

James swallows. "They're—they destroy things now, when they never did before. They're rough sometimes. Bloody."

"Warm," Regulus counters, pressing another kiss to James' shaking fingers. "Steady. Strong. These hands hold the people you love. These hands care for them. They're gentle. Tender." He turns James' hand slightly and kisses the space in between his thumb and index finger, that line where the grip of a hatchet would rest. "I can't stand to be touched, most of the time, but it's your touch I miss most of all."

"Regulus, *Regulus,"* James whispers urgently, fingers twitching against Regulus' mouth, and his voice cracks because he's ridiculously choked up right now.

"Your hands are so beautiful. You're so beautiful, James," Regulus tells him, lifting his gaze so their eyes will meet and lock. He looks like he means it, like he wholeheartedly believes it. There's something peaceful in his eyes as he tips his cheek into James' open palm, resting it there, and he closes his eyes in such a way that feels so vulnerable, so *trusting,* that James can't breathe for a moment. Regulus stays there and breathes out, "Being touched by you is being blessed by divinity. I know I'm not worthy, but I crave it ceaselessly all the same."

"I thought I was the devil," James chokes out.

"You're that, too. You're everything to me, baby." Regulus turns his head and presses another kiss to James' palm, eyes still closed. Again and again, he rains down more kisses to his fingers, looking like he's sipping salvation right out of the palm of James' hand.

"Okay. Okay, okay, okay," James chants breathlessly, rocking forward to press their foreheads together again, wrapping his free arm around his waist. He tangles their hands once more and breathes shakily as he starts tugging them in slow circles again, unsure when they stopped. "You—you can't do things like that to me. What did we *just* talk about?"

"Sorry," Regulus mumbles.

"Fuck, please don't apologize," James wheezes. "You're amazing. You're just so fucking lovely, Regulus. You don't even *know,* and it kills me. You have no idea what you do to me."

Regulus is quiet for a moment, and then, "I think, most of the time, despite my best efforts, all I do is hurt you."

"That's not all you do," James whispers, "and even when you do, it feels so fucking good. I can't get enough of you."

"Remember your boundaries, James."

"You've just blown them all up. I could not give less of a shit about them at the moment. Come here. I miss you. Oh, I—"

"No," Regulus cuts in, tilting his head down so James can't kiss him like he was desperately trying to. "You said no, you said that's better for you, and I will respect that, James. I'm not doing something you'll regret, not again."

James groans. "Fuck, I'm so *stupid.* Can you just—forget I said that? Please? I've forgotten it already. See how easy it is?"

"No, James," Regulus says with a quiet huff of gentle laughter, but he soothes James by wrapping his free arm around James' neck and bringing their joined hands between their chests. He ducks his head to press a gentle kiss to them, then leans in and rests his head on James' shoulder with a soft sigh. "I'll get it right. If I cannot climb, I will grow."

"What's that?" James asks.

Regulus just hums. "Nothing to worry about. Just dance with me. Let's just dance, James, just me and you. This is ours, even though we're not alone."

"It's ours," James agrees. "It's just me and you, love."

And it is. They're close together, swaying in slow circles and from side-to-side, holding onto each other, utterly alone in James' mind. Because, to him, the whole room—the whole world—has disappeared, along with everyone in it. There's no one else. Nothing else.

Just this and just them.

~•~

Sirius has danced with no less than eight people, because Emmeline abandoned him at some point to go hunt Marlene down for a dance—which, Sirius notes, did not work out for her, clearly, because she's now dancing with Pandora, who likely offered when she either couldn't find Marlene or when Marlene refused. Marlene doesn't like to dance.

So, Sirius has resorted to dancing with various Hallows, either sponsors he counts on each year, or sponsors he's hoping to count on next year, because the job never really ends for a mentor. Even now, he's putting in the work.

Meanwhile, James and Regulus are secure where they're at, so intimately wrapped up together that no one even bothers them. Well, a lot of people watch them, and there are giggles and whispers carrying around the room, but Regulus and James look so damn peaceful together that, thankfully, no one seems to have the heart to attempt to cut in. People do seem entertained by the way they're hardly even dancing at all, their arms wrapped around each other as they lazily sway, like an excuse just to hold onto one another.

Sirius won't lie, he's ever so slightly envious, because he doesn't get to slip his arms around the one he loves and feel everything else fade away. Instead, he dances with people he doesn't actually care about, taking a spare few seconds between each partner to repeatedly locate the one man he'd leave them all behind to be with.

It's easy for Sirius to find Remus. He did the moment he walked in the room, and he's found him countless times since. There he is, the most beautiful bastard in this room in nothing but grey, unflattering clothes and a black mask that covers basically half his face, and yet he puts everyone else to fucking shame. The fact that no one else notices it just further proves how stupid and lifeless they are, too blinded by flashing lights and fake smiles to see true glory right in front of them.

Remus isn't always looking at him—he does have other tasks to focus on, sadly—but this time, he is. Every time he *is* watching Sirius, he's doing so with a hooded gaze, something so intense in his eyes that it has the ability to send a shudder up Sirius' spine from all the way across the room. There's something more this time, a significant sort of look that makes Sirius' stomach swoop with anticipation.

"Excuse me, Boris," Sirius says politely, adopting an apologetic smile and stepping back. "I'm a tad tired. Just need a small break for now, but don't you worry, I will be back to steal another lovely dance with you."

Boris just chuckles, not seeming offended in the least by his abrupt departure, and he slips away from the dance floor quickly. Most people seem distracted by James and Regulus as it is, so Sirius gets away with relative ease. No one stops him on the way out, and he slips down the hall, further and further away from the party that grows more muffled in the distance.

On this floor, there's at least three other wings just full of different rooms for…who knows why, honestly? Sirius doesn't care. He gets far enough away that he can't hear the distant sounds of the party, picks a door, and leans against it to wait.

He doesn't have to wait too long, thankfully. Eventually, there's the sound of quiet steps, and his head swings around to see Remus moving up the hall, barely even glancing at him when he stops by the first room, knocks, waits a moment, then slips inside. Sirius goes into his own room, mildly bemused to see that it's a service closet full of cleaning products. Well, too late now. He couldn't have picked a room with a bed?

Sirius holds himself still until Remus reaches him, but the moment Remus comes in and peels his mask off, Sirius surges forward to kiss him, only to be a little disoriented by the height change. He's still not taller than Remus, even in the boots, but he's nearly his height, so the kiss lands a little off-center.

"Oops," Sirius breathes out, rocking back and blinking.

"A bit taller than usual," Remus notes with a small smile, his hands sliding down Sirius' sides. "Also, the utility closet?"

"I didn't know what it would be until I got in here," Sirius complains, slipping his arms around Remus' shoulders and leaning into him. He doesn't even have to stretch up to press their foreheads together. "How long do we have?"

"Only a few minutes, at most. I'm sorry. I know it's not enough time, but—"

"It's something."

Remus hums and tilts his face forward to brush their mouths together, soft and sweet. "It sure is. You look beautiful, by the way. I like the heels." He slips one hand up to run his finger gently down the center of Sirius' chest where his shirt swoops open. "I like this more when I'm the only one looking at it."

"Me too," Sirius admits.

"The amount of people drooling over you tonight…" Remus shakes his head, both hands settling on his hips, flexing.

"Yeah, them, whatever," Sirius says carelessly. "What about *you,* though?"

"I can barely do my fucking job because you're so distracting," Remus informs him, kissing a slow path along his jaw.

Sirius' breath hitches, his eyes fluttering shut as Remus nips down at the skin of his throat, the catch of teeth sending a ripple through his entire body. He feels faint and fluttery again, as Remus often makes him feel, and his desire comes trickling through for one thing and one thing only, at the moment. All he wants is Remus' mouth against his own.

He winds his fingers into Remus' hair to tug gently, making a quiet sound that's probably appropriately labeled as needy, but he doesn't care because it works. Remus responds instantly, lifting his head, and then it's so very easy for Sirius to have what he wants, because Remus' mouth is *right there,* and Remus just lets him have it with no issue whatsoever.

Sirius wants to do this forever, all the time, constantly. He just wants to kiss Remus every day, and hold him, and have him. He doesn't necessarily feel *whole,* or *complete,* because he doubts he'll ever feel that way, no matter what. But he doesn't have to suffer that horrible feeling of missing Remus, yearning for him, wanting him and not being able to have him. There's nothing to worry about, nothing to be scared of, when he has Remus this close,

because Sirius can keep him safe and make sure nothing happens to him. He loves him. Oh, he loves him so much, with every steady beat of his heart.

"I love you, Remus, so much," Sirius whispers when Remus slowly peels away from him. "I know you have to go. I know you do, but I just—I want you to know that I miss you already. We never have enough time, but I'm so fucking glad that I've gotten to see you again. I'll—I'll keep that letter safe for you, I promise, and I'll see you in six months."

Remus takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out, then starts to lift his mask, but Sirius reaches out to catch his wrist and rocks forward to duck his head, pressing a kiss to the inside of it before swiveling his head to kiss Remus again. When he pulls away, Remus is smiling at him, soft and adoring.

"I love you, too," Remus whispers back. He leans forward to bump their foreheads gently together, sighing wistfully, then pulls back. "Wait a few minutes before slipping back out to the party, and don't forget to take care of yourself. See you in six months, sweetheart."

With that, Remus clips his mask back on and eases right back out of the room like he never entered it at all, and Sirius takes the few minutes he has to wait to press his hand over his mouth and squeeze his eyes shut as the building sob in his chest fights to get out. He traps it there, feeling it fester, but knowing he can't give into it, not this time.

When Sirius returns to the party, he does so with dry eyes and a beaming smile, no one around him realizing that he's aching except the beautiful bastard in the mask, when he finally returns, who can do nothing but watch from afar.

Chapter End Notes

starting from the top!

remus, james, and sirius <3 just them hanging out and chatting made my heart so warm ☹☹☹ remus telling james to be nice to himself! sirius making james agree that his boyfriend is sexy, then Instantly Regretting It! james and remus flirting just to tease sirius! them getting into a pillowfight!!!

pandora, my love 😭 first of all, let me end the allegations right now. she is not a secret daughter of dumbledore's or something. her dad is someone unspecified in the background who will never be met and is indeed on his deathbed while his daughter is out there taking the world by storm, as she should!!! but she's sad and dealing with it, and like, having that moment between her and regulus was so, so special to me. theyre friendsssss!!! they trust each other!!! regulus willingly touched and comforted her (or did his best to)!!! just the whole rooftop scene holds a special place in my heart. also pandora giving regulus advice and a reality check in one whack! her powerrrrr

remus and james saying goodbye, and then remus and sirius saying goodbye 1.0 😭😭😭 not the "there's always tomorrow" and "sweetheart..." WHY DID THAT BREAK MY HEART??? THEY DESERVE ALL THE TOMORROWS IM SO UPSET

yes, i know i wrote it, we've been here before. i Had To, for the progression of the story. no im not pleased about sirius and remus separating again either

anyway, dorcas my beloved <3 don't worry, we see more of her (and marlene) in the next chapter, but it's one of those "be careful what you wish for" things. yes, there is dorlene angst on the horizon!!!

but dorcas getting james ready and the little parallel between regulus' (about james) "i don't want him to see me" and james' (about regulus) "i want him to see me" LIKE THAT'S A THESIS STATEMENT!!! IS THAT NOT THEM??? IS THAT NOT THE DYNAMIC??? sorry it gives me The Brainrot when i think about it too much

also james just being adorable by liking shiny things and fiddling with dorcas' purse and being bashful when she called him beautiful and beaming at the ground because she essentially said regulus likes him a bunch!!!! AHHHHHHH I NEED TO BITE HIM!!!!

and then The Party. well, The Party Part 1, because we see some more of it in the next chapter, but still.

first, just james and regulus, like, dropping everything and being ready to throw hands the moment someone insults sirius!!! yes, go ahead kings!!! me too, honestly. lmaoooo james and regulus being little shits and pissing lucius off! as they should. it came from a place of anger, not a place of Actually Being Proud of their actions in the arena, but hey! at least they're in a place where they can actually talk about it, so...progress?

anyway, not regulus being a jealous little shit, then forgetting it the second he actually Looks At James like, starry-eyed "oh he's so pretty" GOODBYE. he was mesmerized 🥰 then james saying that regulus looks like home??? the fact that regulus thinks of james as home and as soon as james said that, he just Melted. gonna sob, never gonna stop sobbing, i love them.

james saying he can't help how he loves regulus and regulus immediately trying to kiss him... LOOK, CAN YOU BLAME HIM??? he's doing his best, leave him alone 😭😭😭 you'd do it too if james said some shit like that to you, don't lie. but also james rejecting regulus literally for the first time. kill me. BUT THEN HIM INSTANTLY

REGRETTING IT WHEN REGULUS UPSTAGED HIM BY REVEALING HIS HAND KINK!!!

lmaoooo let me stop, that was a Very Emotional Moment. regulus just genuinely standing there and showering james' hands in kisses. gonna take a swan dive off a cliff! also like, just their whole discussion about regulus' self-worth issues and then regulus inviting james in for tea when they make it back home! this is good! this is growth! let's hope it goes well!

and then the wolfstar goodbye 2.0 ☹ im SAD! i was sad about it, so much so that i literally wrote that extra scene just so they could have more time together. just made it even more sad, though, so really, i achieved Precisely Nothing.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-pandora being like "we're done" and then no one arguing with her! a queen!
-sirius being jealous of remus' clothes lmaooo
-marlene laughing when sirius asks her to dance
-james making regulus tea bc he knows regulus doesn't drink coffee!!!
-the little kiss during the interview that was real
-yaxley, you bitch, Just You Wait
-sirius not even wanting to have sex, just wanting to put his mouth on remus any way he can. he's so real for that
-"if i cannot climb, i will grow"

yeah, that's all, i think. i wanted to thank everyone again for being so kind and supportive and leaving comments.

Unconvinced

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death (blink-and-you-miss-it)
-references to past child death (vague and brief)
-discussions/implications about sirius being a sex symbol to the hallow, and him using that to his advantage
-alcohol abuse/alcoholism (it's mostly implied to start with, then explicitly discussed later, but it leads into a talk of stopping drinking for the character's health; ill give an in-depth warning in the end notes for those of you that need it, which is valid, as always)
-death in present (very brief and blunt, and i will also give a warning in the end notes)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James is not prepared for someone to be courageous enough to interrupt him and Regulus as they dance, so it takes him by surprise when he feels someone tap him on his shoulder. Regulus slowly raises his head with murder in his eyes.

Marlene seems unperturbed. "Simmer down, Reginald, this won't take long. I need to borrow your boyfriend for a few minutes, and it'll be quick. I fucking hate dancing anyway."

"Well, aren't you in popular demand?" Regulus mutters to James, scowling as he steps back.

"Oh, don't—" James groans as Regulus swivels and marches off in a clear tiff, heading right for Sirius, who is gawking over at Marlene and James in disbelief. James heaves a sigh and looks at Marlene. Flatly, he says, "Thanks for that."

"He's a fussy one, isn't he?" Marlene asks, amused. She steps forward and awkwardly braces her hands on his shoulders, quite literally keeping them at arm's length.

"Very volatile, like his brother," James says dryly, then clears his throat and reaches out to carefully lay his hands on her hips. She glares at him, so he panics and slips his hands up higher, but her glare only becomes more pronounced, and she's strangling his shoulders now, so he snatches his hands away entirely. "Er, sorry. I thought you wanted to dance."

"I don't *want* to, but…I'd like to speak to you, and I can understand why you and the pocket-sized Sirius might want to stay on the dancefloor." Marlene heaves a sigh and glances down at his hands. "Go ahead, put them back. It's fine."

James pauses. "Would you rather I hold your shoulders? We can swap, if you want."

"I—" Marlene blinks. "Actually, yes. Less…invasive that way."

"Sure," James says simply, because he gets what she means, he thinks. They swap quickly, with his hands resting on her shoulders as she settles hers on his waist. They're not close, and it's a bit amusing because she's shorter than him, but it puts her at ease. "Also, pocket-sized Sirius? He's, like, an inche shorter than him."

"Yeah, but I bet Sirius never lets him forget it, so I can't either in solidarity," Marlene muses. "Besides, I bet I could break him like a twig easily."

"No?" James replies slowly. "I mean, no offense, but it definitely wouldn't be *easy."*

Marlene clicks her tongue. "You poor thing. You're hopeless. I could break him if I wanted to. It's honestly sort of funny, since it doesn't look like it'd be simple to do, because he's always glaring at things."

"Yeah, he's cute," James murmurs, lips curling up fondly. Then he frowns. "He *does* actually have muscles, and he's stronger than he looks."

"No, I know that. I know better than most that looks can be deceiving, and I did see him pick you up once when you were passed out and carry you up an incline," Marlene admits.

James opens his mouth, closes it, then says, "He did that? Wait, when was this? In the arena, I know, but—but I have no memory of that."

"Yeah, because you were passed out." Marlene rolls her eyes at him. "It was after that whole mess with Mulciber. You weren't doing well, so Regulus scooped you up. How exactly do you think you got back to the cave?"

"I…never thought about it," James admits quietly.

Marlene nods. "Suppose that's fair. It was…a rough one. Your games, I mean. Definitely one of the most brutal, I'd say. They'll be talking about it for a long time."

"I wish they wouldn't," James confesses.

"I understand," Marlene informs him, and he knows she does. Of course she does. She's a Victor, too. "Look, I just—I wanted to tell you that it—it meant a lot, what you said about Vanity and Hodge on the tour."

"Marlene," James rasps, a lump forming in his throat instantly.

"No, listen." Marlene holds his gaze, her eyes bright and fierce. "It's—it was a bit of a mess, yeah, but it was real. It was important, because you were right, and I'm grateful you had the guts to say it. Too many people have gone too long *not* saying it, James, and you did the first chance you got."

"It was all I could do, and it still wasn't enough," James whispers. "They deserved better."

"It's not your fault that they didn't get it," Marlene tells him simply, and it feels like being absolved, just a little, a simple forgiveness that slices through weight he didn't even know was there, allowing it to slough off his back until he's almost unbalanced from feeling lighter.

Everything has been heavy for so long, but she was their mentor, trying to help them survive, and she doesn't blame him for the fact that they didn't.

He can breathe just a little easier.

"Thank you," James whispers, blinking fast and hard. "I really appreciate you saying that, especially because you—I mean, I know you don't like me very much—"

"It's not that I don't like you, James. I do, actually. It's just that I'm—" Marlene sighs, then gives him a tight smile. "I'm still learning how to be gentle again. For now, it's still a bit difficult, so I'm kind of shit at the worst of times, on top of being a useless mentor with a drinking problem on the horizon. And don't even get me started on my love life, or how fucking complicated and confusing it is right now, because I'm not joking, I could prattle on complaining for *hours."*

James blinks. "Oh… Well, you know, you can if you like. If you have some things to get off your chest, I mean."

"Right, so, your stylist?" Marlene asks, settling in as they continue to sway. "The one who looks like a fucking goddess? Yeah, so get this, she says we're *friends…"*

~•~

Sirius does his absolute *best* to shield Regulus from the worst of the attention he receives when he's away from James' side, but it's fucking difficult, honestly. The Hallows are a force to be reckoned with when they get together like this, and Regulus is sadly getting the brunt of it at the moment. They're all drawn in, curious and eager and demanding.

People ask about James, commenting on their relationship, giving unsolicited advice and praise. Most of these people just like to hear themselves talk, so Regulus can usually just nod and *mhm* along, and that seems to satisfy them enough. He should be smiling and laughing, but he honestly struggles with it, Sirius can tell. So, Sirius does it for him, smiling when they smile, forcing laughter when they do, mirroring them because, really, that's all they want.

He's pretty sure it works, for the most part. Some people, he thinks, can tell that Regulus hates them, but they seem to talk themselves out of that knowledge for their own comfort.

In the end, Sirius saves Regulus from most of it in the only way he knows how, by ushering him off to dance with one of the more well-meaning sponsors. A shy one, really. Sirius doesn't have many favorites, but Huey Rutledge is one of them. He's a bleeding heart, quite frankly, and coincidentally the sponsor with the least amount of money. He generally can only afford one to two donations a year, and he's never once used them on death eaters, always going for the underdogs in the arena. He's the one who donated to Frank to give Irene hot soup that everyone in the cave could split to warm up.

Regulus doesn't look too pleased to be going off dancing with a total stranger, *but* he does look relieved not to be overwhelmed by everyone else at once, and it's clear he trusts Sirius' judgement on this, because he goes without protest.

Sirius, on the other hand, has work to do.

Seeing that James is safely with Marlene, Regulus is safely within range of James and Marlene, and Pandora is safely with Emmeline, Sirius locates his target across the room—who Pandora pointed out to him earlier—and heads right over with a beaming smile. He catches the hand of the next head gamemaker and brings it to his lips in a quick, brushing kiss while she's in the midst of turning around.

"Ms. McGonagall," Sirius greets warmly, still cradling her hand while peering over it through his eyelashes, coquettish. "I don't believe we've had the pleasure of meeting yet."

McGonagall is an older woman, graying hair twisted artfully from her face, wearing a vintage a-line dress. Sirius can't stop himself from tracing the tattoos on her arms, visible through the sheer-style sleeves of her dress, traveling as far as he can see from her shoulders all the way down to her wrists.

Most of them are aged, like she got them when she was young, but not all—there are a few that suggest she's still getting tattoos to this day. It's more common in the Hallow, because those in the districts have to do it themselves, and they don't have access to good enough

medical treatment to fix it if something goes wrong. Not that people have never done it in the districts, but it is rarer, and it's never something like this. One or two tattoos, maybe, but whole sleeves? No, that's definitely more of a Hallow thing.

McGonagall is beautiful in an intimidating way, with sharp eyes and a straight back, muscular and seemingly unimpressed with everyone around her. Even Sirius doesn't manage much with his usually-effective grin; she's still just looking at him like she wouldn't bother to spit on him if he was on fire. Sirius is delighted. It's a nice change of pace from the usual Hallow, and he does love a challenge.

"No, I don't believe we have," McGonagall replies, slipping her hand out of his as she faces him fully, one eyebrow sweeping up. "Nonetheless, your reputation precedes you, Mr. Black."

"Well, you know, you can't believe everything you hear. Some things, it's best to learn for yourself," Sirius tells her, holding her gaze. "It's always worth it to check firsthand, I say."

The very corner of McGonagall's mouth twitches ever so faintly, like she's amused, which is not the usual response he gets to his flirting. Most people—of all ages—are at least helplessly intrigued. She appears immune, which makes *Sirius* the one who's helplessly intrigued for once. He does love it when someone manages to surprise him.

"Unfortunately, your…reputation holds none of my interest, so I'd say it's not worth my time at all," McGonagall informs him, completely ruthless about it, and *oh,* Sirius does like her. He doesn't want to, because in six months, she's going to be the one behind the games, behind the death, behind the torment. Still, he can't help it, because he's never, not once, had a Hallow blatantly and bluntly *not* want something from him.

Never one to back down, Sirius grins wider and raises his eyebrows at her, swallowing his amusement and delight to say, instead, "So, you *don't* want to find out if my reputation for being the best dancer in this room is true, Ms. McGonagall?"

McGonagall blinks, slowly. Sirius has to fight rising laughter when some sort of light of understanding *visibly* goes off in her eyes, followed by another twitch of her mouth and the slightest tilt to her head, a tiny motion that admits defeat and prompts respect, an awareness that she's been bested.

Because, see, she was assuming he was insinuating something sexual—and, okay, that *is* what he was doing, to be fair, though he wouldn't have followed through, of course, because he never does, or has to—but he countered that effortlessly. Him being the Hallow heartthrob, beloved and desired by all, is something that is known, but not discussed. Or, well, he's sure people talk about it when he's not around, but to do it right to his face is something else entirely, which backs McGonagall into a corner where she either has to admit defeat, or admit that she expected him to entice her with sexual favors.

Most people wouldn't be brave or shameless enough to do that, but Sirius is learning very quickly that McGonagall is not like most people, certainly not like most Hallows.

"I've no interest in whatever sexual advances you're rumored to pass around like candy," McGonagall clarifies, even while she holds out her hand, "but I won't say no to a dance."

Sirius laughs. He can't help it. With a bright burst of laughter, he reaches out to cup her hand delicately in his own, held aloft as he leads her to the dancefloor. "Good to know. Come along, then—Minerva, wasn't it?"

"Ms. McGonagall will do," McGonagall declares.

"Of course, Ms. McGonagall. Feel free to call me Sirius, if you like," Sirius muses, cupping her waist politely and promptly tugging her into slow, sweeping circles. Distinguished and fluid, they match the music, and she never fails to keep up, just as effortless as he is. He makes a mental note to address her respectfully, as she's requested, unwilling to offend her or displease her when she will one day soon hold the lives of his future tributes in her hands. Having her call him by his name suggests familiarity, so he can only hope she will.

The thing is, Sirius knows how to do this, how to charm the Hallows. It's his thing. Most of them are lifeless, brainless puppets he can maneuver at will, but there are the occasional few that take a bit more effort. There's always an angle, though, and he intends to find hers.

"It's a good turnout," McGonagall comments as she flicks her gaze around those that are dancing near them. They sweep past James and Marlene—James lifts his hand to smile and wave at Sirius like an excited puppy as he goes by, which makes Sirius grin back against his

will, while Marlene doesn't even stutter in what seems to be a long-winded rant about the implications of a ring as a gift—and McGonagall's gaze lingers on James for a moment until they twist away. "It's a shame Horace Slughorn isn't here to enjoy the fruits of his labor."

"Oh, I'm sure he would have loved nothing more," Sirius muses, flicking his gaze towards hers. She's already looking back, her expression neutral. He wonders what she knows, because he has his suspicions as to why Slughorn isn't present. He's quite sure the man is dead, and no part of Sirius regrets his part in that possibility. Riddle likely executed him for allowing James and Regulus to win, and Sirius is the one who planted that idea in his head. He feels no remorse for it.

"It was quite a valiant thing to do, allowing two Victors," McGonagall says. "I must admit, in my time of knowing Horace, he never struck me as a very valiant man."

"No, I'd say he wasn't," Sirius agrees, never breaking his gaze from hers, because he thinks—well, somehow, he's almost sure that she knows it was him. "Maybe he needed someone more valiant to guide him."

"Maybe so," McGonagall murmurs.

"And what about you, Ms. McGonagall?" Sirius asks, tilting his head curiously. "Would you consider yourself valiant?"

"I would," McGonagall says simply, then she smiles at him, small and secretive, "but I'm not so easily guided."

"Yes, well, I'm sure Horace Slughorn thought the same," Sirius says softly, letting the implications of that—the weight of an unspoken threat—wrap around his words and slip like molten silver off his tongue. If he cannot enchant her, perhaps all that is left to do is to intimidate her. "And where did that get him?"

"No one knows." McGonagall never loses that tiny smile that lives in the lovely little wrinkles at the corner of her mouth, and Sirius has no idea what to make of it. "What I do know is that Horace Slughorn was a fool, Mr. Black, and I am not."

So, as it turns out, Minerva McGonagall is not so easily intimidated, and the mystery of what angle it will take to get through to her isn't simply found. Who she is, what she wants, and how she'll be as a head gamemaker remains unknown, but Sirius isn't deterred. Though she allows no familiarity between them, he intends to keep trying.

She's the first Hallow who has ever posed a true challenge, and maybe it's foolish of him, but he's looking forward to it.

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Huey Rutledge is a quiet, bashful man who blushes with his entire face every time Regulus looks at him, stuttering and tripping over his words every time he attempts to talk, going wide-eyed and focused every time Regulus speaks in response, which isn't often and usually happens monosyllabically.

He's a little taller than Regulus, broad-shouldered, and handsome enough with curly blond hair, pale green eyes, and very deep dimples in his cheeks. While he's polite and seems to have tact and simple human decency that most other Hallows lack—especially sponsors, Regulus has noticed—what Regulus likes most about him is that he seems to have no interest in talking about Regulus' games, or Regulus' relationship with James.

No, his interest seems to lie in Regulus himself, like he's trying to get to know him as a person, not as a Victor or a character in an idolized love story. Regulus usually hates talking about himself, but honestly? He appreciates it more now.

"So, it's just writing?" Huey asks slowly, cautious like he's doing his best not to offend. "Can you draw, too?"

"No," Regulus admits. "It's just writing."

Huey nods. "Any particular form? Poetry? Fiction?"

"Poetry, usually," Regulus murmurs. "Sometimes just journal entries. The occasional to-do list."

"You like organizing your thoughts," Huey says.

Regulus pauses, then nods tentatively. "It's easier to get what's in my head on paper than out of my mouth, most of the time."

"I, um—yeah, I get that," Huey tells him. "I'm a musician, but not a singer. I can compose and play what I'm feeling, but the idea of putting it into words and singing it is… unfathomable to me, honestly. People just—do that. I have no idea how."

"What do you play?"

"Piano, guitar, and violin mostly. I'm alright with a flute, or I was when I was a child, but I haven't picked one up in years. Oh, and the kazoo. I'm not half-bad on the kazoo."

"Is that an actual instrument?" Regulus asks.

Huey cracks a weak smile, flashing dimples. "Technically, yes. Mostly a comedy instrument, but you'd be surprised how well it can round out a song if you add it in. But, for my peace of mind, I take it very seriously so I don't feel like an idiot."

"My brother had a kazoo, once," Regulus says quietly, lips curling up helplessly as he remembers it. "He built it when he was nine. He mostly just—yelled into it, and didn't even have the sense to feel like an idiot for it at all."

"Yeah, older brothers are good for things like that," Huey tells him wryly, chuckling. "I have one of those, too. An older brother, I mean. Louie never takes himself seriously either."

"Louie and Sirius would get on, then."

"Probably, if they ever met. He's—he isn't into things like this. Louie, I mean. So, it falls onto me to handle it."

"Falls on you," Regulus repeats. "Being a sponsor."

"Um, yes," Huey mumbles. "Our parents were, so when they passed, the opening remained for us to step in. Louie…didn't think there was a point. Rutledges aren't exactly high-rollers, you understand, but our parents thought every little bit we could give was important. It's rarely enough to truly help anyone, to save them, but if we can at least make them a little more comfortable, we should."

"Doesn't it upset you?" Regulus asks carefully, holding his gaze, and Huey immediately turns red under his scrutiny. He's holding onto Regulus so lightly, barely touching him at all, but he looks like he wants to come closer.

"It—well, I—" Huey cuts himself off, swallowing. "I don't know. I think it used to, but then… Well, I used to feel like Louie does about it, but my first year as a sponsor, I got to help send someone water when they were in pain, and—and they were so relieved… Even though they didn't live, I was able to offer them that comfort, and it—it felt like I had to do it, you know? Because if I didn't, who would?"

"Do you want to know a secret, Huey?" Regulus murmurs. He tugs Huey a little closer, hearing his breath hitch as Regulus leans in to whisper in his ear. "If you didn't, it wouldn't matter. There is no comfort in the arena."

When Regulus pulls back, Huey is pale.

He can't seem to figure out how to respond to that, and Regulus gets a sense of vindictive amusement in watching his worldview shift all at once. It feels good, honestly, even though it's cruel. There are certainly worse sponsors, and Huey clearly has good intentions in a way so few Hallows do, but he's blinded by his own contributions to even question the system behind it all. He should question it.

Regulus hopes he does. Regulus hopes that he thinks about it, thinks about all the people he's felt the need to help, all the people he wouldn't have to help if only the arena didn't exist at all. Regulus hopes it keeps him awake at night.

It's unfair, really, because what can Huey do? Even if he's no longer blind to what's actually wrong, it's not like he can actually do anything about it. But, well, misery loves company, and Regulus never sleeps peacefully anymore.

There's a loud clearing of a throat that causes Regulus and Huey to snatch their gazes from one another and look to the side to see James, who has his lips pressed into a thin line. Huey literally jumps in place and takes a frantic step back, inviting space between him and Regulus again, no longer pale as his entire face turns red so brightly that it looks painful.

"You've accosted my dance partner long enough. I'll be taking him back now," James says, his voice clipped. He gives Huey one last hard look, then quite literally steps right in between him and Regulus to snake an arm around Regulus' waist before promptly sweeping him away.

"Poor Huey is having a really bad night," is all Regulus can think to say, his lips twitching.

"Oh, yes, *poor Huey,"* James mutters as he swivels them further away, only slowing them to a casual swaying motion when Regulus can't crane his head and spot Huey again at all. He tries, and James audibly grinds his teeth.

"Now, who's jealous?" Regulus asks as he slides his arms around James' shoulders and helplessly melts into him. Oh, he's so warm, so very terribly warm.

He's also achingly beautiful. Dorcas is a terror, frankly. She has him in a soft, plum shirt that hugs his shoulders and practically strangles his arms high up on the muscle, except the fabric moves fluidly with his every motion. It dips down a bit at the collar, showing the obscene hollow of his throat and a peek of each collarbone. Between that, the charcoal trousers, and smart shoes, looking at him makes Regulus' mouth water. He had that the audacity to say James looked *nice.* Nice doesn't even begin to cover it, especially when he looks happy.

James does not look happy now, however. His gaze is sharp. "I looked over and you were talking to him, and then you were whispering in his ear like you were telling him a fucking secret or—"

"I was," Regulus admits.

"You were," James repeats, his voice flat.

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "Yes. So?"

"So, you don't like people enough to trade secrets," James grits out. "But, what, you liked him?"

"James."

"What?"

"Don't be stupid," Regulus says.

James scowls. "You make me stupid. And *oh,* he obviously likes you. Wouldn't even look me in the eye, the fucking—"

"James," Regulus repeats, stifling a rising laugh.

"I'll kill him. I do that now. Kill people. It's something I've done and am apparently willing to do again, as it turns out," James announces. "Did he force you to dance with him? You could have come to me. Why didn't you come to me? If he did *anything* you didn't like, I mean it, I'll actually kill—"

"Stop it, idiot," Regulus says, huffing out a quiet laugh as he shakes his head. James still looks quite grumpy about the whole thing, but he's mostly just pouting now. It makes Regulus want to coo at him, though he refrains, because he'd die of embarrassment if he gave into the urge. "You were busy with Marlene, remember? Sirius sent me off with Huey to, I'm assuming, get me away from the crowd of vultures that were surrounding me at all sides. Huey's not so bad, really. A bit misguided, but he has good intentions."

"He has intentions to get in your fucking pants," James declares sharply. Regulus rolls his eyes, and James releases a huff. "No, I'm not joking. It was all over him."

"Was it?"

"Yes. I recognize it, because I, too, have had intentions to get in your pants. Not just that, obviously, but that's besides the point. The point is, I could *sense* it."

Regulus sighs in exasperation. "And did you stop to think about the fact that I wouldn't pander to his intentions?"

"Yeah, that was before you started whispering secrets in his ear," James mumbles. "You never whisper secrets in *my* ear."

"Yes, I can see how this is distressing for you, as the man I have actually *wanted* to let into my pants before," Regulus says dryly.

"Sure, but now I'm sad about it, so it doesn't even count," James replies.

"Retroactive sadness aside, I remember it well enough to know it absolutely counts," Regulus muses, arching an eyebrow at James, who looks torn between still being agitated or giving into his focus on this topic. He's easily distracted by things that interest him—what Regulus likes to think of as *shiny topics,* things that James fixates on the moment they're brought up, without fail. Sex, Regulus, and sex with Regulus are *very* shiny topics for him, Regulus has

noticed. Plus, he can't always do two things at once, especially when they're contradictory things, like being agitated or being delighted.

"I don't want to talk about Huey anymore. Let's never mention Huey again," James announces predictably. He tugs Regulus a little closer, scanning his face, lips parted. "I'm—oh, I'm forgetting my boundaries again."

"No, none of that," Regulus reprimands. "You're—it's good for you to have them, honestly. Especially if we're going to be having tea. Are we—do you still want to do that?"

James' face softens. "Yeah, of course. What, do you think I changed my mind in the last thirty minutes?"

"No, I just…" Regulus doesn't finish, clearing his throat and looking away instead. He doesn't want to be the person who needs reassurances, but there's always this horrible, creeping doubt crawling up from within the depths of him, clawing its way up no matter how many times he shoves it down. He never feels sure of anything, and he doesn't think that's a result of the arena. Maybe the arena made it worse, but it's something that has always existed within him for as long as he can recall.

"I like your tea," James offers. "Maybe I'm biased, but it tastes better than anyone else's. What do you do to it?"

Regulus hums and lightly says, "I spit in it."

Without missing a beat, James replies, "Ah, that explains it."

Helplessly, Regulus' shoulders start shaking as he folds forward into James and muffles his laughter as much as he can. He can feel the gravelly baritone of James' laughter vibrating against his chest, deep and lovely.

"Would you—" Regulus chokes on another relentless giggle, gasping a little. "Wait, would you actually drink my tea if I spit in it, James?"

"Love, I would let you spit directly into my mouth," James announces with absolutely no shame in his tone whatsoever.

"Oh, for fuck's—" Regulus doesn't even get to finish before he dissolves into laughter all over again, just letting it happen at this point, unable to stop it. James is so funny. Regulus hates it, has always hated it, and doesn't hate it at all.

James is still laughing, quiet and light, when he protests, "Is there a reason I *shouldn't?* We've kissed before, many times! You've literally had your tongue in my mouth. Technically, we've *already* swapped spit, if you think about it, so you know, if you ever get the urge to cut out the middleman—"

"Stop it. Shut up, stop," Regulus wheezes, burying his face into James' shoulder and clinging to him, stomach hurting from the laughter that won't quit. "Just shut up and dance with me."

"Yeah, alright," James says softly, sweeping his hand up and down Regulus' back, holding him close as they sway.

And that's all they do, for a while. It's so fucking good. It has no business being as good as it is, honestly. Regulus doesn't like the feeling of hands on him, but James… Well, maybe it shouldn't surprise him that James is turning out to be his exception. In the beginning, right after the arena, it was unbearable most of the time, but Regulus is starting to hope that it's getting easier, getting better, if it can.

It's different at night, when he's actively trying to rest, and he can't explain why. For some reason, when he knows he's trying to sleep, being next to someone, *feeling* them, is the only thing that helps. But when he's awake, it's not the same. He doesn't know what that says about him that he can only accept comfort when he knows that he'll be oblivious to it.

But this past week has shown him that maybe, just maybe, it's something that will pass. Maybe it is passing already. It feels so good just to have James close, even when he's not

about to fall asleep. There's no part of Regulus that wants to step away and shrink into himself; he wants to stay just like this, forever. He thinks that's a good sign. It is, right? He wants it to be.

Still, Regulus has no earthly idea how he'd ever offer James sex. Not that he thinks that's all James wants, really. He's quite sure that James would never have sex with him if that's what Regulus wanted, and he wouldn't even be upset about it, because of course he wouldn't. That being acknowledged, it is something that Regulus wants to give him, and wants to let himself have, at least someday.

One of the main issues is that Regulus can't fathom letting James see his scars. He hasn't seen them all. No one has except for Barty, and even Barty hadn't been able to stop himself from sucking in a sharp breath of shock when he was confronted with all of them. He got over it quickly and got used to them, continuing on like they weren't even there, which is why Regulus let him see them in the first place, because he knows he can count on Barty to do what Regulus expects him to. He's consistent, always. The most consistent part of Regulus' life.

But James… Well, it's different for James, isn't it? He's closer to it, for one thing. Regulus is terrified that James will see his scars and either see him differently, or see him and blame himself, or just see him and be taken right back to the arena, or maybe a mixture of all of that.

Regulus can barely stand to see himself most days. He doesn't want to burden James with that.

James makes a quiet sound of displeasure, suddenly, and Regulus' eyes immediately snap open. He's not sure if he'll ever lose the urge to eradicate anything and everything that could ever make James unhappy. He thinks he would bleed the world dry if it meant James was never sad again.

"What's wrong?" Regulus murmurs.

"My leg," James mumbles. "It's—I've been standing and dancing too long. Didn't bring my cane…"

"Do you need to sit down?" Regulus asks, pulling back. "We can grab something to eat. Take a break. The night's almost over now, James."

James smiles at him. "Yeah, thanks."

So, they thread their hands together and go find a table to sit down at. Regulus makes James sit there and save his seat, then goes to make them small plates, dodging people as much as he's able. Marlene helps at one point, cutting someone off to get to the drink table. Sirius is still dancing, and Frank is doing the same, it seems. When Regulus heads back to the table, he locates Emmeline and Pandora, who are filling chairs around James, so that other Hallows can't.

Regulus is grateful, honestly. He sits next to James and listens to everyone chatter around him, watching James brighten around people he actually appreciates spending time with. A few Hallows do stop by to talk to him and Regulus, but James handles most of that, which is probably for the best. It's *really* not Regulus' strong suit. He does feel bad that he's not helping James more, but to his credit, he tries his best. It's just that his best is never really good enough. He's used to that by now.

They've just finished eating when the music cuts out, making people dancing stop and turn to the balcony on the far side of the room, above everyone else. Riddle is there, gently clinking a spoon to the side of a wine glass.

Regulus feels his heart pick up in immediate fear.

Sirius told him this would happen. That Riddle would step out at some point in the night and give a speech for the Victor, just as he does every year, except this year, it's two. It's for show, of course, so it goes exactly as Sirius said it would. Empty words and lifeless celebrations. Hollow. Riddle is the most hollow person Regulus has ever seen.

By the end, Riddle lifts his glass to James and Regulus in a toast, demanding the whole room to turn and show their signs of respect, and they all do. But Regulus is looking right at Riddle, his heart lodged in his throat, so he sees it in vivid detail when Riddle meets his gaze

and slowly shakes his head. Regulus' heart sinks, because he knows exactly what that means. He reads the message loud and clear.

Riddle is unconvinced.

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Dorcas keeps glancing at the door. She doesn't mean to. She's trying her best to pay attention, because what Minerva is saying is no doubt important in some way or another. It's just… Well, the mentors from the other districts that traveled in for the party are leaving now that it's over, which means Marlene will be boarding a train soon, and Dorcas didn't get to say goodbye last time, but she'd like to this time, at least.

But work and debriefing with Minerva has to be more important. Of course, she'll get her final orders from Dumbledore once Minerva debriefs him, but Dorcas knows that they'll coincide with what Minerva already thinks.

The victory tour has been...absolute madness, particularly for the Order. Dorcas was their main connection to everything in real time, all the things going on behind the scenes, all the people she met along the way. She had to shut herself away and get in touch with Dumbledore with information far more often than she expected to, honestly.

The steady rise of riots and rebellion is a good sign for the shifting tides of war, and things are starting to pick up the pace. With her connection to the Order, they're able to actually stay updated on current events, as well as get involved in a proper time frame. Dorcas doesn't know much, but she does know that change is on the horizon.

Minerva's main role tonight, other than playing her position as the next head gamemaker perfectly, was to scout out those she felt were prime candidates for recruitment. It will be Dorcas' job to recruit them in six months.

Frank Longbottom is one that Minerva is sold on, fully, so it will fall on Dorcas to get him on board. Emmeline Vance, she isn't sure about entirely, but it is a possibility. There's one

sponsor as well, apparently, a man named Huey Rutledge, who Minerva believes would help provide money for war efforts, if nothing else. Even war comes with a price.

"What about Sirius?" Dorcas asks, ripping her gaze away from the door to focus on Minerva.

"Ah, Mr. Black," Minerva muses, lips twitching. "He threatened me, you know."

Dorcas can't stop herself from raising her eyebrows. "Did he? Maybe I shouldn't be surprised. He's unfairly underestimated, honestly. More than just a pretty face, I can tell you that."

"His pretty face seems to be his weapon of choice," Minerva tells her. "However, he adapts well and thinks on his feet. I can see that he's smarter than people give him credit for."

"He's a good candidate," Dorcas says softly, fighting the lump that forms in her throat. She struggles to smother the harsh impulse in her chest not to do it, not to drag Sirius into this, even if he would be the *perfect* candidate for recruitment. The power he has over the Hallows alone…

Minerva hums. "He is, yes. However, Albus wouldn't clear it, and they'll all provide assistance to the war without being at the forefront of it just yet. It's for the best to leave them out of it for now."

"But not forever," Dorcas asks, holding her gaze. "Dumbledore intends to bring them in at some point."

"I understand that you've come to care for them, Dorcas, I really do," Minerva says quietly, "but there's no way of keeping them out of it, at this point. Personally, I'd prefer to, because goodness knows they've been through enough already, but you know as well as I do that it's not so simple. You saw the riot in five, the close call in eleven. Regulus' message—Hallow is Hollow—will no doubt become the leading warcry when the battles truly begin."

"You know where he got that from, don't you?"

"From you. Yes, I know."

Dorcas quirks a sad smile. "Sirius, Regulus, and James have gone through too much. It's not wrong of me to say that being dragged into this is unfair to them."

"War is never fair," Minerva agrees, averting her eyes as her lips tip down. "They're in this, Dorcas. Whether they mean to be or not, it's a fight they can't avoid, and it's one we are depending on their...involvement to win. We've known it from the moment they branded their love with defiance, all of them. Sirius loving them so much that he would manipulate Horace and risk his own life to see them live. Regulus loving them so much that he would die for them, proving so by going into that river. James loving them so much that he would threaten the Hallow when no one has ever dared to before."

"They're going to hate me when they find out," Dorcas croaks, her heart clenching, and Minerva has no words of comfort for her about this. Dorcas' eyes sink shut. "They didn't sign up for a war, Minerva."

"Nevertheless, war is here," Minerva says softly, "and they are not safe from its reach."

"How long do you think…?" Dorcas trails off and swallows, opening her eyes to scan Minerva's face.

Minerva pauses, then carefully murmurs, "I believe things will be mostly quiet for the next six months, but after that…"

"The next games," Dorcas mumbles, eyebrows furrowed. Minerva says nothing more. "What is it? What do you know?"

"Nothing," Minerva replies simply.

Dorcas frowns, because she's known Minerva a long time, long enough to know when she's not telling everything. But she also knows that Minerva only doesn't tell her things for a reason. Whatever she's hiding, there's a need for it. Dorcas knows that sometimes Minerva keeps things from her just to try and keep her safe, because she doesn't want her to get hurt.

Minerva has been in the Order for a long time, the very first Hallow that ever joined, and she's been working her way up in levels of importance to the Hallow for years now. The fact that she's worked her way up to being head gamemaker is a major turning point for the war, and Dorcas knows it. She's terrified, because she doesn't want Minerva to get hurt either.

But here they are, in this by choice, wishing the other wasn't despite knowing how important it is for them to be. Caring about people in the midst of war is always a dangerous game.

Again, helplessly, Dorcas' gaze crawls to the door.

"Do you have somewhere to be?" Minerva asks, because she's known Dorcas for years, and she's a frightfully observant woman at all times.

"I just—I mean, yeah, sort of," Dorcas says weakly.

Minerva peers at her for a long moment. "Now? This late? And it can't wait?"

"I—well, if I—it's, um…" Dorcas grimaces slightly, feeling like a fucking teenager trying to hide a crush from her mother.

"The only event I can think of taking place that comes with something of a time limit tonight is the mentors leaving to travel back to their districts," Minerva says.

Dorcas coughs and taps her fingernails to the table, the pointed tips clicking away. Damn Minerva for always picking up on the details. Dorcas doesn't say anything.

Minerva sighs. "Which one?"

"Marlene," Dorcas mumbles, her shoulders slumping. When she peeks over, Minerva has her lips pressed into a thin line, which means she's displeased. "What? You don't approve?"

"Would you say she's a good candidate to join the Order?" Minerva asks simply.

Dorcas' breath catches, her whole body going still as Minerva examines her, studying her closely. Dorcas balls her hand into a fist on the table and chokes out, "Please don't, Minerva. Not her. Please, I'm—please—"

"Dorcas," Minerva says softly.

"Don't suggest her to Dumbledore. Don't—don't do this to me. Don't put this on me, to recruit her, because I—I—" Dorcas swallows, her eyes stinging. "I won't do it. Not her."

Minerva takes a deep breath, holds it for a beat, then slowly lets it out. "Okay. Okay, Dorcas, I'll leave her name out of it."

"Thank you," Dorcas breathes out, her voice hoarse as her eyes slip shut, relief slamming into her all at once.

"Involvement isn't always a choice," Minerva murmurs, her gaze sad when Dorcas' eyes flutter open. "You should know that better than anyone. You may wish to keep her safe, but if wishes were reality, we'd all be daydreaming."

"Then let me daydream," Dorcas whispers. "Please."

"Do you love her?" Minerva asks quietly.

"I don't know," Dorcas admits. "I think I could. I think I almost do."

"Go," is Minerva's only response. She nods to the door, sitting back in her chair. "Go be where you need to. I'll be waiting here when you get back. We'll continue this then. The war has waited this long; it can wait a little longer."

Dorcas is out of her chair in an instant, needing no other prompting before she's out the door.

All the way to the train, she thinks about how Minerva looks at Poppy sometimes like it'll be the very last time. How she's strong enough to handle the risk of that, Dorcas doesn't know.

Dorcas isn't that strong.

And yet, she's a glutton for punishment, because she arrives at the train station and feels her breath punch out of her the moment she lays eyes on Marlene. She's in an arctic blue suit that Dorcas recognizes, one she designed herself that Marlene must have gone through the trouble of buying from a store, or online. The top buttons on her undershirt is undone, and her tie is draped open, giving her that lazy, leisurely sexy look that genuinely makes Dorcas' head spin a little bit. Dorcas wants to peel her out of the suit. Oh, she's gorgeous.

She's also…quite blatantly drunk.

Even from here, Dorcas can see it. She's draped all over Emmeline, laughing loudly, face flushed as she struggles to stay upright. Frank hovers beside her, like he might need to catch her if she falls over, but Emmeline seems to be doing most of the work in keeping her steady. In fact, Emmeline seems quite dedicated to keeping Marlene on her feet, hands on her hips, pressed right up against her.

Mm, well, Dorcas doesn't like *that.* Not one bit. Oh, she definitely doesn't fucking like that at all. Belatedly, she realizes that this is rather hypocritical of her, considering *she* has fucked Lily, and also she and Marlene are technically just…friends. She has absolutely no right to be agitated by the sight of Marlene all over another woman, but does that stop her from grinding her teeth? No, no, it does not.

Dorcas crosses her arms, cocks her hip up against the brick wall next to her, and waits.

Marlene is drunk, that much is obvious, but perhaps the way Dorcas is drilling holes into the side of her head with her eyes breaks through anyway, because she eventually catches sight of her. As soon as she does, she gives a rather comical blink.

"Dorcas?" Marlene calls, peeling away from Emmeline, who grimaces slightly when she stumbles. Emmeline and Frank instantly reach out like they're going to have to catch her, but she bats away their hands and makes her way unsteadily right over to Dorcas, her eyes glazed and wide.

"Tipsy, are we?" Dorcas asks softly.

Marlene clears her throat and reaches out to brace her hand on the brick wall beside her, getting her balance. She looks a little sheepish as she says, "Oh, just a bit."

"I can see that," Dorcas tells her.

"I just…had a few drinks," Marlene mumbles. "Just to make the night a bit more bearable, you know how it is. I'm, ah, liked more by the Hallows when I'm drunk. I laugh easier."

Dorcas is pretty sure her heart breaks. "Not all Hallows. I like you when you're sober quite fine, actually."

"Yeah, well, you can't offer me money to save the lives of my future tributes, so no offense, but it's not exactly your opinion of me I'm relying on," Marlene announces bluntly.

"There's a fine line between a fun drunk and a messy drunk, at least to them, so keep that in mind," Dorcas says. She holds her hands up in surrender when Marlene squints at her. "I'm just saying. It's a fine line to walk, and I don't know anyone who has ever managed to."

Marlene's lips press into a thin line. "Well, I can't fucking do it sober, Dorcas, alright? I hate them. I—when I'm sober, I'm—I can't—I don't know how to—"

"Marlene," Dorcas cuts in gently, "I'm not judging you. I'm just… I don't want you to harm yourself for their sake, especially when it likely won't get you anywhere anyway."

"I don't know what to do," Marlene confesses, blinking hard and fast. "I don't know how I'm supposed to keep doing this. I'm going to end up like so many of the other mentors. Drunk. Withering away. Escaping this in the only way we can."

Dorcas swallows thickly and reaches out carefully to grab Marlene's hand, squeezing it gently. "I—I think you should stop drinking, Marlene, or try to. Maybe that's unfair of me to say, but I just—I want you to be okay. I want you to be safe, and healthy. Maybe you—you could talk to your mum? The way you talked about her, I don't doubt she would help you."

"She—she would," Marlene croaks. "I just—I don't—"

"It's okay to need help," Dorcas whispers.

Marlene sniffs quietly and looks away, her eyes sinking shut. She breathes for a moment, then gives a jerky nod before looking at Dorcas again. "I didn't expect you to come, to be here. I didn't want you to see me like this. Not you."

"Hey, it's alright," Dorcas assures her, squeezing her hand again. "Really, it is. I came to tell you goodbye, because I—I didn't get to last time."

"Will I see you again next year?" Marlene asks. "Are you going to be designing for Sirius again?"

Dorcas nods. "Yes, I will. I'll be here, Marlene."

"Could I convince you to ditch Sirius and design for me?" Marlene murmurs, swaying a little closer. "I'm positive he doesn't appreciate you the way I would."

"Ah," Dorcas says, huffing out a weak laugh, "Sirius would kill me, I think."

"I wouldn't let him. I promise," Marlene tells her, curling forward until she's settling her free hand on Dorcas' waist and leaning in to brush her lips along Dorcas' jaw.

"Marlene," Dorcas whispers, her eyes fluttering shut as a sharp hook of yearning yanks at her until she's scared she's going to tilt right into Marlene and never resurface again.

"You smell like rosewater, diluted sweetness," Marlene breathes out, inhaling sharply as she flexes her hand on Dorcas' hip and dips her head to kiss the side of her throat. "That's you. Diluted sweetness. Every time, you muffle the full force of it, hold it all back, and I don't know why."

"You're drunk," Dorcas rasps, her mouth dry as she gently untangles their fingers to ease Marlene back.

Marlene huffs. "Yeah, but it's not like I want you any less when I'm sober."

"Well, you seem to want a lot of things when you're drunk," Dorcas mutters, her gaze flicking over Marlene's shoulder to land on Emmeline, who's chatting easily with Frank.

"What?" Marlene follows her gaze, then turns back around and stares at her. "Are you—jealous?"

"No," Dorcas mumbles.

"I thought we were *friends,"* Marlene reminds her, sing-song, that last word wrapped in a derisive scoff.

Dorcas purses her lips. "We are. Of course we are."

"Emmeline is my friend," Marlene muses.

"Lucky Emmeline," Dorcas snaps reflexively, then immediately squeezes her eyes shut with a grimace. Oh, for fuck's sake.

Marlene has a smile tucked at the corner of her lips when Dorcas opens her eyes again. "Yeah, but there's no need to be jealous. I don't have a friend like you, other than you, and that works for me. I'm alright with being friends like this for now, in the way no one else gets to be."

Dorcas can't stop herself from tucking her lips in and dropping her gaze, pained. Ah, dammit. Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

"Oh," Marlene whispers.

"Marlene," Dorcas says weakly, lifting her gaze and instantly regretting it when she sees how hurt Marlene looks.

"Shit," Marlene chokes out on a harsh laugh, blinking rapidly. She takes a solid step back and nods. "Right. Well, you know, I don't even know why I—I just assumed—"

Dorcas shakes her head. "No. No, wait, it's not—"

"And you were *jealous?"* Marlene asks incredulously. "For fuck's sake, Dorcas, that's—you do realize how ridiculous that is, yeah? I mean, I knew Hallows felt a strong sense of entitlement, but fuck, the double standard is a bit much."

"Just—wait, no, it's *not* like that," Dorcas insists. "I swear it's not, Marlene, okay?"

"No, this is on me. This was my mistake. Of course you have other *friends,"* Marlene grits out.

"She's—it's—" Dorcas legitimately feels like she's about to let out a low whine. "Yes, she's my friend, but we're not friends like…you and I are."

Marlene arches an eyebrow. "So, you two didn't fuck? I just misunderstood, then?" She waits, and Dorcas opens and closes her mouth. Marlene nods. "Right, so actually, it sounds like you two are friends the *exact* same way that we are, unless you want to elaborate on how it's different."

Dorcas would love nothing more, except she can't, because then she would have to admit that what she feels for Marlene is a lot more than friendship, and she knows it, but to do that would be to put Marlene in danger. Dorcas has responsibilities and other things she *has* to let be a priority, none of which she's willing to drag Marlene into. She would be lying to Marlene in a worse way than she already is.

"Please elaborate on how it's different," Marlene croaks, holding her gaze, her voice small. "I'm—I'm literally begging you to, because you didn't do anything wrong, and if you'd just—if you'd just give me *something,* anything, please…"

Dorcas wants to give her the world.

Dorcas can only give her nothing.

Marlene swallows harshly and blinks away visible tears, her jaw rolling as she turns her head and breathes, in and out. She nods again, then reaches down to brush her fingers over the ring on her thumb, swiveling it once before pulling it off all the way, revealing the scar she doesn't like to look at.

Meeting Dorcas' eyes, Marlene reaches out to cup her hand and drop the ring into her palm, curling her fingers over it before drawing her hands away. "There's nothing wrong with you having friends, Dorcas. I just don't think I can be one of them. Not like this. Not when I—"

"Marlene," Dorcas whispers, stricken, feeling like her chest is shrinking as Marlene cuts herself off and looks away. "At least keep the ring. You don't like seeing that scar."

"It'll be easier to see than the reminder of you," Marlene says softly.

The train blows the horn, calling for them to board, and Marlene meets Dorcas' eyes again. It's not the goodbye she was expecting, but it's the goodbye she gets.

Without another word, Marlene turns and stumbles back to her friends, boarding the train with their help without once looking back. Dorcas stands there, clutching the ring so tight that it hurts, daydreaming that she hadn't come at all.

~•~

The last night in the Hallow is a bad one for Regulus, personally. After a day of being forced to socialize, he genuinely feels so drained that the thought of being around anyone else sounds like torture. So, he sneaks away to the rooftop and stays there until the sun rises. As exhausted as he is, sleep remains out of reach. It's frustrating. Regulus always misses oblivion when he's away from it.

The next morning, bright and early, they all gather themselves up and board the train to go home. Pandora sees them off, but Dorcas doesn't show. They didn't get to say goodbye to her, and Regulus wonders if he'll ever see her again.

The train ride home is quicker without any of the stops. Sirius is in a sullen state, moody and quiet, clearly upset about being away from Remus again. He's in his *James only* setting, the one where the only person who seems to make him feel the least bit better is James. Regulus doesn't look too much into that, not anymore. It's not an unfair feeling to have, after all.

Regulus can't blame Sirius for it, especially not when he understands it intimately himself, in a very different way.

There's just something about James. Something so inherently comforting. Something so unshakably safe. When everyone else fails to be enough, James always is.

Sometimes, it breaks Regulus' heart that James can't see that.

Regulus leaves Sirius and James alone, sitting off to the side and watching the world go by, quiet and alone in the way that doesn't make him feel so small.

They're passing through a tunnel in district five when Regulus does a sharp double-take, head whipping to the side. He would *swear* he just caught a glimpse of words spray-painted on the inside of the tunnel. Maybe his mind is playing tricks on him, but it looked like it said *Hallow is Hollow.*

The train is going too fast for him to really be sure, so he settles back into his seat slowly, eyebrows furrowed. Against his will, he thinks about the way Riddle had made it very clear that Regulus failed to change his mind, or do a proper job of convincing him, as he was demanded to.

Regulus doesn't believe there's actually anything he could have done to achieve that goal anyway, if he's honest. Riddle doesn't strike him as the type of man who's swayed once he has his mind set on something. But, well, maybe Regulus did a good enough job of convincing everyone else. James, too. They really did try, no matter how difficult it was.

That has to count for something, right?

Either way, Regulus is relieved when they make it back home. He doesn't know the future, doesn't know if the Hallows will demand more out of him and James at some point, but he is sure that the chances of them fading into obscurity are higher now. There will be new tributes soon enough, and Sirius is the only one who will *for sure* have to return to the Hallow. James and Regulus might not have to, possibly for a long time.

So…tea. Regulus thinks tea is a good place to start. He isn't sure what that means for them, honestly, but he is sure that he's not opposed to finding out. It's easier like this, without the weight of the Hallows expectations bearing down on them. Whatever they do, however it goes, it'll be their choice. It won't be for show. It'll be theirs, and only theirs.

When the train slows to a stop, Regulus gets off first. James has been getting up at random intervals to walk when his leg demanded it, so he doesn't seem as uncomfortable as he did the last time he returned home from the Hallow. Regulus lingers out front, waiting in silence as Sirius gets off behind him, then helps James off right after. James is fine enough that he's not using his cane, just lazily swinging it as they walk.

He seems pleased that Regulus waited on them. A smile curves his mouth, and it's beautiful, so very beautiful. Regulus wants to feel that smile against his own lips, and with no one around eager to see just that, the desire feels more real somehow. It leaves him a little flustered, honestly.

Regulus could have left and just—went home, but instead, he walks along with Sirius and James to the gate. They're all quiet, but it's not a heavy silence. It's light, actually, just an unspoken relief to be home with the past week behind them.

When the gate opens, Effie and Monty are there. Regulus is secretly relieved, because some part of him was afraid that they wouldn't be, that Riddle would have…

And then, Effie steps forward and softly says, "Sirius, Regulus, I need a word with you both," and Regulus knows instantly that Riddle *did.* Just not to them.

Regulus' heart sinks, his stomach tangling into knots as he slowly looks over at Sirius, who is already staring right at him. They don't say anything; they don't have to. James is frozen in place, staring at Monty with wide eyes, and Monty has sorrow etched into the lines of his face. Without a word, Sirius and Regulus follow Effie off to the side, listening in silence as she explains that their parents had a tragic accident and are dead.

Riddle didn't even grant the liberty of leaving bodies behind for them to bury.

Chapter End Notes

the alcohol abuse warning: marlene has turned to drinking to cope with being a mentor, and she is drunk in one scene that she's with dorcas, but nothing really happens, and she does agree to ask for help back home on getting sober (we will see her recover)

the death warning: walburga and orion are killed. it's not explicitly stated how (not yet) and is shown in, like, two paragraphs. all that's said is that there was a tragic accident and "riddle didn't leave bodies behind to bury" which will get explained in the next chapter

alright! into me jabbering away, ig.

so, starting strong with marlene being hilarious, and also her and james bonding! i told you they'd have progress! also regulus getting bitchy because their dance got interrupted 😭😭😭

regulus' little moment with huey was so satisfying to me, im so sorry. like "there is no comfort in the arena" YOU TELL HIM BABE!!! sucks for huey tho bc he really does mean well.

jealous james my beloved <3 sorry but he has me giggling and kicking my feet, he's so 🥰 lmaooo not him being like: he wants to get in your pants and i know this because i ALSO want to get in your pants, i will fight him to the death! okay babe, calm down 😭😭😭 literally who are you fighting??? regulus doesn't even know other people EXIST.

but regulus bringing up sex and james immediately shifting gears, he is HILARIOUS, i love him. the fact that regulus calls them "shiny topics" is adorable to me bc he knows james likes shiny things PLS 😭

also just like, the growth that regulus has had!!! he has come so far!!! he is trying so hard and making progress!!! im so proud of him ☹☹☹

now, minvera fucking mcgonagall!!! an icon!!! a queen!!! not sirius trying to THREATEN HER 😭😭😭 GOODBYE. also yes, finding out that she is the next head gamemaker but also in the order... hm, What Could This Possibly Mean 🤔

that whole interaction between minerva and dorcas is so.... god, it's such a set up for future pain, yall don't even KNOW. but also the fact that dorcas BEGS minerva not to make her recruit marlene, and then admits she could love her, and she thinks she almost does... KILL ME 😭 just minerva being like "go. go be where you need to be" ohhhh it's hitting so hard

but its a sad day for the dorlene lovers (i am one of them, yes, and i am Sad). just, like, the fact that dorcas did absolutely nothing wrong by having sex with lily, just like marlene wouldn't be doing anything wrong by having sex with someone else, but it Still

Hurts bc they have feelings for each other, EXCEPT dorcas feels she can't do anything about it bc like, she Needs To Keep Marlene Safe. and it's one of those things where, like, marlene can't just be dorcas' "friend" she feels much more than that, so she needed to take a step back and do what's best for herself, and there was NOTHING dorcas could do about it, because she would be putting marlene in danger.

the ring... we will see the ring again. it's Important. don't worry, dorcas and marlene WILL see each other again. there's a lot more to their story, i promise.

but god, that juxtaposition where minnie is like "if wishes were reality, we'd all be daydreaming" and dorcas then being like "then let me daydream please" only to then later daydream/wish she hadn't gone to say goodbye to marlene at all bc of how it ended. it felt like someone just stepped on my heart 😭

and then, the going home portion!!! effie and monty are alive and well, walburga and orion...are not. ding dong the bitches are dead. all of you: i wish they'd just die. me: your wish is my command

lmaoooo no but, as shit as they were, it's not something that regulus (and sirius) are just happy about, obviously. it's a complex thing, and it's expanded on more in the next chapter.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-james "spit in my mouth" potter—he's his mother's son, there's no denying that 💀
-the little kazoo story about sirius making regulus smile
-regulus "id bleed the world dry if it meant james would never be sad again" black always being ready at a moments notice to Fuck Shit Up at the slightest sign of james' discomfort
-sirius being sad about leaving remus behind and only wanting to be around james :(
-"when no one else is enough, james always is" 😭
-marlene being sure she can kick regulus' ass and also teasing him in solidarity as sirius' friend and also "reginald" lmaooo
-jealous dorcas!!!
-marlene in a suit!!!
-marlene agreeing to get sober <3
-sirius doing his best to shield regulus from the hallows 😭
-minnie being absolutely unimpressed by sirius lmaooo (this Will Change)

alright that about sums it up!!!

Quarterly Memorial

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past deaths
-references to past child death
-references to past violence
-references to past child abuse
-depictions of grief
-depictions of depression
-very brief and vague depiction of dissociative amnesia (like one sentence)
-brief depiction of self-harm (it's stated that a character bites their arm hard enough to draw blood, but it is not shown or described in detail)
-one brief mention of vomiting
-hints of/implied alcohol use to cope (though this isn't a sign of incoming alcoholism, it's literally just that things are That Bad)

yeah, uh, we're into the thick of it again. this chapter will lead you into a false sense of security in the beginning, but im a no good dirty rotten traitor, and that sense of a security is a lie! 😬 PLEASE KEEP UP WITH THE WARNINGS, SHIT IS ABOUT TO GET FUCKING AWFUL AGAIN! okay, thanks, carry on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time Regulus invites James in for tea is months after learning his parents are dead. James can't really blame him for that, honestly, because—well, *his parents are dead.*

It was a house fire, apparently, but James—along with Sirius and Regulus—knew that Riddle was behind it somehow. The mayor did have it assessed, but all that was said about it was a faulty wire that led to a tragic accident. No one wondered why they didn't try to escape, and didn't think to ask themselves if maybe Walburga and Orion *couldn't.* Effie said it happened in the middle of the night, while her and Monty were asleep, so by the time they got up to the harsh smell of smoke from down the street, it was already too late.

Regulus was, predictably and understandably, not okay after the fact. Sirius wasn't either, though his complex emotions seem steeped in his own understanding of morality, because he confessed to James once, late at night, that the fact that his parents were dead comforted him,

and he thought it made him a bad person. He got randomly upset as well, though. About two weeks after learning his parents died, Sirius had a major breakdown thinking that maybe, just maybe, there were happy memories of his childhood with his parents, but he just forgot them. On that day, the only person who *could* help Sirius was Regulus—who also wasn't doing so well at the time—and so it was Regulus who had to explain that no, they didn't have many happy memories with their parents as children, and yes, their parents were shitty people, but they were still dead, and it still hurt anyway.

There was no funeral equivalent or anything of the like. James is pretty sure that Sirius and Regulus took a night to get absolutely fucking plastered, because Sirius didn't come home one night, and he could hear yelling from across the street. The next day—not morning, but afternoon—Sirius came stumbling in, hungover and sporting busted knuckles, grumbling about lunatics for little brothers.

Nonetheless, whatever issues they had seemed to pass, because Sirius continued to go visit Regulus as often as he had been. The only other common visitor was still, infuriatingly enough, Barty Crouch Jr, who went in and out of Regulus' house like he fucking lived there. James, of course, was still just bringing the daily flower, and he wasn't even heartbroken the first time he stepped up and saw the flower from the previous day right where he'd left it. Well, he had been heartbroken, but not out of a sense of rejection. He remembered how Regulus said that the flower got him out of bed when doing so was too hard, and he was pretty sure that meant that Regulus just—hadn't gotten out of bed the previous day. At all. Not even for the flower.

So, James put out a little flower pot for him on his stoop, just so the flower wouldn't die, letting it wait there for whenever Regulus was ready to get it. Regulus eventually did. James showed up one day to see that the flower was gone, and so he replaced it again, and the cycle continued. There were some days that Regulus didn't take the flower, and there were some days where James barely got to make it across the damn street before Regulus' hand was darting out his door to grab the flower like it was all he wanted out of life.

It took two months, nearly three, for that door to open when James stepped up onto the stoop. He didn't expect it, not that day, and probably not ever. Some part of James felt—guilt, felt like it was at least partially his fault, because maybe he could have done more, tried harder, put on a better performance, and maybe Walburga and Orion would have lived. He knew, rationally, that he wasn't to blame—Riddle was—but that didn't stop the feelings from being there.

His shame for it led him to be fully convinced that Regulus would never, ever speak to him again. The curtains on his window were always shut.

But then, one day with no warning, the door to Regulus' house opened just as James was about to lay a flower out on his stoop, and as beautiful as Regulus always is, he had looked quite rough at the time. For James, who hadn't properly laid eyes on him in months, it felt like a drastic change. He was thinner, and he had deep and dark circles under his eyes that looked like they'd been there for quite some time. James immediately wanted to feed him and tuck him into bed.

But he was there, and his voice cracked a little bit when he looked at the flower in James' hand and whispered, "Would you want to come in for tea?"

James did want, in fact, and so he went in for tea.

Which brings him to now, two months later, nearly five months after returning home and finding out that Walburga and Orion had died. Not just died, though. They'd been killed. James never lets himself forget it, never lets himself forget how easy it was for Riddle to *have* them killed, done in secret, late in the night; not as a warning, but as a punishment.

Since Regulus let him in on that very first day, James has had at least one cup of tea with Regulus every day since. He doesn't lay flowers on the stoop anymore, instead knocking on the door—if Regulus isn't opening it before he can even lift his hand in the first place—and handing it directly to Regulus, who takes each one like they're precious. He always replaces the old flowers in the vase in his kitchen with the new one, taking one of the old ones up to his room before returning to the kitchen to start tea for them both.

Some days, Regulus doesn't acknowledge him at all, doing everything with a distant look in his eyes, quiet and never looking at him. On those days, James sits with him in silence and listens to the sounds of life they create even when living is so hard; the clinking of ceramic, the scuff of shoes across the floor, and the soft, steady way they breathe. On those days, James knows not to touch him, and he knows that, in some way, just being there with Regulus is enough.

Other days, Regulus seems better. He's willing to talk; he'll look James in the eye; he goes just a little slower when making their tea. On those days, James talks to him, and usually

that's all it is. Lazy, inane chatter about whatever thoughts pass through his head. Sometimes the goal is just to get him to laugh, and James is always pleased when it works. On those days, James is fairly sure that he can come closer, that he can reach out and touch, that Regulus will let him. Most of the time, James doesn't. But, occasionally, he can't stop himself from at least trying—just a hand on Regulus' arm on the table, or coming so close that only one step would be all it would take for him to have Regulus in his arms—and on the good days, Regulus allows it, every single time.

Some days, James is the one who's struggling. He drags himself into Regulus' kitchen and can't quite remember how to smile. On the days that his leg hurts more than usual, he's grumpier from the pain. On the day he accidentally kills a bee while tending to his flowers, he goes through the five stages of grief in less than an hour, which has nothing to do with the bee and everything to do with Vanity. He has bad days, too, days where he walks into Regulus' house and wants to curl up in a ball and fucking cry, or get up and toss shit around the room, or scream at the top of his lungs until he's breathless.

Those days, Regulus always tries to be there for him. James knows he does. He can tell. Regulus isn't very good with vulnerability, James knows that, but he makes it a point to ask if James needs or wants to talk, or just rant, if he's clearly having a bad day. He listens when James takes him up on the offer, which isn't always, but James has learned by now that he feels a little better every time he lets himself unload a bit. And, when James doesn't want to talk, Regulus makes his tea just a little bit sweeter, and somehow that makes him feel better, too.

Today is a good day for them both, which isn't as rare as it was when they started doing this in the very beginning. It's more frequent now, in fact, especially since Regulus seems to have fully come to terms with his parents being killed, as much as he ever will. He doesn't talk about them, ever, at least not to James—maybe Sirius, but Sirius hasn't said either way, so James doesn't know—but Regulus does look better these days. Still tired, most of the time, and still beautiful.

On *this* day, Regulus is in a good enough mood to add bagels to their tea time, as James has fondly dubbed it in his head. When Regulus wants more time with him, he adds bagels, which James has now unconsciously been Pavloved into thinking of as his favorite food for that very reason. For one thing, he gets to watch Regulus spread cream cheese on the warm bagels; a treat for his eyes, because Regulus uses a dull kitchen knife with the same ease that he used his daggers in the arena.

"You're a bit of a show-off, you know that?" James asks in amusement after Regulus effortlessly swivels the knife between his fingers. "Sort of like Sirius, but more secretive about it. Don't think I haven't noticed."

"I'm not showing off," Regulus mutters, sticking his pinky in his mouth and sucking off a smear of cream cheese with a small frown of concentration that makes James feel like he's about to melt down against the counter.

"So, what, you just can't hold a knife normally?" James teases.

Regulus hums and swivels the knife once more before sitting it down and sliding James' bagel over to him. "Maybe. I don't know. It really is just an unconscious motion. A habit."

"Can you teach me?" James asks.

"Do you want me to?" Regulus replies.

James thinks about that for a long moment, then lifts one half of his bagel and admits, "No, not really. I just like looking at it, if I'm honest. It looks…nice."

"Nice wasn't the word you were going to use, was it?"

"No, it was not."

Regulus shakes his head, his lips twitching as he starts tearing his own bagel into portions, rather than just biting into it like James is. He's always like this, eating politely, something he no doubt learned from how he was raised; it took Sirius *ages* to get out of the habit himself.

"Maybe you should think about your fascination with knives a little more, James," Regulus muses, popping a piece of bagel in his mouth and chewing slowly, eyebrows raised.

"I don't really have to. They're sexy." James shrugs, shameless, because that's enough for him. "That's all I need to know."

"Is that so?"

"I'm a simple man, Reg."

Regulus rolls his eyes. "You're something, alright."

James grins at him and bites into his bagel, chewing obnoxiously like he can invite a little life into this house with just a smile and a willingness to be silly. He's always doing that, when he's capable of it, on his better days. He laughs loudly and hears it echo throughout the house, hoping it will seep into the walls and warm the space when he's gone. Every day, when James leaves behind remnants of conversation and commotion, it feels a little less hollow.

Sirius is contributing in his own way, too. He builds furniture and just—leaves it all over Regulus' house. He puts together picture frames and fills them with photos of himself and James, himself and Regulus and James when they were kids, himself and Regulus before James ever came into a picture. He even put out a photo of their parents, likely for Regulus' sake more than his own, but it's still the thought that counts.

Effie sends over food and various other things so she's sure that Regulus' pantry will never get empty. Monty has sent over books for Regulus to read, which James knows for a fact that he actually does, because he's seen the books lying around with flowers that James gave him used as bookmarks. Mary somehow worked out through James' rambling that they're trying to make Regulus' house a bit more of a home, so she sent a beautiful painting full of bright, happy colors that genuinely *does* make the house seem warmer. And, of course there's always a vase of flowers in Regulus' kitchen.

It's still… Well, there's still a hollowness that lingers, and James knows why. It's hard to make a home out of a house where a ghost lives, and there are days where the only thing that seems real in this house is the way Regulus haunts it.

What puts a bright burst of hope in James' chest is that *Regulus* is starting to try, too. He sees it, the signs of effort, everything from the clear signs of Regulus actually cleaning up, to him moving furniture around on his own because he wants it in a different spot than where Sirius left it. He sees it in the shoes by the door, and the little notes of recipes taped to the fridge, and the lack of a visible flinch or tension in Regulus' shoulders whenever he turns on the tap and hears running water.

His curtains are open again, too.

It's the small things, really. They matter.

"So," James says later, once they've both finished their bagels and the visit is coming to an end. There's just something that James wants to talk about first, and he dares to hope that he'll actually get a positive response. "I've been thinking…"

"Mm, dangerous," Regulus comments idly, carrying his small plate and empty cup over to the sink. "Wasn't aware you could do that, James. What a terrifying discovery."

James snort-laughs, unable to help it, and that's another thing. Regulus is mean to him again, sometimes, but like, in the *good* way. James can't explain it, what's so good about it, why it makes him feel happy every time Regulus does it, but he is nonetheless pleased by it. He didn't even realize how Regulus had *stopped* doing it until he started back.

"Yes, well, it's difficult business, this thinking thing I've taken to doing as of late," James announces with a delighted little chortle as he brings his plate and cup over, too. "You're, ah, watching the announcement for the Quarterly Memorial tonight, right?"

Regulus side-eyes him, even as he grabs James' dishes to wash along with his own. "Yes…"

"Well, we're all going to be watching it right across the street. Mum, Dad, Sirius and me, I mean," James says slowly, bracing his hand on the counter and gazing at Regulus hopefully. "If you wanted—I mean, if you didn't want to watch alone, you could always come over and watch with us."

"Ah, I—I don't know if that would be the best idea, James," Regulus replies carefully.

"You wouldn't be intruding," James tells him, leaning closer to try and catch his gaze. "Really, Mum and Dad think you should be there anyway. No point in watching it alone. Sirius would probably feel better with you there, too. We can—I mean, you can have dinner with us, then stick around…"

"I'm not—I don't—" Regulus pauses, then blows out a deep breath and sits the dishes out to dry, turning off the tap and pivoting to face James, eyebrows furrowed. "I'll see how I feel later, how about that? I'll think about it."

James nods, unwilling to push. His gaze snags on a wavy strand of hair stubbornly lying over Regulus' forehead, and he studies it for a long moment before his hand raises slowly. He hesitates for a beat before he comes in contact, flicking his gaze down to look into Regulus' eyes and see if this is upsetting him in any way, or if it's going to. Regulus just watches him, his eyes clear and sharp, a little intense.

Gently, James brushes the hair back, letting his fingertips graze slightly over the arc of Regulus' eyebrow. James is pretty sure his heart attempts to kick right through his chest, muscle and bone and all, because Regulus *leans into it.* He sways closer, a soft sigh spilling out of mouth the moment James dares to brush the curl of his fingers down his cheek.

"Oi, what's going on in here?"

James jumps in place, snatching his hand back reflexively as he bursts out, "Fucking *shit,* Sirius! For fuck's sake, don't *do* that. You nearly scared the piss out of me!"

"Can't you fucking knock?" Regulus snaps, pinning a glare on Sirius, who seems unperturbed by this.

"Well, I usually don't, do I? And now I'm glad I didn't. What's all this then?" Sirius flaps his hand between them, his nose wrinkling. "Stop that. I'm miserable and loveless, so this means

everyone else must also be miserable and loveless in solidarity with me, because I said so."

"Oh, stop being dramatic," Regulus mutters. "You are not miserable and loveless."

"This is true," James agrees solemnly. "I always endeavor to make you happy, and I love you very much."

"Don't make me feel guilty, you utter tossers." Sirius groans and shuffles into the kitchen to flop against the counter, pouting at them. "I miss him. I miss him so much. I'm pretty sure I'm dying, that's how much I miss him."

"Not too long now," James tells him weakly, walking over to pat his shoulder. There's not really much James can say to make Sirius feel better about missing Remus; he's said every single comforting thing he can think of by now so many times that he's pretty sure Sirius is tired of hearing it.

Sirius heaves a sigh and props himself up. "I am going to attack him mouth-first when I see him again. I'm going to just fucking *absorb* him, that way I can keep him when I leave next time. Is that insane? I think I'm insane."

"Your last name is Black," Regulus says wryly. "Of course you are."

"Bad news for you, Reggie," Sirius replies, bearing his teeth in a playful grimace. Regulus snorts quietly and turns away, so Sirius focuses on James. "Are you two done with your little tea date now? Mary is expecting us, James."

"It's not a date," James and Regulus announce at the same time.

"Sure it's not," Sirius declares flatly, clearly unimpressed with them both. "Whatever helps you two sleep at night. Anyway, can we go now?"

"Yes, you can," Regulus mumbles, pointing towards the door, his cheeks red. "Get out of my house."

"Don't you want to walk James to the door, Regulus? It's only polite, you know, after a date."

"Out!"

Sirius cackles his whole way to the door, and James has to stifle laughter of his own as he follows behind. He glances back on the way, just in time to see Regulus shaking his head with a small smile as he turns around, reaching out to gently brush his fingers over the flowers in the windowsill.

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"Fucking hell, Potter, you're heavy," Sirius complains, pausing in place to do a little jump to haul James further up on his back, having to pitch himself forward to keep his balance.

"Hey, this was your idea. Steady on, my noble steed," James declares in delight, clicking his teeth and raising his cane up in the air, laughing brightly when Sirius huffs.

Nonetheless, Sirius continues on, because it was indeed his idea, so now he has to see it through. It's colder now, these days, since winter is coming in; that makes James' leg a little more difficult for him to deal with at times, especially if he's been really active. The idiot was chasing children around outside today, while Sirius—who is lazy—much preferred to stand off to the side with Mary and gossip about the other teachers. By the end, James was limping a little on the way home, even with his cane, so Sirius—who is not lazy, when it comes to the people he loves—decided a piggyback was a clear solution. His back is not happy with him about it, because James is a solid mass of muscle draped all over it right now.

"I can feel you turning to look at his house," Sirius says dryly as he carries James towards their own. He *can* literally feel James twisting around to look at Regulus' behind them.

"He's at his desk," James replies lightly. "Writing more sad boy poetry, no doubt, but I think we've just ruined the mood for him. He's laughing at you so hard right now."

"Little shit," Sirius mutters, but there's not much heat to his words, honestly. Regulus has been doing better lately, which is a huge improvement to how fucked up he was after their parents died. Frankly, Sirius wasn't really handling it well himself, so he has no room to judge.

It's just that it was so unexpected. Like, yes, they all knew it was a possibility; that's part of the fear they've had from the moment Riddle paid them all a visit. But it's one thing to think about it, and it's something else entirely to have it actually happen. Sirius doesn't know why, but some part of him didn't expect it to. Maybe because he has spent years of his life just wishing his parents would fucking die, like that could erase everything they put him and Regulus through, only for it to actually happen and find out that it doesn't.

Sirius had a war going on in him for months after they were killed. One half of him tangled up with shame and this horrible yearning for the Walburga and Orion that never even existed in the first place; the other half just fucking *relieved,* as horrible as that may be, because them being dead can't change what they did in the past, but it does ensure they can't do anything else in the future. The war has settled now, over time, but neither side really won. He just… let it go. Or, he tried to. He's still trying to, and he does a little more each day.

Regulus, though… Well, he loved their parents. He *still* loves their parents. He never wanted them to die at all, despite every reason it would be perfectly valid for him to wish for that. It hit him very, very hard and wasn't a complex, complicated thing at all. His grief is clear and defined; Walburga and Orion are dead, and he does not want them to be.

So, it's—well, it's relieving for Sirius, to see him doing better. He's pretty sure a weight lifted off his chest the first time James didn't come home immediately after leaving one of his flowers, and he discovered the two of them having tea in complete silence. He left them to it, hoping it was a good sign.

It was. Regulus has been doing better, slowly but surely. Not just with the loss of their parents, but with a lot of things, honestly. Two days ago, Sirius showed up at Regulus' house unannounced and they got into a bickering war that ended with them both racing each other up the stairs, shoving at each other and insulting the other back and forth the entire way, and at the top, Sirius mindlessly threw his arm around Regulus' shoulders to roughly drag his

knuckles over his head, forgetting for a moment that Regulus fucking hates being touched. Except Regulus fussed and craned his head away, but he didn't push Sirius off, even leaning into him a little as they stumbled along, like he didn't hate the contact at all.

It's a big improvement from the horrible, ugly fight they had the night they decided mixing alcohol with their grief would be a proper way to send their parents off. It felt fitting at the time, but in retrospect, it was a very stupid idea. Regulus ended up tossing shit at Sirius' head, yelling at him about a lot of things, like being a bad son and a bad brother and a bad person, all because Sirius made the less-than-innocent comment that some part of him was glad that their parents were dead, so they couldn't do any more damage.

In response, a very drunk Sirius retaliated by yelling right back and ranting about how fucking emotionally-stunted Regulus is and how he's a bad brother as well. In his drunken stupor, he may have punched a wall a few times, which was better than punching Regulus, because he *really* wanted to punch Regulus. He's pretty sure if they fought that night, they would have ended up killing each other, or coming close to it.

By the end of it, though, they were both a weepy mess of apologies and stupid, dysfunctional confessions that will likely never see the light of day again. Things like how much they missed each other in the ten years they spent apart. Regulus admitting that he missed Walburga and Orion and wasn't even sure what he was missing. Sirius whispering that he wished he remembered them more, even if the memories he would have would be as shitty as all the rest, but a part of him wanted to cling to them anyway. They'd both passed out on the floor in the main room of Regulus' house and regretted all their decisions the following day, plus they struggled to meet each other's eyes after the emotional upheaval of the night prior.

And yet, Sirius went right back when he promised to, and Regulus welcomed him in without missing a beat.

"You know, he said he'd think about coming over for dinner and watch the Quarterly Memorial announcement with us," James says as slides slowly off Sirius' back at the doorway, bracing himself with his cane and following Sirius in when he opens the door and holds it for him.

"Did he now?"

"He—well, he didn't promise anything, but he didn't say no either, so…"

The absence of a no is not a yes, and James knows this as much as Sirius does, *especially* with Regulus, but Sirius can tell that James is getting his hopes up anyway. Sirius won't make a fuss out of it either way, but he really hopes Regulus comes.

But Regulus doesn't show up for dinner, and Sirius grimaces each time he sees James wistfully look in the direction of the door. It's probably some of the most heartbreaking shit he's ever seen. James is so ridiculously smitten that Sirius doesn't even mock him about it, even though it's with Sirius' little brother. Sirius also has no room to judge for being ridiculously smitten, because a night does not go by where he hasn't dragged himself up on the roof to talk to the moon.

You'd think that getting the surprise of seeing Remus in the middle of the year unexpectedly would have made him miss Remus less, but he's pretty sure it just made him miss Remus *more.* He thinks about it a lot, how different things would have been without getting to see him. He wouldn't know the story behind Remus killing someone—justifiably. He wouldn't know that Remus has a new scar. Has he gotten any more in the time since? Is he okay? Is he safe? Is he…alive?

The last thought scares the hell out of him, honestly. It really, truly does, because there's no way for him to know, or find out, until he returns to the Hallow as a mentor. And that's what the rest of his life is going to be like. It's the life he chose, and it's one he would choose every time for Remus, but that doesn't make it any easier. It's still so fucking hard.

The only thing he can do is take it one day at a time, as Remus would say, and so he does. Some days are better than others, but every day, he misses Remus just the same.

Before dinner, James was in a good mood, but throughout dinner, he becomes more visibly dejected and subdued. Sirius doesn't often get angry with Regulus or James on the behalf of the other—he meant it when he promised to stay out of it—but there are some moments where he can't help it. This is one of them. He wants to go across the street and grab his stubborn, emotionally-stunted brother by the ear and drag him over here, just to put a smile back on James' face.

Sirius knows, in only the way a brother does, that Regulus loves James with everything he has in him. He has no doubts that one day, someday, Regulus will be ready to allow James to love him just the same. Very soon, likely, from what he's seen. Regulus is getting there. Slowly but surely, he and James are getting there.

It's just taking time, and *sometimes,* Sirius gets a little impatient when either of them get sad about the other, which is unfortunately a frequent occurrence.

Effie notices, too, because she discreetly ushers Sirius into helping her wash dishes while Monty goes to set up the screen and James begs off to have a shower. As soon as they're alone, she murmurs, "Did James have a bad day?"

"Not really," Sirius replies quietly. "A good one, mostly. It's just that Regulus said he'd think about coming over, but he must have decided not to, and James… Well."

"Ah," Effie says softly, getting it instantly. "Mm, well, maybe he just needs a bit more time. Regulus, I mean. He was always more cautious than you and James were, even as kids."

"Sometimes, I can barely even remember what we were all like as kids," Sirius confesses, swallowing. "Reggie, most of all. I do remember some things, but not…"

"Well, Regulus was…a quiet, shy child who turned bashful the moment I smiled at him. Such a gentle, gentle boy," Effie muses with a fond smile. "He grew into a gentle man."

Sirius stops and stares at her. "He—what? *Regulus?"*

"Yes," Effie confirms with a laugh. "Most wouldn't think so, but I know better. I watched him stand to his feet and tip himself into a river of blood in an act so tender that I'll never again be able to look at him with anything less than pure love. Every other member of the Black family, including *you,* fought and clawed their way home to their family, oftentimes to a family that never truly made them feel loved at all. Regulus? He fought and clawed through that arena, the entire time, for *James.* He's far more gentle than anyone gives him credit for."

"Oh," Sirius whispers, a lump forming in his throat. He swallows past it harshly and blinks rapidly, clearing his throat loudly. "I—I suppose I never really…thought about it like that."

"Gentle things are easily crushed. That's why they're packaged more carefully. Takes a bit longer to unwrap," Effie tells him with her special brand of wisdom that he's been fortunate enough to have in his life for a long time now. She smiles at him and reaches out to sweep her hand down his hair, leaning over to kiss his temple, then she goes back to washing dishes.

They're silent for a while, and he can hear the faint sounds of a shower going, along with the quiet sound of Rita Skeeter jabbering away from the screen. The past week, for the lead up into the Quarterly Memorial announcement, the previous hunger games were held in review for a refresher. Highlight reels from the arena, from the interview before and after, as well as Rita's constant commentary.

They haven't been watching them for obvious reasons, but they don't have much of a choice tonight.

Because of the Quarterly Memorial.

Sirius wasn't even born when the first Master of the Hallow was assassinated. Gellert Grindelwald, killed in his own castle only months after the 34th hunger games. He doesn't know much about it, only that the people in the districts had been hopeful that a change in leadership would bring good fortune to the districts.

It had not.

Tom Riddle was the next to become Master, and Sirius doesn't know much about that either, since it was before his time, but he does know that people were originally appalled by how young Riddle was when he came into power. Not even eighteen at the time, if Sirius has his facts correct, but while those in the district were upset, the Hallows loved him.

One of the first things he implemented was special games in memory of the previous Master of the Hallow. So, the 35th games were altered with a rule to allow the tributes reaped to pick

volunteers to go in their stead, with the catch being that they could only pick from their own family.

The Hallows had loved the special games so much that Riddle announced it would be a quarterly event. Every twenty-five years, in memory of Gellert Grindelwald's lovely leadership, there would be a Quarterly Memorial. It was apparently a Victor from long ago who killed him, though no one knows who anymore, or what happened to them. Probably dead, Sirius would guess.

It's the Quarterly Memorial. They're notoriously worse than the usual games. Bloodier. Harder. More intense. Whatever rule Riddle comes up with—because it is his decision in the end, even if government officials and gamemakers get to vote or offer ideas—it will be brutal. It will be hard on the tributes, yes, but it will be hard on the mentors, too.

It's going to be hard on Sirius.

"What do you think the rule will be?" Sirius can't help but ask, his voice small, his heart picking up the pace in fear.

"I don't know," Effie says quietly. She washes a plate and stares straight ahead, her gaze distant like she's looking into the past and existing there, too.

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Regulus has come to the conclusion that staring at a door and thinking about knocking on it isn't the same thing as actually knocking. He's not sure why it's so hard to do, but he's really struggling to even just lift his hand. The first step, and he's somehow managing to fuck that up.

Well, no, the first step was actually showing up on time, but he fucked that up, too. It was his fault. He's not sure why it mattered to him so much what he wore, and he didn't expect it to, or maybe he would have gotten dressed earlier than he did. But he wasn't aware that it would send him into a mild crisis in which he dumped basically his entire closet out, changed at least six times, then somehow ended up on the floor with his head between his knees, trying

not to cry because he realized he was already late and still hadn't found clothes that made him feel presentable enough to show up in the first place.

He has no idea why, other than the fact that he cares what James thinks of him, which is so *stupid,* because James has quite literally seen him look his worst and that didn't stop him from feeling for Regulus as he does.

So, Regulus was late to dinner and decided just to not go, since he was already late, but then he kept thinking about how James really did seem to want him to come, and honestly, Regulus really wanted to go. The more he thought about it, the more the desire settled within him, because he *really* doesn't want to watch the Quarterly Memorial announcement alone.

He'd also like to choose to be there for Sirius at least *once* in his life, and it's Sirius who's really going to be needing the support tonight, seeing as the announcement will affect him the most. So, Regulus talked himself back into going.

And now he can't figure out how to knock, and the door won't just magically open for him, so he's in a bit of a—

The door proceeds to magically open without any prompting whatsoever, and Monty blinks at him while holding a bag of rubbish in his hand, clearly about to walk out and toss it in the large bin at the corner of his property.

Regulus blinks back.

"Oh," Monty says. "Hey, Regulus."

"Hello, Monty," Regulus replies weakly, his entire face immediately getting hot. Oh, for fuck's sake, this is *mortifying.*

"Coming in?" Monty asks. "You just missed dinner, but I could make up a plate for you if you want."

"Oh, ah, thank you, but I ate," Regulus admits sheepishly, because he did indeed smash down two sandwiches before leaving his house so he wouldn't put them out by being late for dinner, and yes, he did almost cry about the crumbs that got on his shirt, and he was also sure that his parents were rolling over in their—well, they didn't get graves, so their metaphorical graves, then, for how he slammed those sandwiches back with no manners whatsoever.

"Alright, come on in," Monty says agreeably, stepping back to let him slip inside. As soon as he does, his lips twitch as he tilts his head and calls up the stairs, "James, hurry up in the shower, Regulus is here!"

"WHAT? HE IS?!" is the shout that drifts back down, followed by a series of loud thumps and muffled cursing.

Monty chuckles quietly, then looks at Regulus fondly. "My poor child. Alright, I'll be back. Sirius is in the kitchen with Euphemia if you want to go see him."

"Thank you," Regulus mumbles, and Monty winks at him before carrying on what he was doing.

Before Regulus can even take one step, Sirius' head pokes out the kitchen doorway. He blinks. "Reggie?"

"No, a figment of your imagination. An illusion, if you will."

"High chances of that, actually, with the horrors my brain likes to cook up."

"I'm not sure why your brain would have to cook anything up when all you'd have to do is look in the mirror."

Sirius opens his mouth like he's about to respond, but he snaps it shut again as Effie appears in the doorway, smiling as she says, "Hungry, dear? I can make a plate for you."

"I ate, but thank you," Regulus replies quickly, still embarrassed about missing dinner as it is. He's pretty sure he'd die from the humiliation if she fed him now.

"Would you like some tea?" Effie offers. "It's a bit nippy out, isn't it? Or, oh, we could do hot cocoa."

"Yes!" Sirius blurts out. "Yes, Regulus, would love hot cocoa, because Sirius would *also* love hot cocoa."

Regulus' lips twitch. "Tea is fine."

Sirius scowls, and Effie chuckles as she waves them both into the kitchen. Regulus relents and agrees to hot cocoa when Effie offers again, which makes Sirius stop grumbling under his breath. Regulus stands off to the side and watches in silence as Effie and Sirius work together to make the drinks, moving fluidly around each other with a familiarity that Regulus himself has never had with—anyone, honestly.

Effie chats with him a bit, asks him to pass her a mug or two, scolds Sirius when he squirts cream directly into his mouth, and it's—nice. He feels on the outside of it, but he feels on the outside of a lot of things, and he thinks he always will. Most of the time, he doesn't even mind. This is one of those instances where he's okay with it, where it's almost comforting just to flutter on the sidelines and watch, where he's not envious or yearning at all, just happy to bear witness.

James appears in the doorway with a mess of damp hair and bright eyes, only getting brighter the moment they land on Regulus. He inhales sharply, audibly, then holds it for a long moment before he exhales all at once and eases his way into the kitchen. His cane *thunks* lightly with his every step, a rhythm that somehow, inexplicably, feels like music in Regulus' chest, a beat that leaves him breathless.

"Reg," James greets happily, his gaze warm, pleased. Regulus likes it, that look in his eyes, that simple joy in seeing him.

"James," Regulus murmurs, his heart giving a quiet, yet no less happy little *hello* in return.

"You're late," James says, but it's teasing, no true displeasure in his tone at all. He props up against the counter next to Regulus, leaning over on it, turning to give Regulus his full attention. His glasses are a little fogged up from the swift temperature change from, Regulus presumes, the steamy shower and the slightest chill in the kitchen.

"Ah, yes, I was—" Regulus opens and closes his mouth, his mind completely blank, but he refuses to tell James that he's so late because he literally couldn't decide what to wear. "Yes, well, I'm here now. Sorry I missed dinner."

James hums. "That's alright. You are here now. Hungry, though? I can make a plate for you."

"No, I ate, but thank you," Regulus says, fighting a smile. Potters. They're all the same.

"Effie can't leave him empty-handed, though, so we get hot cocoa!" Sirius announces brightly, looking utterly delighted as he cups his mug between his palms.

"Regulus, I'm going to have to ask you to come over more often," James says, eagerly holding his hands out with a grin, and Sirius laughs as he sits his own mug down to pass over one to James, then one more for Regulus.

Effie isn't very discreet about ushering herself and Sirius from the kitchen shortly after that, though that's partially just because Sirius doesn't realize that's what she's doing, so he keeps failing to miss her cues, and she finally just swats him gently on the shoulder and practically drags him out of the room. Regulus blushes behind his mug of hot cocoa, trying to hide, and for once, James looks just as flustered as him.

"Sorry about—" James coughs and waves a hand sheepishly, sitting his mug down and reaching up to scratch at the side of his head in a nervous gesture. "I don't want you to feel ambushed. I wasn't—I mean, this really was about having you over for the Quarterly Memorial announcement, not to get stuck with me or anything."

"I don't feel ambushed," Regulus assures him. "Or stuck."

"Oh. Good," James breathes out, visibly relieved. He relaxes a bit, reaching out to grab his drink and sip on it, all of his nerves seeming to fall away from him at once. That means it's with complete sincerity that he says, "I'm happy you're here."

"Me too," Regulus whispers.

And he is, that's the thing. He's so fucking happy that he's here right now; next to James, close to James, looking at James, being fortunate enough to exist at the same time as James. It feels so unbearably, inexplicably good just to be near him, to be with him. It makes Regulus happy. So happy.

It also makes him feel like he's going to fall to pieces, but not in the way it used to. He wasn't able to stand being touched before, and now that's all he wants James to do. Touch him. Just touch him. Please, please touch him. However he wants to, however he will, Regulus doesn't care. He craves James' hands on him with a desperation he never thought he'd reach again, after the arena, but here he is, and he hasn't forgotten.

He hasn't forgotten what it is to long for James. He still knows what it is to want him so badly that he'd be willing to kneel at the altar of James Potter and *beg;* he'd drop down on his hands and knees and *crawl* if that's what it took, if that would prove his devotion. He is the manifestation of longing built up with nowhere to go, and he craves, he yearns, he covets.

It has been building into this, slowly, especially since he started letting James into his house every day, but he's sure of it now. Every time he gets in the same room with James, all he wants is for James to touch him, and maybe never stop.

The scars—well, it has reached a point where Regulus is almost sure he's going to have to let James see them, and the plan is to beg him to just get used to them really fast and keep his comments to himself and pretend he doesn't see Regulus any differently than he always has. Because, honestly? Regulus' libido has caught up to him, along with his willingness to do something about it, and James can barely breathe in his direction without it invoking this carnal, desperate need to fuck until they can't move.

The insane thing about all of this is that Regulus could literally just…have it. All of it. Anything. If he asked, James would touch him. He knows that.

It's the asking part that's difficult.

He thinks it a lot, as loud as possible. *Please touch me,* he'll think on repeat, staring at James and almost wishing that James could just read his mind. Oh, if James *could* read his mind, even he would probably be stunned—possibly even a little horrified—by the absolute tirade of pure *filth* that has barged in and out of Regulus' head in this last week alone.

James quite literally can't do anything without Regulus wanting to rip his clothes off and jump his bones. But, most of all, he just wants James' hands on him, the weight and warmth of them pressed into him all over, anywhere, *please.*

Sadly, James seems utterly oblivious to this fact, which is honestly a bit of a letdown, because if he *knew,* then he'd make it happen for them. Regulus knows he would.

Regulus is honestly doing his best to find some way to convey this to James, but he can't think of how. He knows that just saying it is an option, except literally every time he tries, the words legitimately won't form. He's considered writing a letter or poem, but the idea of actually letting James see into his head like that is—oh, no, he's ready for some things, but not *that,* not yet. Maybe someday, but he's aware of himself enough to know that it would take time for him to build up to that.

So, really, he knows no other form of communicating his desires without just waiting for James to either notice, or just get brazen enough to act on his own, while Regulus gets to happily participate.

It never even crosses his mind that *he* can just—do it himself, until after they've finished their cocoa in comfortable silence, and James turns to take his mug to the sink. Regulus trails behind him automatically, only for James to turn right back around very abruptly and say, "Ah, shit, let me take yours, too, if you're—" and get no further, because Regulus literally just bumps directly into him. Like, right into his chest. He even bounces off a little with a blink, because James is…firm.

"Oh, sorry," James starts, and again, he doesn't finish, because Regulus is still so close to him, with his free hand on James' arm, and he's staring at it with fixed intensity as he realizes all at once that *he* can touch. He flexes his fingers on James' arm, like testing the theory, and James sits his mug down next to Regulus' with a dull thunk, not saying a word. Regulus is very aware of the fact that James is holding his breath right now.

Oh, hello, I'm home again, Regulus thinks, or maybe he just feels it, always feeling whenever James is close to him, under his fingertips. So close, and still, not close enough. Regulus wants him closer. He wants to be closer.

It's simultaneously so easy and not easy at all to slide his hand up James' arm and step forward to press up against him once more, and he doesn't realize he's holding his breath as well until it escapes him on a sharp, shaky sigh the moment he sags into the warmth James carries around with him wherever he goes. It's been months since the last time Regulus was in his arms, all the way back in the Hallow, and it's been too long. Regulus slips his arm up to link around the back of James' neck, then does the same with his other one, his eyes fluttering shut as he melts into him all at once.

"Reg?" James mumbles, not moving, not returning the embrace at all. His hands hang by his sides, waiting.

"You can, James. You can touch me. Please," Regulus replies, not meaning for the last word to tumble out of his mouth, but it does, and he can't take it back now. He's not so sure that he would anyway, because as soon as it falls from his lips, James' arms fly up to wrap around him, instantly, earnestly.

It's different here, like this, in James' kitchen with no one else around, just them, no prying eyes and no expectations. It's different after time, after they've had time to adjust, after they've reached a point where trying isn't a daunting task they could drown in, but a glowing possibility that they're eager to jump into the deep-end of. James would have never let him

drown, he knows that; he didn't, after all, but it was never about that; it was always about Regulus needing to learn to swim on his own. Regulus can swim now. He's ready to.

"You're shaking," James whispers, his hand gently sweeping up and down Regulus' back.

"I'm—I'm really happy at the moment," Regulus chokes out, then tucks his face down into James' shoulder when he realizes that, rather pathetically, he's crying.

James, the pure soul that he is, doesn't call attention to it, or ask any questions. He just holds Regulus in a sure grip and continues to stroke his back, letting Regulus sob, letting Regulus shake, and letting Regulus settle.

"Remember that time I told you I was going to keep hoping for us?" James asks quietly.

"I remember," Regulus croaks.

"I still am," James says. Regulus releases a hoarse, choked laugh and clings to him even harder. James presses a fleeting kiss to the side of his head, to his hair, and Regulus practically goes limp against him. He nearly *whines.* "I think, now more than ever, I have reason to hope. Don't I? Do I?"

"Yes," Regulus breathes. "Yes, you do. You always have."

James exhales explosively and tightens his arms around him, and they stand there like that for a while. It's an embrace, but it's also so much more than that, too. It's the beginning of something that they're sure they'll actually get to have.

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James settles in next to Sirius while Regulus does the same on the other side of him. In the middle, Sirius swings his head between them, finally settling on looking at James, because

Regulus is pretending he doesn't even exist. Sirius arches an eyebrow at James, and James bites down on the inside of his cheek as hard as he can, but it still doesn't stop the grin that breaks out across his face. Sirius snorts and looks away.

Alright, so maybe James is walking on clouds at the moment, but he's chill. Really, he's being so normal about this, if you ignore the fact that literally every part of him is tingling and his arms feel permanently warped to the shape of Regulus' body. He's pretty sure he's about to start floating.

That feeling fades when Monty unmutes the screen when Rita shows up on it, the previous clip of Regulus and James curled up together in a cave thankfully fading away. Rita is smiling as she says, "And now, a special message from the Master of the Hallow himself."

"Thank you, Rita," Riddle murmurs as soon as he's on the screen, staring right into the camera. He seems to be at a desk, his hands threaded casually together on top. There's a cordial smile on his face, and his eyes—usually so empty—gleam with an unspoken pleasure that makes James' heart sink in his chest. "As with each Quarterly Memorial, I'd like to take a brief moment of silence to remember the fallen Master I take great pride in having as a predecessor."

Sirius scoffs and mutters, "Well, fuck that," then proceeds to chatter throughout the entire moment of silence, in an overly cheerful tone that has them all cracking up helplessly. He does fall silent again when Riddle raises his head to speak.

"Fifty years ago, we had the very first hunger games with an altered rule, and the Quarterly Memorial was born," Riddle explains. "Every twenty-five years following the first altered games, we have the Quarterly Memorial to remember the previous Master that was taken from us too soon, a special event in his honor that, were he alive today, I believe he would be truly honored by."

"He sounds charming," James says flatly, and Sirius snorts derisively, crossing his arms. He's tense, his jaw set.

"He wasn't," Monty murmurs. "Grindelwald, I mean. I was still very young when he was assassinated, but I remember my parents being relieved by the news. Grindelwald was young,

twenty-six years old, I believe. He'd been a Master for eight years before he died. Very young when he took up the role, and yet, Riddle was even younger."

"Wait, so who was the Master before Grindelwald?" James asks, blinking over at his dad. He's never thought to ask about this, or even care, because he was still a baby when the previous Quarterly Memorial happened. His mum was a mentor, though. Maybe he should know this.

"There wasn't one," Monty says. "The first twenty-six hunger games weren't…what they are now. The Hallow used to be a democracy, long ago, run by a council of people instead of just one, but Grindelwald somehow managed to change that, and with it, the hunger games themselves. It used to be…"

"My parents said they weren't celebrations," Effie announces quietly. "There was no reaping from the districts. People couldn't volunteer. It was—at first, it was just people thrown out on a field with weapons and told to kill each other, or they'd be killed. It wasn't…adored, if that makes sense. There was no way they could spin it to make it desirable to watch, but apparently Grindelwald turned it into what it is now."

"Hat's off to whoever took him out, then," Sirius declares firmly. "I hope that fucker *isn't* resting in peace, actually. I'd love to take Riddle out, too."

Like he's heard the threat, Riddle looks straight into the camera and shuts it down with one simple announcement.

"This year," Riddle continues calmly, "in memory of Gellert Grindelwald—who was unjustly murdered by a Victor—to remind all Victors that their crimes against the Hallow will not go unpunished, it has been decided that this year's tributes will be reaped from the existing Victors in each district."

It takes James a second to get what that means, honestly. He's not sure why, but it's so unfathomable to him that he literally can't make sense of what Riddle has just said. Existing Victors in each district. Reaped from the existing—

James' ears ring.

Riddle is still speaking on the screen, though what he's saying, James couldn't say. He can't hear past the loud pitch in his head that's slowly, steadily getting louder. He's just staring at the screen, watching Riddle's mouth move, and then Rita comes on the screen next, staring wide-eyed at the camera.

The screen abruptly goes black.

"Fleamont," Effie croaks, but Monty is already out of his chair, flinging the remote at the wall so hard that it flies apart and crumbles to the floor in pieces. It leaves a dent in the wall.

"No. No, not—not again. Not—" Monty chokes off and ducks his head forward before leaving the room altogether, marching up the steps. A door slams in the distance, and then another one slams much closer.

James looks over, and Regulus is gone.

~•~

The moment Sirius processed what that rule meant, he was gone. It was instant. A switch flipped, and he slipped away.

He doesn't know how long he's been gone for when he makes it back, but he's not in the same place he was. He's in the kitchen, sitting next to James, while Effie paces back and forth in complete silence. Sirius blinks and looks over to James, who is visibly shaken, the whites of his eyes shown in blatant fear as he watches his mother's every move. Sirius glances around, but Monty isn't here, and neither is Regulus.

"Where's Regulus?" Sirius demands instantly, starting to push to his feet.

"I'm quite sure that he went home," Effie murmurs, coming to a sudden stop and facing them both. "Sit down, Sirius. There's something I need to say before you go to him."

Sirius sits down, despite every instinct screaming at him to go to his little brother right now. James—he has Effie and Monty, and of course he has Sirius as well, but Regulus? He has no one right now, and he needs Sirius. He has to. Sirius needs Regulus to need him, because he needs Regulus, too.

"No volunteering," Effie declares sharply. James and Sirius both go still at the same time, and she clenches her jaw. *"No volunteering,* not for me, am I understood?"

"Mum," James whispers.

"Neither of you will volunteer in my place if my name is called," Effie tells them, each word precise and blunt, allowing no room for argument. Sirius stares at her in horror, because it's just now fully hitting him that Effie could be—she could—

Sirius has spent so long thinking of her as a mentor that he hasn't thought about how she's a Victor, too, in the lineup just like the rest of them. Sirius has spent so long thinking of her as a mother that he hasn't prepared himself to ever lose her, because a true mother isn't someone you can bear to lose.

"If your names are called, I will be volunteering to go in your place," Effie continues shamelessly, "and—no, do *not* interrupt me, James Potter—"

"That's not fair, Mum!" James bursts out anyway, nearly coming out of his chair. "You can't just—just tell us we're not allowed to volunteer for you, but turn around and say you're going to volunteer for us!"

"I can, and I am. Sit *down,"* Effie snaps, and James slumps back into his chair. She stares him down. "You are my son, and I am your mother. I'm your *mother,* so I will—"

"You're not mine," Sirius says softly, then almost immediately shrinks back when Effie's eyes cut to him, cut into him, bright and blazing in a way he's never seen before. Fierce.

"I am," Effie informs him, her tone clipped, and though they've never actually said it out loud before, he knows this already. "You're my child, and I will volunteer in your place, if that's what it comes to."

Sirius swallows. "I can't let you do that, Effie."

"You can't stop me, and won't," Effie says simply, her gaze darting between Sirius and James. "I will volunteer for any of you, and I will see to it that whoever I go into that arena with makes it home, do you understand? And I will not hear a word of protest from either of you. And *neither* of you will volunteer if it's my name that gets called. Promise me. Now. Both of you." They don't speak, and she slams her hand down on the counter, making them jolt. *"Promise me."*

"Mum—"

"Now, James."

James' eyes sink shut, and his breath shudders out of him all at once. "I promise."

"Sirius?" Effie demands.

"I promise," Sirius whispers.

Effie sweeps her gaze between them, then exhales heavily and leans back. "Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go console my husband."

With that and nothing else, Effie sweeps out of the room, straight-backed and stiff, her lips pressed into a thin line as she goes. Sirius and James are silent for a long moment, and then

they look at each other, and that's all it takes.

"No," Sirius says instantly. "Let me do it, James."

"She's my mum," James retorts.

"You heard her; she's mine, too. She's—James, she was my mentor. I—I wouldn't even *be* here if it wasn't for her," Sirius chokes out. "Please just—please don't—"

"I'm not letting her go back," James grits out, "and I'm not letting you take her place, Sirius. I'm just not."

Sirius sets his shoulders and narrows his eyes. "Well, you better hope you're faster than me, because the moment her name is called, if it is, I'm volunteering."

"And abandon your brother?" James asks coldly, holding his gaze.

"Ah," Sirius breathes out, feeling like he's just been punched directly in the gut. His brain slams into a brick wall, suddenly, because oh, right, Regulus is a Victor, too.

Regulus.

His little brother.

Always his little brother.

James swallows harshly. "I'm sorry. That was—I shouldn't have said that. I—"

"Fuck you, James, truly," Sirius croaks, fumbling to push his chair back and get to his feet, his eyes stinging as the tears build and a lump forms in his throat. He's struggling to breathe. His heart is crumbling. Both sensations are at war with each other, and he's shaking all over, and he wants Remus. He misses Remus. "Why would you—how could you say that? Fuck you. *Fuck* you. Why—"

"Sirius, wait, *wait,"* James whispers frantically, surging forward to catch his arm, wide-eyed. "I—I didn't—I didn't mean that. I'm just—I'm scared, alright? I'm scared, and I'm sorry. I don't want her to go back, I don't want him to go back, and I don't want *you* to go back. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

And, finally, it hits Sirius that James, too, is a Victor. He's known, of course, but each option settles in fully at some point, and somehow, James sinks in last.

Not James, he thinks desperately. *Not James, not James, not—*

"Sirius?" James mumbles, his voice trembling like a small child, so much remorse in his eyes that it hurts. Sirius knows James didn't mean to hurt him; he was just trying to be the one to take his mother's place, another way to keep Sirius out of it.

Except there is no keeping Sirius out of it, or Regulus, or Effie, or James. There are four options, two names called, and six different ways this could go, not including all the ways in which they could reach those ways if volunteering comes into play. Two people won't be going back into the arena, which means that Sirius can take Effie's place, or James', or Regulus', but one of the others will still be with him anyway.

"No volunteering," Sirius whispers, and James' eyes go wide. Sirius forces himself to exhale. "Promise me you won't volunteer for me, James. If it's my name—"

"You can't ask that of me," James croaks, his eyes visibly filming with tears. "You can't—"

"I can and I am," Sirius counters, and James pulls his hand away, his throat bobbing harshly, up and down. "I will never, ever be able to live with myself if you did, do you understand? The guilt—James, if the arena didn't kill me, that *would."*

James opens and closes his mouth, then rasps, "Sirius—"

"It'll kill me. You'll kill me. I'm—I need you not to. I need you to promise me you won't," Sirius insists.

"What about—" James' voice catches, cracking in his throat loudly. "What about Regulus?"

"I don't know," Sirius murmurs. "I have to go talk to him. I'm going to make him promise, too. But I'm here with you right now, and I'm not leaving until *you* promise."

"You have to promise, too, " James tells him, holding his gaze steadily. "If I'm promising, then you have to promise not to volunteer for me. And mean it. You have to mean it."

That sits between them for a long moment, a heavy one where something unfathomable passes between them, a simple joint understanding of how much it hurts to be in this position. How impossible it is to be stuck here, incapable of splitting themselves apart to protect and save everyone around them, both wishing to do the same exact thing. It's agonizing, looking at one another with the impulse to shield each other; it's just as awful to look at each other and see the echoed desperation to shield the same people that *aren't* them. Effie and Regulus, they share that between them, here and now, like one of the worst secrets they've ever heard.

To *not* volunteer goes against their nature in every capacity. Sirius has already done it once, and he would do it again three more times for each of them. James has also done it once, in his own way, planning to die to get Regulus home from the arena, though that thankfully went in a better direction. Sirius has the feeling that there's no escaping this, not this time.

They are helpless creatures trapped in the jaws of life, no way out, no way to get free. They can't do this, and yet, they have no choice. This is what it is, and Sirius can only think about how it would affect him, how it would genuinely kill him, if James went into that arena in his place. He wouldn't survive it, and he knows it would change him irrevocably. He knows it would be the worst thing James could ever do to him.

And he knows that, to do it in reverse, would be the exact same for James. It would ruin him. So, Sirius swallows as he blinks harshly and says, "I promise, James."

"Okay," James breathes out, blinking hard and fast, not even seeming to notice the tears that spill from his eyes. "Okay, then I—I promise, too. No volunteering for each other."

"I have to go," Sirius whispers, his vision blurring, and James nods before dropping his head into hands. Sirius wants to comfort him, but he has to get to Regulus and get this handled; he has to drag a promise out of him, too.

He leaves James there, just like that, weeping quietly.

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Sirius is sitting at Regulus' kitchen table with two full glasses of whiskey—the fine sort of stuff Orion always liked to keep on hand—when Regulus makes it home.

In the aftermath of the announcement, Regulus just—ran. He didn't know where he was going until he ended up at the tree out on the edge of the mayor's property. He thinks he was crying when he got there. He thinks he screamed. He *knows* he threw himself at that tree over and over, desperately trying to climb it, scrambling for purchase at the bark and repeatedly slipping down until he ended up in a heap on the ground, biting his own arm so hard that he drew blood.

He swallowed it—as if, after all this time, he's still trying to survive. It's not a taste he's forgotten. He vomited right after and wished, pathetically, that he just died in that river.

But he didn't. He's still here and there's still more to endure. He couldn't do anything about it, so he picked himself up and came home, where Sirius has clearly been waiting for him.

Regulus looks at him and remembers being a baby-faced, freshly fifteen year old boy stepping out to the center of the courtyard the first time he was reaped, only for his older

brother to come stumbling out, his voice a desperate plea when he volunteered in his place.

It's been nearly eleven years, and what was the point? What was the point of any of it? Look at them. Here they are. Every choice they made, even that young, led them right to here.

Regulus moves forward and sits down in the chair across from Sirius, who picks up the full glass closest to him. He holds it the same lazy way their father always did, but Regulus would never tell him that. He'd hold it differently if he knew, and something about the sight comforts Regulus, even now.

Together, they drink in silence, just looking at each other. Regulus wonders which of them will break first. He isn't expecting it to be him, but it is.

"You can't do it again," Regulus rasps, his throat raw and sore, his whole body aching. "I nearly didn't forgive you last time, and I won't this time."

"Regulus," Sirius says softly.

"You *can't* do it again, Sirius," Regulus whispers, his voice small, a desperate, pleading note to it. He is exposing himself, cracking himself open in front of his brother, bared to him and vulnerable. "Please don't volunteer for me again. *Please."*

Sirius' eyes flutter shut, and he presses the glass against his forehead, his face twisted up. The moment stretches between them, and Regulus' heart thumps harder with each passing second that Sirius doesn't respond. Regulus hasn't felt terror like this since he was fifteen, particularly *this* type of terror, the gripping fear of knowing that he will be to blame for everything Sirius suffers, just as he always has been.

Every ounce of Sirius' pain can be sourced back to one place. One person. Regulus. Even as a child, all the hits he took for him, all the punishments he volunteered to have so Regulus wouldn't, all the abuse he carried so Regulus didn't have to. And the arena, where Sirius spilled blood and took lives in his name, where his life was wrecked and altered, where he bore wounds and scars and tragedy just so Regulus could live.

"Sirius. *Sirius,"* Regulus chokes out, borderline frantic now, and he doesn't mean to come out of his chair, but that's what happens. There he goes, swinging around the table to crouch down beside Sirius' chair and press shaking hands to his arm lying on the table, tugging on his sleeve like he's nothing more than a child again. "Look at me. Look at me, Sirius, *please."*

Sirius squeezes his eyes shut tighter, his throat convulsing on a harsh swallow. When he exhales, it comes out stuttered and heavy, like it's being slammed out of his lungs. He opens his eyes, swivels his head, and looks at Regulus.

"What if—"

"No. No, we're not talking about anything else, any other possibilities. We're talking about *this.* About what happens if my name gets called. Promise me, Sirius."

Again, Sirius doesn't respond. He remains unmoved, no crack in his expression at all. He was like this when he was in the arena, when he was in pain, when he was fighting for his life.

"You can't do it again. Please don't do it again, don't take my place again, because I—I—" *I love you, I love you, I love you, too,* Regulus thinks, trying to force the words out, but they don't come. He can barely breathe. "I won't be able to forgive you this time, Sirius, if you do. Everything that we just got back, everything we work together to have every single day, all of that will be gone. We'll lose each other again. You'll lose me. So, please, just—just choose to keep me this time. *Please."*

And there. A tiny splinter in his expression. Sorrow blooming in his eyes. Sirius chokes out a harsh breath, sits his glass down with a thunk, and releases a strangled, "Okay."

"Okay?" Regulus repeats, shaking so hard that he can barely balance in place, so much residual fear in him that he doesn't feel capable of experiencing what it is to be safe ever again.

"Okay," Sirius confirms, shakily, nodding jerkily. "I promise, Reggie."

Regulus wheezes out a deep breath of relief, and he ducks his head forward to press his face against Sirius' arm, whispering over and over, "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Sirius cups the back of his head for a moment, his palm a warm weight of comfort that makes Regulus' eyes sting. For a beat, they both stay there, just like that, and then Sirius tugs on his hair to get him to lift his head. He holds Regulus' gaze and demands, "Now, you. Your turn. Promise me the same."

This time, it's Regulus who remains silent. The thing is, he never even thought about it, the mere chance that *Sirius'* name would be called. Sirius' name has never been called. The idea that it could be this time, for the first time, is absolutely unfathomable to Regulus. His mind can't even conceptualize it, what that would sound like, what that would be like.

"Regulus," Sirius says sharply, so sharp that Regulus can hear their mother in his voice.

The worst part is, Regulus *didn't* think about it. His mind was too full of other things, other fears, other concerns. But it could happen. That's a reality he doesn't know how to face, that Sirius' name could be called, and Regulus is supposed to just—what, remain silent? Do nothing? Not even return the favor? Sirius did it for him. Regulus should—he should—

"If you can't promise, then I don't either," Sirius declares, dropping his hand down from Regulus' hair to grip his shoulder and shake him a bit. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Regulus? This *has* to be an equal exchange. I need you to promise me, and you better not fucking lie when you do."

Right. Because of course this is how it has to work, for any of this to work. Regulus recognizes this, what it is to put in effort and demand the same from one another, because they've spent a year doing just that. They've spent a year trying so *hard,* working together to reach this point, and now they have to fight every instinct to let it come crumbling down again.

So, he breathes in, and out, and he fights. He looks up at Sirius, looks at him and sinks into that juvenile little brother's belief that Sirius' name *won't* be called, and he nods. He swallows and says, "Okay."

"Promise?" Sirius asks.

"I promise," Regulus whispers. It feels like his greatest sin.

"You know I love you, right?" Sirius asks, his voice cracking, the words soft as a feather, yet weighing so heavy with endless sincerity packed into it, coming straight from the heart.

Regulus turns his head away, feeling the tears fall, and all he can bring himself to say is, "I know," because after all this time, after everything they've been through, he does.

I love you, too, Regulus thinks.

Even now, the words never leave his head.

Chapter End Notes

...sigh 😔 ah, shit, Here We Go Again...

and it started off so well, too 😭😭😭 well, sort of. i mean there was the (complicated) grief that regulus and sirius were dealing with for their parents, and the differences in that for them always interests me. also the (brief) wedge it drove between them.

but with time (a five month time jump, sorry about the time jumps btw, but it was Necessary For the Plot), they both got better, and god, regulus made SO MUCH progress in that time period, despite the minor setback. like the fact that his house was becoming a home, and he was having tea (*cough* tea dates *cough*) with james every day... LIKE HE WAS READY!!! HE MADE THE FIRST MOVE!!! HE!!! 😭

just the fact that, like, they were so fucking close, but never close enough. i hate myself. like that moment in the kitchen was literally them being like: okay we're gonna do this. and like, THEY WOULD HAVE. if the announcement had been anything else, they

would have been trading love confessions and fucking THAT NIGHT!!! james would have probably done something ridiculous like proposed on the spot, and regulus would have matched his energy and immediately said yes. LIKE THEY WERE READY FOR THE LONG-HAUL!!! I AM PUNCHING THE AIR SO HARD RIGHT NOW

anyway, let's talk about the whole Quarterly Memorial thing. it was only mentioned once a few chapters ago and a few people clocked it and were like 😳🤔😒 about it, so those of you who saw it, cookies for you!

but yeah, the backstory with like grindelwald and dumbledore killing him is like. it's LITERALLY the catalyst to them all ending up Right Here. the Quarterly Memorial would not exist if not for dumbledore, in more ways than one...

anyway, monty immediately losing his shit when he heard the announcement hit so hard... and then effie stating outright that she's going to volunteer... just. FUCK. it's so upsetting :(

the way regulus ran away. like the first thing he did was run to that tree 😭😭😭 STOP MY LOVE COME HERE LET ME HUG YOU. and like the way this whole announcement just brought out these intense, harsh, sometimes ugly feelings—and how that was translated through james especially, who is never harsh and has a heart of gold and would never purposefully hurt sirius, and then he says exactly what he knows will cut the deepest bc he's scared and trying to protect EVERYONE. just. that shit hurt so bad.

how sirius and james made their promises and it was almost... i mean, they're best friends, they Get Each Other, and it was literally like, they're so similar in their desire to do the same thing, and they're aware to do that to each other would be absolutely destructive to their entire relationship in any capacity. so it was literally like, relieving each other of that pressure but also just grieving in Having To Let Go Of That, bc they both want to do the same thing for too many people. it's so hard, and like, there IS no solution other than agreeing not to volunteer for each other.

regulus and sirius are—different, in that it's not an isolated event. sirius has already done it once, so regulus NEEDS him not to do it again. that scene where he's like, begging and promising never to forgive him. fucking devastating. everyone turn your heads to moonymoment (blurryayse on tumblr aka jude, my judebug, light of my life, the person this fic belongs to above all—jude, you bitch, you better be reading this while im over here waxing poetic about you). they are partially responsible for that scene between sirius and regulus at the end, and also for some future stuff, ill explain in the next chapter notes more, but they deserve a lot of credit for A LOT of angst in the next chapter especially, so if you're throwing tomatoes at me, aim at her as well! (not really tho i will defend jude with my life)

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-james being Pavloved into loving bagels (this will turn into angst later)
-james thinking knives are sexy
-sirius giving james a piggyback!!!

-effie calling regulus a gentle man 😭
-sirius still talking to the moon every night :(
-regulus having "what do i wear" anxiety (he's so real)
-monty yelling that regulus is there and james immediately Freaking Out (yes, he slipped in the shower from excitement)
-regulus healing, but the fact that he's horny for james being his Biggest Breakthrough 😭
-the drowning metaphor and also "regulus can swim now" 😭
-james still hoping for him and regulus all that time
-effie telling sirius he's her son
-regulus tugging on sirius' sleeve like a little kid :(

yeah, that should be it. feel free to scream in the comments, and like. strap in. things are back to being fucking insane from here on out for a whileee

EDIT: i still to this day get comments asking about narcissa and bellatrix being included in the reaping. just read the next chapter. it's answered there.

Volunteers

Chapter Notes

hi.

warnings for this chapter:

-implied sexual content/fade-to-black
-references to past deaths
-references to past child abuse
-references to past sacrificial suicide attempt
-brief depictions of violence
-very brief mention of guns/gun violence
-angst. heavy emphasis on the angst.

yeah, this one is a rough one. take care of yourselves!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Regulus' twenty-sixth birthday, James shows up at his door not with a flower, but with a hat.

A very, very old hat with a fluffy ball on top that used to have a working bell in it, but no longer does. Regulus hasn't seen it in literally eleven years, down to the exact day.

It's cold outside, there's a blanket of snow on the ground, and James stands there with a hat he kept for eleven years like all the years in between haven't changed a thing.

But they have.

Everything is different now.

It's been hard for them since the announcement. For a solid week, James didn't leave his house—didn't leave his parents' sides, and Monty has been a mess, according to Sirius—and

Regulus was in basically the same predicament. Even if James had bothered to come, Regulus wouldn't have gotten out of the bed to let him inside. The only reason he got out of bed when he finally did was because Barty coaxed him out.

Eventually, James did show back up with a flower, and Regulus didn't answer the door, or let him in. He let the flower die on his stoop, but James just replaced that one, too.

Regulus was angry that he was still fucking *trying.* No matter how this goes, their chance—it's gone. Regulus made the mistake of thinking that they'd actually get to have it, what they wanted, only to have it ripped from him immediately after. He couldn't understand how James could bear it, could bear to still bring him flowers, to still hope when there's no fucking hope left for them. He was so, so angry.

That passed, too. Slipped away into simple resignation and overwhelming regret. Shifted and morphed into a sharp pulse of purpose in his chest, because before everything falls apart, he wants every flower he can get.

Once he started taking them again, he opened his door to let James in, and they had a very, very difficult conversation.

"You can't volunteer for me," Regulus had said. It was the first thing he said. It was what needed to be said, the very thing sitting between them, a topic they hadn't yet broached.

It was a fight. Sort of. James was mostly just begging, so close to some inner collapse, wanting to shut the conversation down and turn away from it. Angry that Regulus would demand it from him. A promise, one he would honor, one he would look Regulus in the eye and mean.

Regulus, stubborn as he is, wouldn't let it go. Even when James cried. Even when he reached for him and *begged.* He stood right there and broke James open to reach into the depths of him and carve out the promise he needed. He got it.

And, when James demanded the same from him, Regulus eased himself into James' arms, hid his face against James' shoulder, and returned it. He promised, too, his eyes shut and his heart

breaking. It was the last time they spoke, the last time they touched, because Regulus didn't open the door again to let him in until today.

And now, here they are. James standing on his doorstep with a hat, and Regulus standing across from him, wanting to let him in, wanting him so badly he can't breathe around it.

"I—I just thought you'd like this back now," James croaks, anxiously flexing his fingers around the hat in his hands. "I know you don't want to see me—"

"I do," Regulus cuts in. "I do want to see you, James."

James looks like he might cry. "You do?"

"I miss you," Regulus whispers.

James starts crying immediately. Instantly. His expression crumbles, and he ducks his head with a heaving sob. He stands there and breaks down all at once, and Regulus feels the splinters in his heart get wider.

"James," Regulus says softly. "James, come inside."

"Okay, y-yeah, okay," James chokes out, stumbling forward with the hat pressed to his chest, clinging to it.

Regulus leads James inside and up the stairs, reaching back to take one of James' hands on the way up, offering balance because he doesn't have his cane today. Must mean his leg isn't giving him trouble, but stairs are always annoying for him, Regulus has noticed. He'd planned to ask Sirius to build one of those seats to carry James up in his house, too, but he supposes there's no point now.

James has never been in his room, even if he's seen glimpses of it through his window. He's not really in much of a state to take it all in, crying as he is, and there's not much to see anyway. Regulus peels the hat out of James' hands and gently sits it on the desk before easing onto his bed and tugging James in right after him. James comes willingly.

"I'm sorry," James gasps out through his tears, even as he slides closer. "It's your birthday, and I—"

"Shh, don't worry about it, James. Come here," Regulus murmurs, getting settled and tugging James close. James curls up against his side and buries his face into Regulus' chest, crying and shaking. Regulus strokes his back and repeatedly passes his hand through James' hair.

It takes a while for James to calm. He does, at some point, and then he's just quietly breathing. He turns his head to get more comfortable. Regulus straightens his glasses for him.

"I don't know how I'm going to do this," James croaks. "How am I meant to do nothing if your name is called? And *Sirius—"*

"You promised, James," Regulus cuts in sternly, reaching down to cup James' jaw and tilt his face up. "We all promised."

James swallows thickly. "I know, and I—I won't volunteer, but no matter what happens, it's going to break my heart. I hope my name is called. I hope it's me."

"I don't," Regulus murmurs.

"I love you," James whispers. "Maybe you hate to hear it, but I love you so much, Regulus. So fucking much."

"James—"

"I just love you. I love you. All I can do is love you. I—"

Regulus surges forward to cut him off with his mouth, because he can't help it, because he wants to. Because why shouldn't he? Because what's the point of not doing it, when there's no point in doing it in the first place? It's all so pointless.

Except.

Except, oh, the heat of James' mouth, and that gentle whimper, and how good it feels. It feels so good. Maybe that's the point. Maybe nothing else matters other than this, this, this. Regulus was ready before, and he's still ready now. If this is all he gets to have… This is all he gets to have.

He wasted so much time.

"Oh," Regulus chokes out with a harsh, pained laugh, breathless as he rocks back to stare at James, who is looking right at him, beseeching. "This is going to hurt."

And it is. Of course it is, because they're a great, big tragedy. That's what they are; that's what they've always been; that's all they'll ever get to be. There's no changing that now, no matter what they do, no matter how hard they try.

They were going to try.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done that," James rasps, squeezing his eyes shut.

"It was me. James, it was me," Regulus tells him, because it was. Trust James to blame himself. He genuinely doesn't seem to realize it, like the concept of Regulus choosing to kiss him is impossible. His eyes flutter open, full of confusion, and Regulus feels a surge of inner rage at himself for ever, *ever* making James doubt how much Regulus wants him.

"You…?" James searches his eyes. "Why?"

"Because I wanted to. Because I want you," Regulus admits, too tired to even bother dealing with all the complications that exist with that, especially now. He just brushes it all aside and, for once, lets here and now be all he knows. Here and now, he wants what they'll never get to have—just a piece of it, something that's theirs and theirs alone.

"Even now?" James whispers.

"At all times, baby, at all times," Regulus whispers back, cupping James' jaw once more. "I'm going to kiss you again, if that's alright with you."

"Please," James breathes out, begging, every inch of him craning forward for more, desperate. "Please, please, pl—"

Regulus refuses to let him beg any further, drawing him in again until James can't say another word, his mouth busy against Regulus' own. It's a slow kiss, gentle, but it's deep from the very beginning, like the depths of them are blown wide open, and they're tipping themselves over into it.

It builds, as these things tend to do when allowed to, and Regulus allows it. He melts back into bed and accepts every single thing James gives him, begging for more without having to say a word, and James gives it to him. James will give him anything, and Regulus wants it all, wants to take it and return the favor, give all that he has, all that he is, right back.

Regulus can't kiss James without losing sense of everything else, anything else. It's just James. Only James.

James.

James.

James.

"No, no, it's okay. It's—" Regulus' breath catches in his throat, because James' just mindlessly slipped his hand up Regulus' shirt and froze the moment he realized what he did. He isn't touching any scars, but Regulus suspects that he's worried he is. Regulus rears back a little to meet his wide eyes. "You can see. I'll let you see. You just—you have to promise me that you won't—that you'll pretend I'm—"

"What?" James asks, confused again. Regulus shakes his head, and James frowns. "You don't have to, love. We don't—listen to me, we don't have to do anything, alright?"

"I want to," Regulus says, then adds, "and it's my birthday."

James blinks, then huffs a weak laugh. "Right, well, that's a solid argument, I'll admit."

"Did you know, on my fifteenth birthday, I wished on the sunrise that you would kiss me?" Regulus murmurs.

James kisses him immediately, dipping down to do it, and Regulus hums in smug approval. Wish granted.

For a bit, it's just that, only that, and then Regulus breaks the kiss and pushes James back, persistently nudging him until he falls to the side, propped on his elbow and staring at him with his glasses askew. Regulus feels his heart clench violently before he sits up, and for a moment, he just breathes.

Slowly, he reaches down to grip the hem of his shirt, his hands shaking, and it still takes him a solid minute to move. He closes his eyes, squeezing them shut tight, and then he eases his shirt off. There's silence. Neither of them are breathing, and Regulus doesn't open his eyes to see James' reaction.

A few beats pass, and then he hears James exhale, inhale, and exhale again. "Regulus? Will you look at me?"

Regulus does, slowly. James meets his gaze, steady.

"Do you think this makes you less beautiful?" James asks softly. "Because it doesn't. It doesn't, Regulus."

And that's it. James Potter dismantles all of his fear in just three sentences, and the truth in his eyes. Regulus doesn't mean to, but his shoulders heave, and he isn't crying, but he's dangerously close to doing just that.

All the fight goes out of him all at once, and he slumps, choking on a harsh breath that could either be a laugh or a sob, or both. James scoots closer, carefully reaching out to grab Regulus' hand, and then he leans in and kisses the scars on the inside of his forearm. They're pale and faded now, but forever gouged, dented in from the claws that dug into his skin. James' lips are warm against them.

Regulus does cry, then. He can't help it, because the scars have always felt like death to him, like death permanently etched into his skin, and James is breathing life back into him.

James kisses more, up the length of his arm, every set of clawed scars on the way up. He pushes Regulus gently back to the bed and crawls on him to reach more, whispering, "You're beautiful, Regulus. So beautiful," over and over between each scar and every kiss, and all Regulus can do is cry.

Regulus' arms and legs are covered in the faded scars, as is his chest and back, his sides and hips, too. Inner thighs. Outer thighs. The outside of his ribs. The side of his neck. Most of them are all faint now, after nearly a year, but there's one…

The worst one is on his chest, right over his heart where the cold, piercing hand tried to rip it right out. A part of Regulus believed for a long time that it actually managed to. Every time

he looks at James, he's reminded that it didn't.

It left behind a mangled, raised scar, the skin knotted and patchy. James kisses it as if it's no different than the rest.

"You still—you aren't—" Regulus can't really finish either sentence, but he doesn't have to.

James raises his head and meets his eyes. "Do you look at me any differently for my leg?" Regulus shakes his head. "Then why would this be any different, love?"

"Because you begged me not to do it," Regulus rasps. "You said—you told me you'd never forgive me, and now you have to look at me and see—always see—"

"I look at you and see you," James cuts in. He lifts his hand and covers the worst scar, not even looking at it. "I never wanted—" He swallows, then sighs. "I could look at your scars and blame myself for them, or even blame you, but the truth is, neither of us were to blame for the things we went through in that arena. At the end of the day, you're Regulus."

"Not the same Regulus I was before," Regulus croaks.

"You'll always be my Reg," James says softly.

Regulus has to kiss him for that, truly. He threads his fingers in James' hair and frantically tugs him into another kiss, his chest heaving as his emotions bubble up and threaten to spill out of him. He thinks about it, the way James once said the arena—the Hallows—could change them, but couldn't take who they are away from them, and the idea that Regulus is included in that, for James, sends him spiraling.

Scars and all, he'll always be James' Reg. It has a nice ring of finality to it, something resolute, something secure and safe.

The next few minutes pass in a frantic haze of:

"Touch me, please. Anywhere. Everywhere. Just—just—"

"Okay, just—I only have two hands, love."

"James—"

"Give me a second. This is—it's a bit difficult when you won't be still. You have to—"

"James—"

"Just—again, only two hands, and my leg is—"

In the end, Regulus just has to come to terms with the fact that James can't spontaneously grow more hands, which is cruel and unfair, if you ask him. He wants James to touch him all over, touch his scars and wipe away the death echoing from the wrong hands that touched him before. James does. It takes time, but he does, leaving behind scalding handprints with the life etched into his palms that only Regulus can feel.

Regulus doesn't know how he's going to be able to look in the mirror after this and hate what he sees, knowing he's going to see the lingering caresses of life that James blesses him with.

Like this, with James' hands on him, he feels more beautiful than he ever has. He never truly has, until now.

It's difficult between them, at first. Sex, that is. They struggle to find the right position that doesn't bother James' leg. They fight with clothes, fight with sheets, fight not to fall right off the bed when Regulus scrambles to snatch his bottom desk drawer open to find what he needs, mentally thanking Barty for always keeping him well-stocked. Safe sex is important to Barty, which is paying off in Regulus' favor now.

It gets easier once they get where they're trying to go, once everything slots into place, and the whole world falls away. That's when they stop, when they pause, neither of them moving or speaking or doing anything at all.

James presses their foreheads together, and they breathe, the intimacy of the moment swaddling around them, heat in their mouths, tenderness in their skin.

"Okay?" James whispers.

Regulus glares at him, and his voice comes out on a wheeze when he says, "No, and you won't be either when I fucking claw your eyes out here in a second. If you don't *move—"*

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," James teases with an exhilarated huff of laughter, grinning as he reaches down to hook his hand under Regulus' knee and hitch his leg up higher, which has Regulus shutting up immediately. "So impatient."

"We don't have a lot of time," Regulus mumbles, hissing in a breath between his teeth and clamping down on a helpless whine when James does, in fact, move.

"We have all the time in the world," James lies, then proceeds to fuck him as if it's the truth, slow and intimate and coated in love, like nothing else exists but this.

For now, Regulus lets himself believe it.

~•~

When Pandora arrives, she takes one look at Sirius and promptly bursts into tears.

Sirius sighs.

"I'm so—I'm *so sorry,"* Pandora chokes out, her eyes streaming, chest stuttering on harsh, hitched sobs. "Sirius—"

"Stop, Pandora. Stop it," Sirius says softly, moving forward to pull her into a hug. "It's not your fault. Don't do that."

"I'm the reaper," Pandora croaks, pulling back to stare at him with puffy eyes. "It's me. I call the names. I—I pick. I—"

Sirius braces his hands on her shoulders and ducks his head to stare into her eyes. "None of us blame you, Pandora. You're not at fault for this. I'm sorry, I know it's upsetting, but I need you to hold it together right now, because you have news we need to hear, don't you?"

"Yes," Pandora says, sniffling.

"Come on, then," Sirius replies, slipping his arms around her shoulders and guiding her along.

They go to the mayor's office, where Effie was already waiting, but Sirius is surprised to find that James and Regulus have turned up early as well. He thought they'd be…doing things Sirius prefers not to think about, but unfortunately is aware of nonetheless, because James felt the need to tell him.

Literally, on Regulus' birthday two days ago, Sirius showed up at his house, calling out to let Regulus know he was there, which resulted in distant, muffled cursing and a series of loud thumps, then unexpectedly, the sound of Regulus laughing.

James had appeared at the top of the stairs, his hair a fucking mess and his shirt on inside-out, so Sirius had an idea of what he'd just walked in on even before James beamed at him and announced, "I just had sex with your brother. Four times."

He'd sounded so proud, too.

Regardless of circumstances, James and Regulus have capitalized on their…new development with vigor, and James repeatedly updates him on this, for some reason. He's pretty sure James just likes to make his face scrunch up the way it does automatically, against his will. Sirius has retaliated by calling James 'brother-fucker', except this never works because James just grins and says, "Yeah, yours," and dodges quickly when Sirius makes a lazy, half-hearted swipe for him.

This morning, James had looked him dead in the eyes and said with no shame whatsoever, "I'm going to go spend all day having sex with your brother and pretending that everything isn't shit. We'll see you later, yeah?"

To that, Sirius could only sigh and reply, "Yeah."

So, yes, Sirius fully expected James and Regulus to show up a bit later, and admittedly, the thought of them arriving late to the reaping because they were too busy fucking is sort of hilarious. Sirius' low-level distaste is overshadowed by his pride in them for being whores. He wishes they weren't being whores for each other, but alas, at least they're happy.

It's not a happiness that can last, not after today.

Regulus and James aren't happy now, and with good reason. Sirius isn't, Effie isn't, Pandora isn't. None of them are happy, and the atmosphere is heavy and solemn as they all come together to hear the process for what's about to happen.

Pandora hugs James and Regulus first, then Effie, who never turns away a hug from anyone, and then she clears her throat and sets her shoulders, breathing in and out. Her hands are visibly shaking. "So, first thing's first. Mentors. The—the mentor options that the Hallow will accept are Regulus, Sirius, and James. Euphemia, they—they want it to be one of them, regardless of which of you are tributes."

"I'll be a tribute anyway," is all Effie says.

"Wait, so—so what does that mean?" James asks quietly.

"It means…" Pandora swallows. "That means if, say, your mum and—and Sirius were tributes, for example, then it would fall on you and Regulus to decide who's the mentor between you."

"Me," James says instantly, looking over at Regulus.

Regulus doesn't protest. Doesn't say a word.

"And if—if it was your mum and Regulus, then it would be between Sirius and you to decide," Pandora continues.

"Me," Sirius declares immediately, and he holds his ground when James meets his gaze. "If I'm not a tribute, then I'm a mentor, James. I'm good with the Hallows."

James relents, because he knows it's true. "Okay."

"So, as I understand it," Pandora says carefully, "Regulus won't be a mentor in…any possibility? Unless Euphemia doesn't—"

"I will," Effie cuts in. "No, Regulus won't have to be a mentor, and only one of them will have to be a tribute. I intend to volunteer for whoever gets called—or, if my name is called, they won't be volunteering for me."

Pandora nods slowly. "I see. Then let's discuss volunteering."

"There are rules for that?" James blurts out, startled.

"Well, there's the usual rule," Pandora replies slowly. "The person reaped can't refuse a volunteer once it's stated, a second volunteer can't be stated after the first, and the person volunteering can't take it back once they've said it."

"Are there…new rules?" James mumbles, face scrunching up.

"This time, yes. Some usual rules don't necessarily apply, since there's no age restriction, or a Victor restriction," Pandora explains. "The way this goes is, if someone volunteers, their name gets taken out of the reaping, so if I pull it, then I have to choose again. So, say I pull James and then Euphemia volunteers, if I pull her name next, I have to discard it and pull again. Also, the person who was originally reaped before someone volunteered for them is taken out of the reaping. This means that person can't be called a second time, *but* they can volunteer for anyone else. So, for example, if Euphemia volunteers for you, James, your name wouldn't be put back in to be called again, but you could still volunteer for Sirius or Regulus after that."

"That doesn't matter," Effie murmurs. "The only person who will be volunteering is me."

Pandora looks skeptical.

"It's true," James confirms wearily. "Sirius, Regulus, and I won't be volunteering for each other. We agreed not to."

"Okay," Pandora whispers, blinking fast and hard. Her mouth twists. "I just—I wanted to say that I—that if there was any way out of this, any way I could not choose, I—I—"

"Oh, sweet girl, this isn't on you," Effie says softly, reaching out to take her hand. Pandora clings to it, her face twitching until it finally crumbles, and then she's crying again.

"We—we don't have much time," Pandora cries. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, all of you. None of you deserve this."

No one argues with her, because they don't.

~•~

It's strange, going up to the stage from the beginning, Regulus thinks. The walk to the stage in the courtyard is like being marched to the gallows, willingly stepping up to the chopping block. Pandora, safe from this fate, is the only one shaking.

Regulus isn't afraid, not this time. It's ironic, he thinks. At every other reaping, he always nursed a heavy dose of terror right in the pit of his stomach, and now that his odds are even worse than they've ever been, he feels nothing.

At the annual reaping, there's usually a palpable fear that pulses through the district gathering, but this year, there's nothing but anger. Regulus can taste the tang of it on his tongue, the restless rage rippling over everyone, because while they're safe, it's still not fair. It's fucked up. It's *wrong.* Victors are supposed to be exempt from this; that's the one promise the Hallow has managed to keep, until now, and it's a further sign of the inequality and overarching power held over them at all times. It doesn't help that a lot of people know Sirius and James, and love Effie, and have respect for Regulus from his games, if nothing else, because he stays to himself.

District six has a good relationship with their mayor, possibly the oldest living mayor to this day, who has been mayor for decades now. He keeps a firm grip on the Aurors in his district and actually works to actively fight poverty with what little power he truly has. Mayor Aberforth might be the one thing standing between a riot breaking out today.

"Welcome, district six, to the 85th annual reaping for this year's Quarterly Memorial," Pandora says, speaking into the microphone, her voice weak and shaky.

Regulus swivels his head to look at those on the stage with him. Effie is standing tall, her shoulders back and her chin tilted up, eyes steely with determination. A part of Regulus looks at her and feels—grief. Just this quiet, unspoken grief for the bond he never fully let flourish between them. She would have been gentle with him, the same as she is with Sirius, if only he would have let her. He wishes he had.

Beside her is James, who does look afraid. He looks completely and utterly fucking terrified, more so than he ever has, more than he did when his name was called the first time. But that makes sense, because this time, he isn't just afraid for himself; he's afraid for the people he loves, too. Regulus is included in that. It's something he doubts he will ever take for granted ever again.

In between James and Regulus is Sirius. He's staring straight ahead, lips pressed into a thin line, eyes blazing. He's *angry.* He looks like he wants to break his way into the Hallow and set it ablaze, like he'd rejoice in slaughtering each and every person who had a hand in making this happen. It's a feeling that Regulus relates to. He feels the same.

The rest of Pandora's speech and the annual message from the Hallow—the same one every year—passes too quickly, and Regulus feels his heart start to race as it comes to an end. All that's left is the names to be called. There are four folded pieces of paper in the bowl, and Regulus stares at them, unable to look away. Four names. Four people who are all, in some way, incredibly important to each other. Four people who will, inevitably, be knocked down to at least three very soon.

Pandora approaches the bowl like it's going to bite her. Regulus can see the tears in her eyes, and he watches her hesitate with her hand hovering over it, fingers trembling. A quiet whimper escapes her as she dips her hand in, echoing across the silent courtyard. Regulus holds his breath.

Slowly, like she's dreading every step, Pandora moves back to the microphone. She unfolds the slip of paper with shaking hands, a muffled sound escaping her as her shoulders wrench up on a building sob. There's a beat, and then—the irony. Because of course. Not just once, not twice, but three fucking times, like he's fucking destined for it. He'd laugh, if he could breathe.

"Regulus Black."

~•~

Sirius hears his little brother's name, and he's sixteen again.

He remembers that day, clearly, vividly. The day Regulus' name was called for the very first time. He hadn't believed it at first, because he hadn't learned yet that the odds are never in your favor—no matter how they might seem to be. Regulus' name, at that time, had been on three slips of paper. Three, out of hundreds. It shouldn't have been him. Sirius couldn't even fathom how it was him, because you never believe it'll be you or someone you love, until it is.

That day, the very first time, Sirius had reeled for a moment. He had been frozen in place, ears ringing, unable to make sense of anything. A cold, desperate *fear* had surged through him, and it hadn't even been a choice, really, to rush out and take Regulus' place, to volunteer for him.

It had been an instinct.

That instinct still, despite everything, exists within him today. It's an instinct that strikes like a snake, quick and ruthless, fast-acting and poisonous. An invasion of the senses, everything in the world draining right out, and he doesn't lose himself. He doesn't go away. He is here, planted firmly in this moment, anchored to one thing, one necessity.

Sirius is entirely himself, entirely aware, when—before anyone else can even catch their breath—he jerks in place, snaps into motion, just as desperate and frantic as the first time, this time, when he blurts out, "I volunteer!"

His voice rings out, wrenched from him, loud and pleading. He can't help it.

It's Regulus.

His little brother.

Always his little brother.

There it is, a clear statement to volunteer, declared before anyone could do anything at all, before Regulus could even take one step forward. The horrible part is, he didn't know he was going to do it until he was doing it. Worse than that, deep down, he always knew he would, no matter what promises he made. He knew, no matter the name called, he wouldn't be able to stop it, but it's Regulus. It's Regulus, and it's instinct. He didn't mean to, and he was never going to do anything else. It's a statement he can't take back, and not one that he ever would; he never wanted to from the very first time, not once. He doesn't now, and it's not a statement Regulus can refuse.

Regulus tries to anyway, his face draining of all color as he goes rapidly pale and chokes out, "No. *No.* I—no, I don't—I won't accept that. Sirius—"

Sirius averts his eyes and takes a step forward, hearing Effie release a strangled sound, hearing a breath punch out of James like he was just struck. A hand catches Sirius' arm, swinging him around, and Sirius feels a lump form in his throat the moment he sees the look on Regulus' face.

"You—you were supposed to choose—you were—" Regulus' words crumble in his mouth, and he looks absolutely, unequivocally betrayed.

The worst part is, Sirius wishes he could be the brother who always does right by Regulus, but he has gotten it wrong many times, and he's quite sure this is one of them. Regulus' eyes are swirling with emotion, full of turmoil, and Sirius knows what comes next. He knows, because Regulus told him.

Sirius is going to lose him.

He just did.

There it is. As expected, Regulus' expression shutters, and all the emotion in his eyes drains right out. It's so painfully reminiscent of all the years they spent with a gaping distance between them, a chasm they've spent time and effort closing into nothing more than a crack in the sidewalk, one they could skip over like they used to when they were just kids playing a game. They're not kids anymore, and with one misstep, that crack breaks open once again, crumbling outwards until it's wider and deeper than it has ever been.

Regulus is unreachable. Sirius could try, and try, and try, but he will never again get to mend what's broken between them once more. Regulus won't dare to reach back.

And that's okay. Sirius makes his peace with that, swiftly and all at once, because it doesn't matter. Sirius doesn't get to keep Regulus, but if it means keeping him alive, the loss is worth it.

It always was.

"I love you, Reggie," Sirius murmurs with a sad smile and a gentle shrug, because really, that's what it comes down to. He does. He loves his brother so very much. Just once, selfishly, he wishes Regulus would say it back.

Regulus doesn't.

"You are *dead* to me," Regulus whispers instead.

Sirius fights against the wave of pain that crashes over him from those words, telling himself it's for the best. After all, he'll actually be dead very soon, because whoever he's going in with, he'll be sure to get them out.

Without a word, Regulus drops his arm and lets him go so he can walk to the front and take his place. Again.

Sirius does.

~•~

James feels the realization sink in belatedly, like he never fully accepted it until this exact moment, and now that it's here, it slams into him all at once.

Sirius.

He's standing there, a tribute all over again, and James feels it hit him fully. Sirius is going back into the arena. There's no stopping it now. He's going back, headfirst into danger, where he could *die,* and James can't—he can't—

"Wait," James says, the word spilling out of his mouth as he surges forward. "Wait, no, Sirius. No."

"James," Sirius whispers, turning his head to stare at him, his jaw clenched as he shakes his head.

"Let me go. Can I go?" James chokes out, steadily moving forward even as he addresses Pandora, who stares at him, pained. "Please. Please just—not him, please—"

Sirius swivels and catches him by the chest, pushing him back a little. "James. *James,* stop. You can't do this. You—"

"Sirius," James croaks, his eyes stinging. "Sirius, don't—please don't—I can't—"

"Listen to me, you need to go back and wait, okay? You can't do this here," Sirius insists, darting his gaze to the side. When James follows it, he finds Aurors slowly approaching the steps with their hands on their guns. Sirius reaches out and grips James' shoulder, shaking him a little. "It's okay, James. Just go wait with Regulus. *Go."*

"Sirius," James says again, helpless.

"I know," Sirius replies, exhaling shakily. He swallows and drags James into a tight hug for a moment, then pushes him back just as quickly, giving him a little shove.

James falls back, his chest heaving and his vision blurring. He keeps backing up like he can get away from this, like getting further away will make it less real, but it doesn't help. He feels like he's being torn directly in half.

Not Sirius, he thinks desperately. *Not Sirius, not Sirius, not—*

James bumps into someone, and his head whips around to see Regulus, who is visibly and palpably shut-down. His face is blank, eyes devoid of emotion. Everything about him is empty, and he's just standing there, just waiting. James waits with him.

Pandora is standing at the bowl again, staring down into it, at the three closed pieces of paper. It could be Effie or James—or Sirius, but she'd just have to choose again if it is. No, it comes down to mother and son now. There are tears streaming down Pandora's face, and she isn't moving. She doesn't move.

"Pandora," Regulus says sharply, and she jolts, choking on a harsh exhale as she turns her head to stare at them.

"I'm so sorry," Pandora announces and never looks away from them as she plunges her hand into the bowl and plucks out a piece of paper with the next tribute on it.

The thing is, James knows it doesn't matter whose name is on that paper, because his mother is going back in anyway. She made it *very* clear that she would be volunteering, so if it's his name, she'll do just that. And, despite his knee-jerk reaction to break his promise and make sure she doesn't go back in, he knows he can't do that to her. He knows he can't hurt her, or disappoint her like that. They've talked about it a lot, and she said something to him, something that broke his heart, but something he needed to hear nonetheless.

A mother should never have to outlive her children, James. Do not put me in a position where I'll have to, she had said, because Sirius is included in that, just as much as James is. If James volunteered for her anyway, if he broke that promise to her, he would be sentencing her to

living on without one of her children, possibly both, and when she broke down crying, once more making him promise, he could only do it again and mean it the second time. He hasn't been able to think about what that entails, what that means for him, what that will do to him and his family when she—when she—

He can't think about it, and so he doesn't, too petrified by terror to even dare to try. But he knows. He looks at those slips of paper and knows that it doesn't matter, because his mother is going in with Sirius regardless, and she won't be coming back out. He glances over at her, his eyes stinging, only to look away when Pandora reaches the microphone again.

"For district six's second tribute…" Pandora exhales shakily through her tears and fumbles with the paper to open it. She releases a low whine, her head ducking forward, and James' eyes sink shut as his preemptive devastation wreaks havoc on him. After a heavy pause, Pandora whispers, "J—"

"I volunteer."

James feels his entire body go cold. Like the sun dying. Flames extinguished. The whole world going dark.

No.

No, not this.

Please not this.

James turns slowly and looks at Regulus, who meets his gaze steadily, unwavering. The last two words he spoke ring in James' ears, loud and blunt and sure. Regulus' voice hadn't even trembled. He'd said it so simply. Without hesitation.

James' full name didn't even fucking leave Pandora's mouth. Effie looks stricken, her eyes wide, and her hand darts out to catch Regulus' arm as he starts to move forward.

"I can't let you do that," Effie chokes out.

"You can't stop me," Regulus replies softly, and Effie's hand falls to her side, limp, as she realizes it's true. There's nothing she can do. Regulus was faster.

"No," James protests, his breathing thin. He shakes his head and steps back as Regulus continues to move forward. "No, Regulus. *No.* I don't—" James stares over at Pandora and Sirius, wild-eyed and frantic. Sirius' face has gone slack with horror, and he looks like he's about to be sick. "I—I *refuse."*

Pandora swallows down a sob and chokes, "You can't, James."

"No, no, no," James chants desperately, surging forward to grab Regulus by his arms and halt him, shaking him a little, his grip too rough. "Don't do this to me. Please don't—"

"It's already done, baby," Regulus whispers.

"You *promised,"* James whimpers.

Regulus gives him a sad smile. "I lied."

James proceeds to lose his fucking mind. He can't really say what happens, exactly, but the Aurors end up involved, along with his mum. She's there, whispering harshly in his ear and trying to tug him away from Regulus, but James isn't budging. The Aurors have to flood the stage and quite literally drag him away, and a fight breaks out right there between basically everyone. The moment James lashes out, the Aurors retaliate, and then Sirius, Regulus, and Effie are all right there, too.

James watches his mother sweep a fully grown man off his feet and put him flat on his back. Sirius punches an Auror so hard that they fall off the stage. Regulus snatches one of the

Aurors away from James and bends her arm back so far that there's a loud, grotesque pop and a horrible shriek of pain from where Regulus just broke her arm with no remorse.

The thing is, James is sure that, between the four of them, they could honestly fight off every single Auror in the district.

If it wasn't for the guns.

The moment one is pointed to his head, everything stops. Sirius, Regulus, and Effie instantly go still, then let go of whoever they're beating the shit out of, surrendering with their hands up. James is so pissed that he's still willing to fight, but their palpable fear stops him.

He closes his eyes and lets himself be dragged away.

~•~

Euphemia watches Mayor Aberforth scratch his beard with a weary sigh, peering at her with very tired, very blue eyes. She's known him a long, long time. He's thirteen years older than her and knows more about the history of district six than anyone alive today. He was seventeen when Grindelwald was assassinated and twenty-six when Euphemia was reaped at thirteen. He didn't become Mayor until he was thirty, and he's been the mayor for thirty-three years now.

Euphemia was a mentor for over twenty years, so she has spent a lot of time with Aberforth, and she knows for a fact that he cares about the people in his district. She knows that she's included in that. She also knows that there are a lot of things—most things, really—that are out of his power.

"You assaulted three Aurors, Euphemia," Aberforth says, his voice gruff, just as it always has been.

"They assaulted my son," Euphemia replies, her tone clipped.

Aberforth sighs. "Your son was assaulting them."

"Okay, and?" Euphemia arches an eyebrow at him. He's sorely mistaken if he thinks, even for a moment, that she cares what James, Sirius, or even Regulus do, as far as fighting for them goes. She'll always fight for them, regardless.

"Do you know how fortunate you are that they decided not to broadcast this year's reaping live?" Aberforth asks, reaching up to scrub his fingers over his eyebrow. "They delayed the broadcast so it's behind, so it could be reviewed, which was in preparation for—unforeseen circumstances."

Euphemia huffs a sharp laugh. "Unforeseen circumstances. Right. And this doesn't have anything to do with Riddle wanting to make sure no possible riots or outcry of rebellion would reach any further than it already has?"

"They were able to cut out everything they needed to, so what happened is contained to here, meaning that James, Sirius, and Regulus will go unpunished due to their positions in this year's Quarterly Memorial as mentor and tributes," Aberforth continues, as if she hasn't spoken at all. "I've managed to vouch on your behalf and talk them out of the public execution they were originally demanding."

"Thank you," Euphemia says quietly, after a long beat of silence, because she isn't too proud to be grateful for that. Not out of a fear of death, but purely because Fleamont—oh, he would have never recovered. And James…

"However," Aberforth continues with a grimace, "they won't allow your crime to go unpunished."

"No, of course not," Euphemia murmurs, holding his gaze without flinching. "Wouldn't want anyone to get the idea that they can fight back, right?"

Aberforth sighs again. "You know as well as I do how this works, Euphemia."

"When do we stop accepting it, Aberforth?" Euphemia hisses, leaning forward to stare him down. "When do we stand the hell up and stop taking this? The children I love are *wrecked.* Do you understand? They have been through too much, and I won't stand for it. I won't sit down and remain silent any longer, not this time. My *boys—"*

"You're going to get yourself killed, woman," Aberforth growls, low and exasperated. "Is that what you're trying to do? Because I'm trying to keep that from happening."

"So be it," Euphemia declares dismissively. "If I die fighting for them, then I'll die with no regrets."

"And Fleamont?" Aberforth asks. "Will you risk him?"

Euphemia promptly shuts her mouth. She falls silent and stares at him, unable to say another word. Fleamont… The mere idea of Fleamont being in danger, being hurt, makes her heart clench violently in pure terror. Just the same, Fleamont is an adult who can make his own choices, and she has no right to make them for him, even out of love.

That's something Sirius, James, and Regulus have yet to learn, and she wishes she could go back to tell them, to teach them, but it's too late now. Look where it has gotten them.

"What's my punishment?" Euphemia says stiffly.

"They'll see you whipped in front of the entire district. Mandatory attendance to all," Aberforth mutters. He drops his gaze, his voice dropping along with it. "Seven lashes for each Auror assaulted. Twenty-one altogether."

Euphemia just hums and turns to leave. "Very well. I'm assuming this will be taking place later, so if you'll excuse me, Mayor Aberforth, I'm going to say goodbye to my children."

"You're not allowed, Euphemia," Aberforth calls. "They said—"

"Just try and stop me," Euphemia calls back, snatching the door open. "Add it to my sentence."

With that, she slams the door and continues on without looking back. No one comes after her, and no one stops her on the way, which is for the best.

The first person she comes across is James, who surges towards her the moment he sees her. He nearly knocks her right off her feet with the force of his collision, clinging to her as he sucks in deep, gasping breaths. Her poor baby. He's been through too much. He's lost so very much.

If she could keep him from all that he's endured, and all that he will endure, she would. She planned to, and Regulus—oh, that stupid, lovesick boy. He'd planned that. There's no way he didn't with how quick he was. A silent, secretive plan that no one saw coming. It's going to ruin James, and Sirius will—she already knows. He's going to fight for his brother; of course he is. Euphemia wanted it to be her, so she could go in and make sure Sirius came home. Damn that boy. Damn them both and their selfish, reckless ways to love. It's going to tear them all apart, and there's nothing she can do about it.

"Mum," James chokes out, reeling back to stare at her with wide eyes and lopsided glasses. He looks innocent and so very young, even now. She nearly died giving birth to him, and she raised him into the lovely man he is today, so endlessly proud of the color and vibrancy he invites into the lives around him just by being himself—and she cannot protect him.

"James," Euphemia whispers, reaching up to cradle his cheeks and study his features. He's always resembled her more than Fleamont, excusing his build. Fleamont is something of a gentle giant. He's tall and broad, but has never once hurt a fly. He's a bit sensitive, honestly. James gets that from him, too.

"What do I do, Mum? I don't know what to do," James says frantically, looking terrified.

Euphemia swallows. "What you do is go to the Hallow and listen to the advice Sirius gives you on being a mentor. You do your best, darling, for both of them."

"But—but only one—"

"I know, James. I know that. It's not—you can't do anything about that. Sirius and Regulus will do whatever they decide to do, and all you can do is help them along the way. I know you're scared, but we don't have much time, and I—I need to speak with Sirius."

James slowly pulls away, blinking hard. "You just came from a meeting with the mayor, right? Is everything okay? Will you be okay, Mum?"

"Of course I will, honey. Everything is just fine," Euphemia lies, because there's no need for James to worry about what punishment awaits her. He'll only blame himself.

She tugs on him and holds on just a little longer.

~•~

Sirius stares at his busted knuckles and waits. He feels numb. He feels… He doesn't know. All that he can make sense of is that, even now, he misses Remus.

His head snaps up when the door opens, a surge of fear hitting him all at once, and it only mildly settles when Monty steps into the room. He looks at Sirius and swallows harshly.

"Where's Effie?" Sirius whispers.

"Being vouched for by Mayor Aberforth, I believe," Monty croaks. "She—she committed a crime, as did all of you, but James—he'll be a mentor, and you and Regulus are tributes, so you'll see no punishment. She might not get off lightly."

Sirius' heart *drops.* "What's going to happen to her?"

"I don't know," Monty says, his voice hoarse. "Mayor Aberforth is a good man, and we've known him a long time. If there's anything he can do, he'll do it."

"So, I—I won't get to see her again?" Sirius asks, his voice small. The skin around Monty's eyes tighten, because he knows what that means, and then he closes his eyes and ducks his head forward. Sirius' shoulders slump. "He's my brother, Monty. My little brother. You know I'm getting him home."

"I know you will do your very best to," Monty murmurs, his eyes fluttering open. "I so wish…"

Monty trails off, then heaves a very exhausted sigh. He steps forward and reaches out to brace his hands on Sirius' shoulders, just drinking him in for a long moment. Sirius feels a lump form in his throat when Monty lifts his palm and oh so gently cups his cheek with a tenderness that makes him ache.

"Are you angry at me?" Sirius croaks.

"I've known you since you were a child, Sirius. As devastating this is, a part of me isn't surprised."

"I'm not a child anymore."

Monty's face softens. "No, you're not, but you will always be our child, just the same as James, no matter your age."

"Regulus hates me now. I'm going to die with him hating me, and I didn't—I didn't even *mean to.* I wanted to keep my promise, I swear I did, but I couldn't help it," Sirius chokes out,

his eyes welling up against his will.

"You're just doing your best, of course you are," Monty assures him, and Sirius can't stop himself from pretty much just bursting into tears. "Oh, Sirius, come here, dear boy."

Monty tugs on him, and Sirius falls in against his chest, feeling ridiculously small, which may have something to do with the fact that Monty is taller and broader than him. Sirius hides his face into Monty's chest and cries, and he's still doing just that when the door opens again.

Sirius and Monty break apart, whipping around at the same time. Monty releases a loud exhale of pure relief when Effie steps inside, but Sirius holds his breath. Effie looks right at him, coming to a halt and just staring at him, her expression tight and tense. It makes Sirius want to curl up and *weep.*

He doesn't mean to say it, but what falls out of Sirius' mouth is a small and heartfelt, "I'm sorry, Mum."

"Okay, honey, shh," Effie soothes him, inching forward to carefully cup his face in gentle palms, her eyes bright with tears. "I love you. We love you so much, Sirius."

"Please, I need you to do something for me. There's a letter in my room to Remus, from his father. I need you to keep it safe, and if you ever see him, give it to him for me, because I won't be able to. Because I'm not coming back," Sirius croaks, tipping his face into her hands with no fear, with nothing but the desperate need for comfort.

A horrible sound rips from Effie's mouth, and she draws him into her arms, holding him tight, and Monty is right there to hold them both. Effie clings to him and chokes out, "Of course, Sirius. Of course we will."

Sirius stands there in the arms of the parents he's only ever truly known, and he weeps. They weep right along with him. Because this is it. This is the last time.

~•~

Regulus' head snaps up when the door opens, and for a second, he's expecting it to be his parents, just like last time. He has to remember they were murdered all over again. It hurts just the same as it did the very first time.

Andromeda stands in the doorway, her lips pressed into a thin line. Next to her, holding her hand with wide eyes, a five year old Nymphadora blinks at him. She's almost six. Her birthday will be coming in a week, and Regulus won't be there.

"Andromeda," Regulus murmurs, swallowing.

"Regulus," Andromeda replies, her jaw clenched as she releases Nymphadora's hand and nods down at her. Dora immediately skips right over to Regulus and beams up at him, holding her arms out.

She's far too young to understand the gravity of this moment, but Regulus is grateful nonetheless that Andy brought her to see him. Regulus never expected to get attached to Dora, honestly. For the longest time, he hadn't been, and she'd been afraid of him, because Andromeda had made sure she knew she wasn't allowed to touch Regulus, especially back in the early days after the arena when he couldn't stand to be touched by anyone, let alone a child.

Over time, as Regulus got better, and Dora got older, things shifted. She would come sit next to him and draw, or read books, or ask him to hold one of her stuffed animals—and he would compliment her artistic abilities, listen to the stories, and keep every stuffed animal safe until she asked for it back. Being so young, she fell asleep and leaned over against him one day by complete accident, and as much as it terrified him, he literally didn't move an inch, refusing to, because she was sleeping so peacefully and he couldn't bear to wake her.

It was at that moment he realized she wasn't afraid of him anymore, and something about that felt—good. Over time, she got farther and farther away from the memory of being told not to touch him, and she just—seemed to forget. She had before many times, but Andy and Ted always reminded her, insisting it was important to teach children to respect boundaries, but Regulus eventually plucked up the courage to confess that he didn't mind so much anymore.

It was like Nymphadora had been given a new, shiny toy. With the permission finally granted, she always wanted to climb on him, or be picked up by him, or run and hug him the moment he stepped through the door. He got used to it. Actually, he thinks the touch of an innocent child was the first touch he ever truly got comfortable with after the arena. He's not so sure he would have gotten better without Dora.

"Hello, Dora," Regulus says softly, reaching down to scoop her up and swing her into his arms carefully.

"Hi, Reggie," Nymphadora chirps, grinning at him. She picked that up from Sirius. The grin and the nickname. "Mummy says you have to go away for a bit, so you won't be able to visit next week like you were s'posed to."

Regulus swallows harshly and nods. "Yes, that's true. I'm very sorry about that."

"I'll miss you lots and lots," Nymphadora says, her grin falling.

"I'll miss you lots and lots, too," Regulus whispers, blinking fast to dispel the heat gathering in his eyes.

Nymphadora's frowning now. "When will you and Sirius be getting back, Reggie?"

"I—" Regulus' voice catches, and he looks over at Andromeda, who is looking away, swiping at her face roughly. It startles him to see her cry. Andromeda is a very stoic woman, and always has been, never one to show too much emotion. Regulus didn't appreciate that enough as a child, didn't really understand it, but he does now. Regulus clears his throat and looks at Dora. "I don't know."

"But you are, right?" Nymphadora whispers, her voice small. "You're coming back, aren't you?"

"Don't worry about that now," Regulus says softly, reaching up to carefully brush his hand over her hair, offering her a tiny smile. "You just—you live your life, alright? Laugh every day, as loud as you want, and whenever you miss me, imagine that I'm laughing along with you."

And there are the tears, because she may be too young to fully grasp what's happening, but children have a knack for picking up when something is wrong. When something is sad. Regulus was that way as a child, crying without always understanding why, just knowing that he felt it necessary to.

"I don't want you to go," Nymphadora tells him, sniffling as the tears spill out of her eyes, big tears from big eyes that only a child can produce. She wraps her small arms around his neck and hugs him tight, crying quietly but wholeheartedly.

"Andy, please," Regulus croaks, staring at her desperately through the blur of his own tears.

Andromeda takes a steadying breath and moves forward to coax Nymphadora away from Regulus with gentle, soothing murmurs. Nymphadora pitches one holy hell of a fit, shrieking at the top of her lungs and reaching for Regulus like she knows, somehow, that she may never get to see him again.

Ted is waiting outside of the door, and he takes Dora away, doing his best to calm her down. Her cries eventually muffle, then drift off. Regulus tries to gather the shattered remains of his heart and comforts himself with the knowledge that she's so young now, she probably won't even remember this one day.

"You're angry with Sirius," Andromeda says in the ringing silence. Regulus just nods his head. "You're aware, I'm sure, that this makes you a hypocrite, yes?"

"I don't care," Regulus replies. "He *promised."*

"From what I hear, so did you."

"Well, he's supposed to be better than me. More honorable."

"I understand why you think so," Andromeda murmurs, and when he glances at her, there's an old, echoed sort of pain in her eyes. "Bella, Cissa, and I were not so young when their names were called. Do you think that there was no part of me that wished to volunteer for both of them?"

Regulus studies her eyes. "Why didn't you?"

"Father thought it was a form of weakness. He made it very clear that volunteering would be pointless, because he would kill whoever we volunteered for," Andromeda murmurs.

"Oh," Regulus says quietly, heart clenching when he realizes Cygnus made his daughters feel like they had better chances of surviving the arena than *him.* He thinks about how Sirius was shunned after his games, by Walburga especially, and wonders if the fact that Sirius volunteered for Regulus had anything to do with it. "The games have been tearing our family apart long before us, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has," Andromeda confirms, and then she heaves a sigh and steps forward to reach out and pass her hand over his hair, the side of his head, like she did when he was a child and still sometimes does to Sirius. She hasn't done it to Regulus *since* he was a child, and he doesn't know why, but it puts a lump in his throat. "I have to go, not much time, but I—I—"

"Andy," Regulus whispers, shaking his head. He knows she's closer to Sirius, has *always* been closer to Sirius, but that doesn't mean this hurts any less.

Andromeda firms her jaw, holding his gaze. "You and Sirius are the first instance of an arena bringing any of this family back together, and I can't say how that will translate when you go in together, but I will tell you and him the same thing." She leans in and lowers her voice to a whisper. "A family like ours, if only we'd work together, we can do *anything,* Regulus. After everything, I believe that. I believe in you and Sirius."

It's a nice sentiment, but not one Regulus can cater to. He told Sirius what would happen, and he meant it. Sirius was supposed to choose to keep him this time, not just toss it all away, like

it was meaningless. That stupid fucking fool. He is once again going into the arena because of Regulus; his name wasn't even called and *wouldn't* have been, and what was the point? Regulus was always going in again anyway, so it was pointless for Sirius to do that, just like the very first time. History has repeated itself, a cycle that gets worse each time it comes back around. Sirius should have learned. Why didn't he learn? It's all ruined now. They're *ruined.*

Two words, and it was ruined.

"Only one of us can come home," Regulus croaks.

"I know," Andromeda agrees, pulling back to lock eyes with him, her gaze fierce. "Make them pay for it."

Regulus swallows, but, slowly, he nods.

Andromeda doesn't linger after that, needing to go see Sirius off next, and it's not like there's much time for these things. In the ringing silence, Regulus moves over to the chair and sits down, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the wall.

He's not expecting any other visitors.

He gets one anyway.

"Don't," James says coldly, the moment he opens the door and Regulus automatically starts to stand up. "Don't get up. This isn't going to take long."

"James," Regulus rasps, feeling like his hammering heart is being pinned to a board like a butterfly that doesn't know its fucking dead yet. Oh, James looks… He looks so…

And the thing is, Regulus *knew* James would be upset if Regulus volunteered for him. A horrible, selfish part of Regulus had hoped that it would have gone differently, so James

would have never found out that his promise was a lie. If not for Sirius, this would have never happened. If Sirius hadn't fucking *volunteered,* then James wouldn't be looking at him the way he is now. They're ruined, too.

He knew that James wouldn't like it, once he found out, but this is something else. He doesn't think he's ever seen James look so angry, so *detached* with blank fury, the way he does right now. Regulus has spent the last two days touching James as much as he could, knowing in one way or another he would be losing James after the reaping, but he still can't stop himself from standing up anyway, prepared to come closer, wanting to apologize even if he's not sorry.

"Sit *down,"* James orders, and Regulus feels a bolt of heat ricochet between the rungs of his ribs, and he finds his legs giving out and himself parked in the chair immediately, buzzing all over like he just stuck a fork into a light socket.

Regulus wisely sits there and doesn't try to interrupt, not that James really gives him much of a choice. He starts speaking, his voice firm and sharp, and his tone is doing wonderful things to Regulus' head while his words do not-wonderful things to Regulus' heart.

"You lied to me. You broke your promise, and you intended to do it the entire time, didn't you?" James demands.

"James—"

"How long?"

Regulus swallows thickly.

"How *long?"* James snaps, when he doesn't answer. "How fucking long did you plan to volunteer for me, if it was my name that got called? How long, Regulus?"

"As soon as I heard the Quarterly Memorial announcement," Regulus whispers, and it's true, because the moment he heard it, the first thought he had, selfishly, was *not James.*

This was always the plan. He knew—the entire time, he knew he would take James' place if his name was called. It was just a matter of what order the names were called in first. Whatever it took to keep James out, that's what Regulus was always going to do. And he was aware, of course, that Effie would take his place in a heartbeat, but Regulus wasn't going to let her go back in. Not James' mum. Not the only mother who has ever done right by Sirius, after their mother never did, after all the pain Sirius took from their mother so Regulus wouldn't have to. If it had gone as it was supposed to, in the order of the names called, Regulus would have been reaped, then James, and Effie would have volunteered. Regulus could have made sure she made it back home to her son—to both of them.

Sirius fucked all of that up. He should have never been involved. He volunteered, only for Regulus to step right up beside him only seconds later. It was almost—poetic justice, in a way. For a moment, Regulus could only think, vindictively, *look at this, you idiot, you took my place and here I am anyway; you should have learned the first time, why didn't you learn?*

James' face wipes clean of any emotion as soon as he fully processes what Regulus just told him. He's silent for a long moment, and then he says, "My personal feelings won't get in the way of me doing anything I can to help you as well as Sirius, but I do want you to be aware of my personal feelings. I want you to be aware that I don't forgive you for this. I want you to be aware that whatever we had, whatever we were doing these last two days, that's done. Don't touch me. Don't sneak into my room and expect me to hold you, because I won't. Don't apologize, because I don't want to hear it."

"Okay," Regulus says softly, even as his heart goes splat right at his feet. Some part of him was preparing for this. It still hurts. It still makes him want to curl into a ball and cry.

James' jaw clenches. "Are you even sorry at all?"

Regulus hesitates, considering lying, but he's already done enough of that, hasn't he? So, he looks James right in the eyes and says the truth. "No."

James doesn't respond to that, doesn't react at all, and Regulus wonders now, after all this time, if James is willing to let him go yet. Regulus thinks he's willing to at least try.

Without a word, James pivots on the spot and walks out, slamming the door shut behind him as he goes.

As soon as Regulus is alone, behind closed doors, all bets are off. He curls up in the chair and grips the arms of it so tight that his fingers ache, face buried into the crook of his elbow as he sobs hard enough that he doesn't even make a sound at all.

Chapter End Notes

well. sirius 🤝 regulus: being fUCKING LIARS.

ahem, anyway. first, a huge HUGE shoutout to jude (moonymoment on ao3, author of the immaculate fic disintegration, and joy in my heart; please go give them some love). they are directly responsible for the line "sirius hears his little brother's name, and he's sixteen again"—as in, she literally wrote it while we were brainrotting (i was drunk at the time lmaooo) and i immediately went: hey im using that, is that okay? and they said yes, and i was like mwah mwah thanks im kissing your brain, so long story short—jude is entirely responsible for that one, PUT SOME RESPECT ON THEIR NAME!!!

also, the plan was ALWAYS to have regulus and sirius go back in, but it was with jude's help that i found the best possible route to make that happen. so, again, huge shout out to her for all her help/contributions to this fic, as well as their love and support! everyone say thank you, jude. That Is A Threat 🔪

right, onto the chapter itself. hm. well, we got a lot of information in this one!

—aberforth dumbledore is the mayor of district six!!! very interesting!!! he does indeed Make Moves in this fic and Impact The Plot, so. there's that! can't wait to see all the theories for what that means for everyone.

—effie is NOT going into the arena, and she has a POV!!! she's going to live!!! SHE'S SAFE!!! i did not see one person who believed she actually would be, which was mildly entertaining to me, honestly.

—we got andromeda and nymphadora (and ted)!!! first appearance outside of just being mentioned! andy is of course an icon! "make them pay for it" YOU TELL HIM, QUEEN!!!

that about covers the new stuff, so let's get into this bitch of a chapter.

james bring regulus his hat!!! seeing regulus' scars!!! kissing them!!! calling him beautiful!!! the scar over regulus' heart (fun fact, i did have this chapter written before i wrote a great, big tragedy!). "you'll always be my reg" 😭😭😭 regulus acknowledging that he (or anyone) doesn't see/treat james differently because of his leg!!! regulus calling james baby again!!! being the one to kiss him!!! demanding to be touched!!! the both of them quite literally spending two days just constantly enjoying each other carnally!!! it's what they deserve!!!

and then it all went to shit. again.

first of all, pandora being a MESS!!! no, no, that hurt my heart so much ☹☹☹ she was DISTRAUGHT. like, that tore her to pieces, she was so upset, that shit was so sad. who let me write that? :/

ahhh, the cruel irony of regulus' name being called THREE TIMES!!! that's for the history books right there. that poor baby 😭 and then sirius instantly volunteering for him. oh, oh, oh fucking devastating. absolutely CRUSHING. like, he PROMISED, but thats his little brother, and he was sixteen again, and it was just. it was instinct. he couldn't NOT. like, he didn't even mean to, really, but he always knew deep down that he was going to. just. ohhhh, the angst, the strife, the "i love you" and "you're dead to me" THIS IS GONNA HURT 😭

and then. and THEN, regulus "i lied" black 😐 now why would you do that? who let you do that? PANDORA DIDN'T EVEN GET PAST THE FIRST SYLLABLE OF JAMES' NAME, LIKE??? damn reggie can you let them breathe??? he MEANT he was volunteering. god herself could not have stopped him. *don't blame me, love made me crazy starts playing in the background*

james, naturally, did not take this well. which, ya know, Valid. james—the only one who actually would have kept his promise, or was at least planning to. ALL of his promises. and then no one else did, but ESPECIALLY regulus, who flatout lied to him. this does not bode well for james at all, or regulus for that matter. the girls are fightinggg. they're in their breakup era part 2, except this time it's not due to outside sources keeping them apart, but rather internal conflict. so, fun!

i told everyone the angst was coming. it is here. we have Arrived At The Angst. that's not to say there won't be happy/funny moments, as well the fun dynamics of "i am so angry at you but i also need to rip your clothes off" that we will indeed be getting, but like. yeah, angst. don't boo me, you can leave at any time! but if you're sticking it out, things are about to get Wild.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-regulus wishing on the sunrise on his fifteen birthday that james would kiss him, and that was the same day that james started falling for him
-effie, james, sirius, and regulus kicking ass together
-effie "add it to my sentence" being an icon!!! (for those who need the reassurance, she does not get whipped)

-sirius' "im sorry, mum" and asking the potters to look after remus' letter 😭
-james "sit down" potter and regulus "im sat" black

yeah, that's about it!

Fury

Chapter Notes

hi, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death
-very brief insinuation of possible suicide (from grief, and also not a thing that actually happens)
-vague implications of sirius' position in the hallow (him being a sex symbol/heartthrob)
-depictions of alcoholism/alcohol abuse (background character, not anyone we know, really)
-one brief mention of vomit (a sentence)
-angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It doesn't fully hit Dorcas until she's sitting in front of a screen, late in the evening, watching with her breath held as the reaping for district ten ends and the one for eleven begins.

Even when the Quarterly Memorial rule was announced a month ago, it never crossed Dorcas' mind to think—even for a second—that Minerva was involved, or Dumbledore for that matter. It was too cruel, too horrific, for her to even imagine that the supposed *good guys* would have a hand in this.

There are no good people in war. Dorcas has known that this entire time, so maybe some part of her should have seen this coming, but she didn't. She didn't.

There are only two Victors in district eleven.

Only two, and one of them is Marlene.

Dorcas didn't know that, because she doesn't know all the Victors in each district. She doesn't find out until she's staring at the screen where Marlene and what must be her previous mentor are waiting on the stage. Alone.

The reaping is a formality. A joke, really. To rub salt into the wound, it's Marlene's name that gets called first. She steps forward, stone-faced. Her mentor, when he is called, stumbles up, visibly drunk, and vomits all over the stage.

Dorcas is just sitting there, ears ringing, and she remembers suddenly how Minerva looked at her with such sadness when she said that involvement in war isn't always a choice. She remembers suddenly the way Minerva said things would be quiet until now. She remembers suddenly that Minerva said she can wish to protect Marlene, but if wishes were reality, everyone would be daydreaming—and oh, isn't that the truth? Reality is a bitch, and Dorcas has been daydreaming for too long. She can't anymore.

Dorcas is up out of her seat in seconds.

It's raining outside. She doesn't care. She just runs.

Minerva lives halfway across the city from Dorcas, nearly half an hour away in a car, so she isn't making it there as fast as she needs to on foot. The quickest route will be to take the tram, which she does, practically rattling in place the entire ride. People look at her oddly, but she ignores them.

The moment she's off, she's running again. Careless and frantic, she sprints without stopping, the pouring rain drenching her until her clothes are sticking to her skin and her braids are slapping heavily against her back, dripping over her neck and shoulders. She's sopping wet, not dry anywhere, and that's how she turns up at Minerva's door.

As soon as she arrives, she bangs her fist against the door on repeat without stopping, her chest heaving as she fails to catch her breath. She'd yell if she could, if she wasn't panting, if she was able to find her voice.

The door wrenches open to reveal Minerva with her lips pressed into a thin line, but she doesn't look particularly surprised to see Dorcas at her door. She doesn't say a word. She just stands there and holds Dorcas' gaze.

"You knew," Dorcas chokes out, desperately wanting to be wrong, but Minerva's mouth flattens out even more, pinched and wrinkled at the corners. Dorcas heaves out a harsh breath and rears back, whispering in utter betrayal, "You *knew?"*

"Get inside," is Minerva's quiet response. "You'll catch your death standing outside in the cold, soaked head to toe."

With that, Minerva swivels on the spot and sweeps off, leaving her door standing open. Dorcas doesn't move for a long moment, her chest still aching, her lungs burning. It takes her a few seconds, and then she tilts her chin up and marches into Minerva's house, which she has never been inside before.

Minerva brings her a towel, but Dorcas doesn't take it. She stands there and continues to drip all over Minerva's floor.

"Did you know?" Dorcas demands, wanting to hear it.

"I knew," Minerva confirms.

Dorcas has always looked up to Minerva. Has always respected her. Has always admired her. When Dorcas joined the Order, it was like Minerva was *her* mentor. Her role model.

One thing about Minerva is, she isn't someone you fuck with. Dorcas has seen Minerva drop grown men twice her size *effortlessly.* She knows for a fact that Minerva has killed people. If you know her, then you don't take the idea of attacking her lightly, and Dorcas knows her better than most.

So, it says a lot that the very first thing Dorcas wants to do is throw herself at Minerva and get *violent.*

She doesn't, because she knows there would be no point. Either Minerva would flatten her in five seconds, or Minerva would let her do it without defending herself, which would only leave Dorcas with regrets in the end, and she doesn't know which possibility is worse. What she does know is that she has too many regrets already. She doesn't add another.

"Tell me," Dorcas croaks, "that you weren't involved in making it happen. At least tell me that you—you didn't—"

"I gave Riddle the idea," Minerva murmurs, "on Albus' orders."

Dorcas inhales sharply. "Riddle didn't—he didn't come up with this? *Dumbledore* did, and you—you—"

"I need you to listen to me, Dorcas," Minerva says sharply, stepping forward abruptly to grab Dorcas' arm and start drying her off with the towel. Dorcas just stands there, limp like a ragdoll, staring at Minerva in horror. "Riddle wanted them dead, do you understand? James and Regulus, and Sirius for collateral, too. He fully intended to have them killed when they got home after the victory tour."

"And you thought *this* was the solution?!"

"There was no proper solution, but this—we can do something with this. There have been four riots across the districts *since* the victory tour. The Order has taken in over thirty-five deserters. More than fifteen Aurors have been killed, and you don't even want to know the death toll sweeping through the districts right now."

Dorcas swallows. "I still don't understand how forcing the fucking Victors to go back in is beneficial, Minerva. For fuck's sake, haven't they been through *enough?"*

"Losing Regulus, James, and Sirius would be a major hit for our side of the war, particularly in the aftermath of their seemingly accidental abilities to invigorate rebels. The loss of them all—it would make those resisting lose steam at best and extinguish every bit of hope at worst."

"Then—then we should have *saved them!* I should have been notified, and I would have gotten them to the Phoenix. How the fuck was *this* the solution?!"

Minerva's lips press into a thin line as she shifts to grab Dorcas' other arm and pat that dry, too. "What we lack in this war right now is unity, as well as visibility. There *needs* to be something that angers the people and brings them together, even the Hallows. We need the Hallows angry, too. We need an outcry from *everyone* to push this war in the right direction, and Albus—well, he knows how to make that happen."

"Martyrs," Dorcas chokes out. "They're nothing but *martyrs* to him. To you."

"Dorcas," Minerva says quietly, reaching up to gently dry each side of her throat, "I was just following orders."

Dorcas shoves Minerva's hand away and takes a step back, glaring at her. "Without *question,* Minerva? Do their lives mean nothing to you? You'll drag these people back in to *die,* just to start a fucking war?"

"To win a war," Minerva corrects sharply. "I followed orders I know will help us win this war. A war we have been fighting for a very long time. Do you think these are the first lives that will be lost? You know how this works, Dorcas, and if you weren't leading with your heart, you would see how important it is to save who we *can."*

"To save—" Dorcas freezes, her heart dropping. "You're going to make sure one of them makes it out. Sirius or Regulus?"

Minerva doesn't reply.

"Which one?" Dorcas hisses, her nostrils flaring.

"Surely you already know," Minerva says softly.

The thing is, Dorcas does know. Of course she does, because she's been fighting in this war long enough to know what will help it in the long-run, and she's been a Hallow long enough to know what will infuriate them the most.

"Sirius," Dorcas whispers. "He's the one you'll make sure wins, because everyone will be furious that Regulus didn't get to make it back to James."

Minerva nods. "That, and Sirius' influence on the Hallows—"

"He won't," Dorcas cuts in harshly. "Are you fucking *stupid?* Is Dumbledore? You—you don't understand how much he loves his little brother. Losing him will—it'll fucking *ruin him.* He'll be useless, Minerva. He won't be fighting in a war! You'll be lucky if he doesn't lay down and grieve himself to death!"

"Albus thinks differently," Minerva counters. There's something in her eyes, something knowing and hidden, like shadows draping over a room when lights go out. "He thinks Sirius will end this war after losing his younger sibling."

Dorcas scowls and snarls, "Oh, yeah? Does he now? And what led him to be so fucking sure of that?"

Minerva holds her gaze. "Because he started it when he lost his."

For a second, just one, Dorcas feels her breath hitch with a rush of empathy, thinking about that portrait of the young girl in Dumbledore's office, the young girl who has his eyes. The young girl Dorcas has never met.

It warps things in Dorcas' mind for a moment, thinking about Dumbledore's motivations behind everything, because she's never truly known. All she knows is he's the one who killed Grindelwald after winning the 34th hunger games, and then he started the Order of the Phoenix. No one knows much else, honestly, but apparently Minerva does.

The moment passes quickly, and Dorcas feels all of that empathy drain right out of her, because there is no excuse for this, for what he's doing now. *No* excuse. Not one.

"And what if he's wrong?" Dorcas asks as she takes a solid step back, her jaw clenched.

"Despite the issues we have with him and the way he does things," Minerva murmurs, "he's never been wrong before."

Dorcas just scoffs and shakes her head, pivoting on her heel and leaving without another word, slamming the door as she goes, furious because Dumbledore *is* wrong. And, this time, Dorcas isn't going to stand back and do nothing.

No, not this time.

This time, she's going to fix it.

She's been thinking of it as an option between Riddle and Dumbledore, siding with the lesser of two evils, but there's not very much difference in the evil between them now—and Dorcas refuses to side with either. If they're the only options she's got, then she'll just have to make another one.

Herself.

This time, she's doing it *her* way.

~•~

Sirius feels nauseous.

"There's no way that wasn't fucking rigged," Sirius rasps, staring at Pandora incredulously. *"Both* of them?"

"Bellatrix first, Narcissa right after," Pandora replies softly, her lips tipped down. "I'm so sorry."

"It's a fucking family reunion," Regulus mutters, his head tipped back against the side of the train car, eyes shut. He's been quiet, mostly, and Sirius wants to tell him that he doesn't have to be here for this, that he can go be with James right now, while they both still have time.

Not that they won't have more time in the future, because Sirius is obviously going to slaughter everyone to make sure Regulus makes it home, but regardless. Regulus won't even acknowledge him. Won't look at him. The one time Sirius dared to speak to him, Regulus pretended he didn't even exist.

James has been locked in his own compartment since they boarded the train, but Sirius is sure that if Regulus knocked, James would open that door and let him in. Sirius himself wants to go, but someone needs to be here to find out the important information, and he knows it has to be him. It's better if it's him. He needs to be prepared.

The 'important information', as it were, is the other tributes that Sirius is meant to be slaughtering in the name of keeping his brother alive. And, right out of the gate, it's a fucking mess. Bellatrix and Narcissa.

Fucking hell, it *is* a family reunion.

Despite being Victors from district six, they are nonetheless residents of district one now, so they were integrated into the reaping there. As luck would have it, their names got called, and no part of Sirius believes that's a fucking coincidence. He just *doesn't.* There's no way.

He can't do anything about it, and it's not something he's sure how to feel about. The idea of killing Bellatrix or Narcissa, or both, doesn't exactly…put him off. They may be family, but he doesn't know them, not really. They're strangers to him, and for Regulus, he'd kill them without blinking.

But he doesn't particularly…want to. Maybe it's some stupid flickering family loyalty in the back of his head, but he doubts that. He doesn't want to kill *anyone.* Bellatrix and Narcissa aren't special, but there is one thing that sets them apart from everyone else. Regardless, they *are* family, and he can't help but think about Andromeda… He knows he's not coming home to see whatever response anyone will have to what he does in the arena—yet another one—but that doesn't mean he's just *alright* with the idea of Andy seeing him kill her sisters.

"Alright, what about two?" Sirius says with a sigh.

Pandora grimaces. "Corban Yaxley and Rabastan Lestrange."

"Fucking Yaxley," Sirius grumbles. "Three?"

"Alecto Carrow and Thorfinn Rowle."

"Four?"

"Majesty Mildred and Asher Rockwood," Pandora says.

Sirius takes in a deep breath, then slowly lets it out, setting his shoulders. "Five?"

"There was a volunteer," Pandora murmurs, and Sirius holds his breath. "Augusta Longbottom volunteered for Frank."

"Fuck," Sirius whispers, feeling a mixture of relief and distress fight their way through him all at once. Because, yes, he's grateful that Frank isn't a tribute again, but the fact that his mother is in there… Sirius would—he'd—if it came to it, for Regulus, he'd do what he had to. Fuck. *Fuck.*

"Alice Fortescue was the other one from five," Pandora continues, and Sirius feels his heart sink.

Oh, that's rough. That's—that's fucked *up.* Frank's mother and best friend. Neither of which can come home, because Sirius has to make sure the only person who makes it out is Regulus.

"Seven?" Sirius croaks, and so it goes. Seven and eight are just four more Victors he's never met, which makes it a little easier, honestly. Best if he doesn't know them.

And then, at nine, Pandora swallows and mumbles, "Dixon Darcy and—and Emmeline Vance."

"Emmeline," Sirius says weakly, his eyes sinking shut. No. No, not her. Why did it have to be her? She's his *friend.* He—he—

"District ten is Mavis and Velvet Oswald," Pandora continues, strained. "They're, ah, married."

Sirius winces, reaching up to scrub both hands over his face, and then he lowers them and looks at Pandora with a lump in his throat. His stomach is in knots, because some part of him already knows what's coming next. As far as he knows, there are only two Victors in district eleven, but—but maybe his memory is just—maybe he's wrong, and—and maybe—

Pandora doesn't meet his eyes.

"Marlene?" Sirius chokes out, knowing deep down already and still feeling a horrible crushing sensation press in all around him when Pandora looks at him with tears in her eyes.

"Marlene McKinnon and Eli Zatish," Pandora rasps.

"What about—they don't—isn't it just them?" Sirius stutters out, his throat feeling tight, like he's being strangled. "Who will be their mentor?"

"They'll have an elected spokesperson on their behalf with the sponsors and such, but—but that's it. No mentor," Pandora says, swallowing harshly.

Sirius' lips twist grimly. "Some spokesperson working with the sponsors isn't going to be *enough.* They'll be a Hallow, and they won't care, not really, so Marlene will be—" *fucked,* he doesn't finish. He snaps his mouth shut, because he realizes all at once that this is, technically, an advantage.

As soon as he's had the thought, he physically recoils like he can flinch back from himself, his stomach turning over with internal disgust. He knows, objectively, that it just comes from what he's always labeled as *mentor brain,* where he thinks in terms of advantages and disadvantages towards survival, but he's never thought in terms like that about *friends.*

Marlene is his friend. His closest friend, after James, basically on the same level as Mary, just in a very different way. Because she knows about being a mentor, understanding what it is to be a Victor. Sirius has looked out for her for years now, as much as he could, and she has looked out for him, too.

The mere *idea* of—of hurting her… Killing her…

Sirius has to take a shaky breath, in and out, just so he won't vomit. Slowly, his gaze crawls to Regulus, who still hasn't opened his eyes, like maybe he wants to block the rest of the world out, escape from reality. Sirius stares at him, just stares, and he knows—he *knows* it in his heart that he'll do whatever it takes to get Regulus home. He knows that, and for that, to do that, he thinks he's going to die as a very bad person with a lot of blood on his hands. It should make him reconsider.

It doesn't.

~•~

It takes James longer than it should to work up to leaving the train car he's essentially been hiding in. He'd only wanted one moment, really, just one to catch his breath and smother the harsh ache in his chest every time he saw Regulus out of the corner of his eye—but then he got alone and started fucking shaking, *again,* and he just couldn't. He couldn't stop, and he couldn't get himself together, and he couldn't figure out a way to shove everything down so he could handle going back out.

He does figure it out, eventually, because he needs to go back out there and deal with everything. The anger helps with that. It comes in waves, and it doesn't go away; it just keeps getting worse, growing within him until he can feel it festering away under his skin, bubbling in his veins. This anger…

Oh, *this* anger is unlike anything he's ever felt before in his entire life. He's never been as furious as he is now. It's a harsh, unforgiving, all-consuming *rage* that has ahold of him, and he doesn't think it's going to let go.

He doesn't think he wants it to.

"Ah, James, there you are," Sirius greets when he makes his way into the train car they're all gathered in together. He's busy writing something down, but Pandora looks up from the notepad and smiles at him. James doesn't smile back.

Regulus is sitting in the corner, his eyes shut and his head tipped back. James could easily mistake him for sleeping, except he can't, because he knows what Regulus looks like when he's sleeping. He knows what Regulus looks like right after a kiss he deems too short, his parted lips and pleading eyes, that sharp tongue of his, words harsh and demanding like that can hide the fact that he's begging for another kiss to make up for the brevity of the one before it. He knows what Regulus looks like right in the middle of his peak of pleasure, when he's feeling *really* good, his slack-jawed, starry-eyed look and flushed skin. He knows what

Regulus looks like right before he breaks a promise he was always lying about in the first place, that lack of remorse and veneer of innocence.

James missed it. He *missed it.* All the times he's looked into Regulus' eyes, all the different states he's seen Regulus in, and he missed this. He never saw it coming.

A new wave of rage floods him, and he rips his gaze away from Regulus to snatch out a chair and sit down across from Sirius and Pandora. "What are you writing?"

"Listing out all the tributes," Sirius mutters with a frown, his eyebrows furrowed. "Just, ah, getting out there what their strengths and weaknesses were in their games. I don't really remember everyone's, so we'll probably need to rewatch and play all the highlight reels." He pauses and looks up, clearing his throat. "We got the list for who's all been reaped. Bella and Cissa are in the arena with us, James."

"Well, would you look at that? Looks like the whole damn family can't manage to stay out of it," James says shortly, and Sirius blinks. James grinds his molars together. "And who is their mentor? Malfoy, I'm guessing?"

Sirius stares at him and quietly says, "Yes."

"He didn't volunteer for his wife?" James asks. "Wonder why. Hm, maybe because he actually has an ounce of respect for her and what she wants. Maybe he even cares about her. *Maybe—"*

"Okay, one, that could not be farther from the truth if you fucking tried," Sirius cuts in. "And two, I'm—I'm sensing that you have some things you're clearly upset about—"

"No, really? You sensed that?" James says flatly.

Regulus heaves a sigh and mumbles, "Here we go."

"No, don't make your sarcastic fucking comments under your breath in your little corner," James snaps. "Either open your eyes and look at what the fuck you did, or keep your opinions to yourself. No, wait, I take it back. When it comes to me, you don't *get* an opinion, actually, so don't even bother looking."

"James," Pandora reprimands him, nearly gasping it like she's never been more shocked in her life.

"Oh. You're—angry at each other? You're fighting?" Sirius blurts out, face scrunching like the idea of that is genuinely the most confusing thing he's ever heard.

"But—but *why?"* Pandora whines, like she's already fed up, like she just wants all of this to stop being so hard. Well, tough. It's not that fucking simple.

"We broke up. Again," Regulus says dryly, lifting his hand lazily and giving a careless flick of his fingers, and James has to clench the edge of the table to stop himself from instantly losing his shit. Regulus still hasn't opened his eyes.

Sirius looks at James in disbelief. "Now is a hell of a time to go about breaking up! James, what the *f—"*

"We didn't break up," James interrupts harshly, "because we weren't together. We were *never* together. He just likes to say things and expects people to go along with it, as if whatever he says is right, like he can make decisions for people, even when he *promised not to.* But hey, he's a fucking liar, so—"

"Okay, hold on," Sirius says quickly, eyes a little wide as he leans forward on his elbows. He looks a bit pale, suddenly. Worried. "I—yes, right, I see the…issue now. Um, James, if you're —I mean, if you're upset with him about volunteering for you, then you have to be upset with me, too."

And, the thing is, James could be upset with Sirius as well; maybe a part of him is. But Sirius didn't break his promise to James. No, just Regulus. Maybe it makes him a horrible person, but James just—can't. He can't do it. Not both. He can't carry all of this, and Sirius—he *needs* Sirius, especially through what's coming. And it is different.

It is.

It's different because it wasn't Sirius who actually broke the promise to James. He didn't lie. It's different because there are different things to forgive. Because Sirius didn't fuck him. Sirius didn't hold him. Sirius didn't give him little slices of happiness and rip it away with no remorse.

Sirius is sorry. James can look at him and see that he is.

Regulus wasn't. He isn't. James only had to look into his eyes to see that truth. He remembers, suddenly, that he hadn't been looking into Regulus' eyes when he made the promise, when he *lied.* Why hadn't James looked? He should have looked.

"No," James says, his voice coming out steady. "No, I don't have to be upset with you, actually. Just him. I'm just upset with him. I hate what he did. I hate—" He stops, the words catching like they're banging on the inside of his throat, awash with the burning acidity of his ever-mounting rage. He flicks his gaze to Regulus, who has finally opened his eyes, looking right at him. James holds his gaze and hopes with everything in him that Regulus sees the truth in James' eyes when he coldly announces, "I hate *him.*"

"You don't hate anything," Sirius argues, sounding strained and a little desperate. "Stop it, James. Come on, please don't do that, yeah? Regulus, he didn't mean that. He's just—he's upset, is all, and he's—"

"I hate you," James states, talking over Sirius as he looks at Regulus. "I didn't get it before, how anyone could ever hate someone they once claimed to love, but now I do. Isn't that ironic, Regulus? I *understand* now."

There's a heavy, ringing silence on the train, and James can hear the rush of his own blood in his ears, the awful thud of his heart against his ribs. He's so angry. He doesn't even properly know what hatred is, but it has to be this. It has to be whatever the fuck happens to him every time he looks at Regulus and feels like ripping the world apart, like he's being ripped apart with it, like everything is just—it's just—

Regulus abruptly pushes to his feet, slow about it. He stands to full height, never breaking James' gaze, and there's something about his eyes that only makes James *angrier.* They're hollow. So fucking hollow. He doesn't even speak. He just turns to walk away without saying anything else, and James lets him go.

Fighting every urge to call him back, to follow right after him, James stays there, raging, and lets him go.

~•~

"You've been crying," Dorcas says.

Regulus presses his lips into a thin line. "No."

"My love, you don't have to talk about it, of course not, but you also don't need to lie," Dorcas tells him, cupping his chin very gently between her fingers as she does his makeup. He has no idea what she's going with this year, honestly, but he leaves her to her whims at this point, knowing better than to doubt her. He's not going to question *Dorcas'* stylist skills.

As soon as they got into the Hallow, he and Sirius had been ushered off as per usual, to get presented for the introduction parade. The reintroduction parade, more accurately. Regulus had to wait for a bit, seeing as he was alone with a fucking bathtub, and then Dorcas showed up and started chatting with him while standing in the corner, her back to him, working on some sort of designs at her desk while he bathed.

After that, she left again, then came back. Left again, then came back. It took Regulus some time to realize that she was running between him and Sirius, which baffled him. She's their stylist, yes, but there should be a design team to help assist her in any way she needs.

Regulus doesn't doubt that there are *countless* people who would sell at least one internal organ just to work alongside her, *especially* this year.

Maybe it has to do with Gideon and Fabian?

Maybe she misses them.

Either way, Dorcas has always been frighteningly good at just—seeing through everyone. Regulus, who has indeed been crying a lot today, really doesn't have a leg to stand on when she's staring directly into his eyes and likely seeing the evidence. His shoulders slump and he sighs.

"James hates me," Regulus whispers, and it takes *everything* within him, all of his effort, not to immediately burst into fucking tears as soon as he says it. Oh, he's pathetic.

Dorcas laughs.

She just—laughs, and Regulus can't stop himself from rearing back to stare at her incredulously, because that's just fucking *rude.* Like, yes, he's aware he's a no-good, terrible hypocrite who really should have seen this coming, because of course the universe would take the chance to turn these tables on him as a form of adequate karma, but she could at least *pretend* to be a little sympathetic to his plight.

"Oh, don't look at me like that." Dorcas snorts and gently reaches out to cup his chin a second time. "James doesn't hate you. I don't know who told you that—"

"James did," Regulus says flatly, and Dorcas blinks. "He told me that, Dorcas. Right to my face. Like, purposefully."

Dorcas doesn't laugh this time. She looks so confused, her eyebrows pinching together. "That's just—not possible. That man is so in love with you that it's mental, Regulus. He's *gone* on you. I mean, so far gone that there's no getting him back."

"Yes, well, it seems like he went so far that he came back out on the other side," Regulus mumbles, and the worst part is, he knows all about that.

He knows what it is to love someone so much that you hate them. Want someone so much that you despise them. Need someone so much that you hurt them. He knows exactly what it is to look at someone you love in the aftermath of a horrible loss and feel so much, too much, all that pain and grief and pure fury, and it leaves you unsure how to make out the love through it all. He knows all too well.

It's fucking devastating. It's nothing less than Regulus deserves, yes, but it is nonetheless devastating. It devastates *him.* He hates it when James is angry with him. He doesn't want James to be angry with him; he doesn't want James to hate him. He wants James to smile at him, and hold him, and have him right up until he can't anymore.

That makes him a huge hypocrite, he knows, and this really *is* karma. He spent *years* making James feel like this, feel the way Regulus is feeling right now.

"I know that this is hard on—all of you," Dorcas murmurs, her throat rising and falling on a harsh swallow. She gently sweeps her thumb over his jaw. "It's—it's going to be okay, Regulus. It will be. I promise it will."

"A bold promise," Regulus whispers, lips tilting up sadly.

Dorcas looks him right in the eye and says, fiercely, "Yes, and it's one that won't be broken."

Regulus doesn't respond, because he knows all about promises made that only end up broken in the end. He understands that she's upset, too. One look at her makes that obvious. Still, this isn't okay, but if it's easier for her to believe it will be, he'll let her. Reality will catch up to her soon enough. It always does.

After Dorcas finishes with his face, she leaves him to get dressed alone with the promise that he would wait after so she could come back and make sure everything was right. He can tell

there's a difference in her style choices this time, rather than last time. He doesn't look innocent, like the angel he was presented as before, instead looking—well, quite dangerous.

Regulus didn't know he *could* look dangerous. He stares at himself in the mirror, baffled, but his blank look of disbelief only makes him look meaner. He's all sharp edges and leather, dark colors and eye-catching material, a walking weapon meant to draw attention and invoke…something.

Fear, he thinks. He's supposed to invoke fear.

Regulus looks in the mirror and realizes that he looks like the epitome of *do not fuck with me.* The more he stares, the more he likes it. He looks untouchable. He looks like a threat. Again, he hears Andromeda's words in his head…

Make them pay for it, she said.

Oh, he will.

That's a promise he intends to keep.

~•~

Sirius squints at himself in the mirror, lips pursed. Dorcas stands behind him, awaiting judgement, and Sirius is likely more opinionated about fashion and such than—well, James and Regulus were, so he's a bit of a harsh critic.

He's trying to find some way to put this politely, but he's not entirely sure if there's any possible way he *could.*

"I just—don't see the vision," Sirius admits weakly, swiveling to face her. "Like, no offense, but this is… I mean, it's a sure sign of talent, I suppose, managing to make me look…"

"Unflattering?" Dorcas suggests, lips twitching.

"Dorcas, I look like shit, babe," Sirius says bluntly. "Fucking hell, what did you *do* to me? How did you even—manage this? Do you know how sexy I am?"

Dorcas coughs around a laugh, eyes bright. "Yes, Sirius, I'm quite sure how sexy you are hasn't been missed by anyone, but I present you with this…" She crosses her arms and raises her eyebrows at him. "Why the fuck should they get to drool over you, hm? That's what they want, you know. They want to see you come out there looking like pure sex, something to ogle, someone to steal their breath—and no. No, fuck that. They don't get that. Let them be disappointed. That's the goal."

Sirius stares at her, startled.

He hasn't thought about the implications of his position as a tribute this year, if he's honest. The performance he has to put on, so to speak. It strikes him suddenly that he's not really required to lean into his usual role for anyone's life but his own, and if he so desires, he doesn't have to lean into it at all.

It's a strange positive to find in all this mess, but leaving the Hallows disappointed—yes, he likes that idea. He likes that he has a chance to subvert expectations and take something away from them, something they never truly had, though they have always believed that they did. And he let them. But no more.

Not this time.

Sirius turns back to examine himself in the mirror again. He genuinely looks…plain. Or as plain as he can get. As plain as he's ever been in the Hallow.

His hair is in a low ponytail that mostly hides the length and waves in his collar, taking the volume of it from his face. There's no makeup except for what Dorcas added to make him look—well, more tired, honestly. He's in bland colors, and there's not an inch of tantalizing

skin on display for anyone to see. He's in layers to take away from his usual shape, like a silhouette, hazy around the edges and indistinguishable so no one could properly apply him to a fantasy.

It's just—he looks muted. Like someone not trying to leave an impression. Like someone who *can't* leave an impression. And that, he thinks, will leave an impression all on its own.

"No, okay, you've got a point," Sirius murmurs, blinking at his reflection. "I'm seeing the vision."

"Brilliant," Dorcas declares, delighted. "Then, when you go out there, don't smile. You do truly have a lovely smile, and it *will* light up your face and ruin the vision we're going for."

Sirius reflexively smiles, unable to help it, and he sees the difference immediately in the mirror. The way his grin does have an effect, how it transforms him, the power it holds. He's never really thought about it—well, he says it often enough, but really, he is truly an attractive bastard. If he wasn't him, he'd be so into him. The thought makes him chuckle. For someone uninterested in being ogled, he's quite vain.

"Yeah, no, don't do that," Dorcas says with a snort.

"I won't," Sirius assures her, still grinning as he faces her again. "Just—thank you. For this. It's—it means a lot. More than you could ever know."

Dorcas' face softens. "I'm glad. Now, come on. I need to go collect your brother, and then I'll see you off to the carriages."

Sirius follows her out, then stands in place and twiddles his thumbs lazily while waiting, his mind turning to James again. He's off with Pandora at the moment, who is giving him a crash-course in all things *mentor.* She'll be holding his hand through a lot of this, honestly, but Sirius has tried to give him as much advice as he could on the train.

But, well, that was hard to do when James is fucking *furious,* just the same as Regulus. They're not okay. None of them. It's a shit situation, and Sirius knows how fucking hard it is to watch two of the people you love most in this world be in this. He did it only last year and very nearly didn't make it through. James is stronger than him, so he will. He has to, because the idea of anything else is something Sirius simply won't accept.

The thing is, James is very, very scared right now. He's freaking the fuck out, and Sirius can't even blame him. It's not as if *he* handled it well, when it was him, and circumstances were a lot different then. Circumstances are a lot different for James now, especially in regards to Regulus.

But—and maybe this is cruel, even if it's reality—he's just going to have to push past it and get the fuck over it. Because if he *doesn't,* Sirius knows that James will regret it. He'll regret every moment he spent angry, and hurt, instead of cherishing the time he could have had. He'll regret all the harsh words he said, and he'll regret all the unspoken truths that he held back, as if that could protect him from the pain of it all. He'll regret all the time wasted and all the opportunities missed.

The sound of footsteps draws him out of his own head and makes him look up, and the moment he sees Regulus, he's fucking *offended.* He gapes at Dorcas in disbelief.

"Wait, why the fuck does he get to look cool? Why couldn't we be boring together?" Sirius blurts out.

Regulus *does* look cool. There's a whole *I will murder you* look that Dorcas has going for him right now. That's not fair. Sirius wants to look like he'd murder someone. This is bullshit.

"Sirius," Dorcas says, amused, "remember what we talked about? If anything, the blatant difference between you two will only leave the Hallows *more* disappointed."

Sirius pauses, thinking about that, then he nods. "Right, no, that makes sense. If I actually looked cool, then they'd all be looking at me and wouldn't even notice him anyway."

Trying to goad Regulus into an argument, light bickering or even a full shouting match, does not work. Regulus doesn't look at him. Doesn't speak. Doesn't react at all. It's like Sirius isn't even here, like he really is dead already.

For a moment, Sirius look at Regulus with a lump in his throat and remembers one of the few memories between them he actually still has. When he was young, when they both were, he tried to bury Regulus in the backyard once. He'd found out that dogs tend to hide or bury things of value to them to protect it from harm, and being so young, he'd thought it was a brilliant idea to do the same. So, he took what he valued most and intended to protect it.

All these years later, and what has changed?

Everything, and not very much at all.

~•~

Remus is doing a terrible job of keeping his excitement down to a calmer level. He's so fucking ecstatic that he's *shaking,* even just standing in the corner of the room with his head ducked and his hands behind his back.

Some part of Remus really didn't think he'd get assigned to this suite again. It's a bit of a risk, but also not really. Someone would have to care enough to look into it, and as a servant, no one cares unless he's failing to be a proper one. And yeah, he *is* failing at it—shamelessly and with glee—but no one knows that. Still, it's very rare that servants get assigned to the same things twice, so whatever Sirius did to make this happen…

Well, it worked.

Remus is practically *vibrating* while waiting for Sirius to get in. Maybe that's unfair and even a bit cruel, because Sirius will be as busy this year as he was the last. He'll have two new tributes to look after as well, though Remus is quite sure that it won't be as emotionally taxing as last year, when it was his brother and best friend he had to take care of, living with that fear that he'd lose either of them, or both.

Regardless, Remus cherishes every moment he gets with Sirius. He'll be happy just to be in the same room with him, honestly. There's no expectation that Sirius will come running and fling himself into Remus' arms immediately, because he'll likely want to explain to his tributes about how servants are treated within the safety of the suite.

It's also the Quarterly Memorial, which Remus doesn't know very much about. He heard the guards in Azkaban talking about how fucked up the rule was, and it had admittedly made his heart pang just thinking about whatever torment Sirius will have to endure this year. And Pandora. And whatever tributes arrive. It's all shit for everyone.

The sound of the door opening makes his heart jump, and he can't stop himself from looking up, waiting with a bated breath for that moment where he'll get to see Sirius again.

Except the first person that steps inside is James.

Remus' mind goes blank.

They come in one right after the other. James first, leaning on his cane and moving swiftly despite that, wearing a scowl that Remus honestly didn't know the muscles in his face knew how to make. Pandora next, and Regulus right behind her, his shoulders tense. The last to come in is Sirius, and he instantly looks right at Remus, but the look on his face—

It's all wrong.

Something is wrong.

James and Regulus weren't supposed to be here.

Remus can only stand there, frozen, not grasping what's going on or what any of it means. James doesn't even greet him; he just marches through the room and down the hall, a door

slamming in the distance *hard.* It makes Regulus flinch.

Oh.

Oh, this is bad.

Whatever it is, it's bad.

Slowly, almost dreading it, Remus reaches up to peel his mask off as soon as the door closes. For a moment, no one even moves, or says anything. Pandora is looking at him with her eyebrows pinched together, so much pity and sympathy and pure, unadulterated *sorrow* in her eyes that it's sincerely scaring the fuck out of him. Regulus fails to meet his eyes.

Sirius, though… He takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. Despite who he's arrived with, he doesn't run and throw himself at Remus. He just approaches him slowly, and with every step, his eyes seem to get brighter. Tears. There are tears in his eyes, building up as he comes closer.

"Hi," Sirius chokes out when he comes to a stop in front of him, and that's when the tears start to fall.

"What's—Sirius, what—" Remus halts, a lump in his throat making it impossible to speak, and there's some part of him that's more afraid than he's been in a long time that doesn't want the answers anyway.

"I thought maybe you would have heard," Sirius croaks, "but from the look of you, I can—I'm assuming you haven't."

"Heard what?" Remus whispers, fucking *terrified,* so much so that his voice is shaking, and Sirius doesn't answer. Remus' heart is racing, and he doesn't know why.

"Come on," Sirius murmurs, clearing his throat and holding out his hand. "Let's—we should go talk. Alone."

Remus shakes his head reflexively, flexing his fingers around his mask. "Just—just tell me, Sirius. What is it? What's—"

"Can you give us a moment? Please?" Sirius asks softly, swiveling his head to look at Regulus and Pandora, both of which dutifully make graceful exits without complaint, leaving Remus and Sirius alone. Sirius focuses on him again, inhaling deep and exhaling slow. "The Quarterly Memorial—this year, the rule was… It was that the—the tributes would be reaped from the existing Victors in each district. So, a Victor could become a tribute again."

Remus stares at him, needing a second to wrap his mind around that, to really understand what it means. It takes him a moment, then it hits him, and his heart *drops,* his mask along with it as it clatters to the floor when his fingers go slack.

"Oh. Oh, Sirius, I'm so sorry," Remus breathes out, reaching for him immediately, and Sirius releases a harsh, choked noise the moment he folds himself into Remus' arms. Remus holds him, cupping the back of his head and squeezing his eyes shut as grief takes root in him.

"It's not fair," Sirius whimpers.

"I know," Remus croaks, feeling strangled, barely able to talk. Later, he's sure, his anger will hit him, because Sirius is right, it's *not* fair. But, for now, he's just—really fucking sad. It's horrible. It's absolutely awful that, after everything Sirius went through last year, he has to do it all over again. He has to watch his brother and best friend go back into the arena. Remus pulls back to cup Sirius' face, meeting his eyes. "I'm aware that it doesn't fix anything, but I'll be here with you the entire way. I'll take care of you, okay? It's—it's *wrong* that they're going back in, and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Sirius' expression freezes for a second, then shifts swiftly and all at once. It sort of collapses into heartbreak, a certain brand of heartbreak that Remus has never seen before.

"Remus," Sirius says gently, and it's that. It's the look on his face, and in his eyes, and how gentle he's being with Remus right now; even before he opens his mouth to elaborate, that's what does it. "It's me. *I'm* going back."

Remus' hands fall away from Sirius' face as he steps back, everything around him and in him seeming to go crashing down. Crumbling. The creation of all things being crushed. It feels like something inside of Remus curls up into a tight ball and *whines.* It feels like a howling wind sweeps through him and throws all that he is against the walls of himself, leaving behind a mangled, broken mess.

I won't break, you know, Remus had told Sirius once. It was a lie. He didn't know, but it was a lie. *Just wait, I've barely gotten my hands on you yet,* Sirius had replied, and he was right. Because here Remus is, now, left in shambles.

It doesn't hit Remus until this exact moment, but there was safety in Sirius, a sense of security that he foolishly believed in, wholeheartedly. No matter what they did, Sirius was never in danger. The risk never truly applied to him, not really. If anything ever went wrong, Sirius would most likely scrape by, evade death and torture and worse; the threat of losing him was never a genuine threat past not getting to see him again, but he'd always know, at the very least, that Sirius would be safe.

Remus was never supposed to live in a world where he would be at risk of losing Sirius to death. Remus was never supposed to live in a world where he could outlive Sirius at all.

"Remus, please say something," Sirius rasps, staring at him with wide, glittering eyes. "Give me *something."*

They could never have everything, and now, they're losing the only something they ever got to have, because Remus has no doubts, not even one, that Sirius is going into that arena with his brother or best friend—either one—with absolutely no intentions of making it back out.

They were never supposed to be nothing.

Helplessly, Remus lifts his hand to cover his mouth and smother the sob that tries to climb the walls of his throat, and his eyes ache. Everything aches. He keeps moving back until he bumps right into the wall, and he can only stand there, eyes squeezing shut as the tears spill over, a horrible, secretive part of him wishing Sirius never touched him at all.

Tragically inevitable and woefully pointless. He said that about them once, too. He knew. He really did.

He just wishes he had been wrong.

Chapter End Notes

sigh. 😔

let's start from the top.

so, dumbledore being the one behind the quarterly memorial announcement... hm. inch resting. That Bitch. the fact that it wasn't riddle!!! oh, had riddle been left to his plans, walburga and orion wouldn't have been killed. sirius, james, and regulus would have. do we say thank you??? no, no, we do not. dumbledore was still fucked up for that one.

and then there's minnie... LISTEN!!! LISTEN, GIVE HER A CHANCE, OKAY??? you gotta see it from her perspective. she has been working with dumbledore for years, war is coming, and this is—objectively—a rather strategic plan to win the war. there is more on this later. is it immoral? absolutely. don't worry, minerva mcgonagall only needs to see another option to take it. just like dorcas, her options have been rather limited to between riddle and dumbledore.

however, OUR GIRL DORCAS!!! OUR QUEEN!!! AN ICON!!! she makes me scream into my pillow. i NEED her. no, you don't understand, i would do ANYTHING for this woman. 😭 she really saw marlene going back into the games and literally just went: hm, yeah, Don't Like That, time to fuck shit up! *whatever ive done, i did it for love playing in the background*

it's interesting, i think, because iirc, in the books/movies, the rebels always fully intended to break people out of the arena, right? i can't fully remember, but i THINK that was the plan. in this, however, that is not the plan. the order's plan is to let them all go back in, make sure sirius' wins (minnie is head gamemaker, she can make this happen), and THEN win the war/take down the government.

dorcas of course is Not Okay with this, and now she's about to cause nothing short of fucking chaos. as she should!!! things are happening people!!! the first domino has

fallen!!!

meanwhile, james and regulus and sirius are Falling Apart. great. love that (i want to go play in traffic)..

so, james. 😬 a bit harsh saying you hate the man, innit? HELP AS IF REGULUS DIDNT DO THAT SO MANY TIMES IVE LOST COUNT GOODBYEEEE 😭 sorry, it just makes me sad seeing regulus sad (says the writer who has purposefully made him sad). but also, james is EXTREMELY valid in his anger, and like, some of you may not like it, you may even be mad at him, but just. just—i am BEGGING you to trust the process, please.

oh, regulus just crying, noooo. like the fact that he's self-aware enough to realize that he's a bit (more than a bit) of a hypocrite in this situation... well, they're all hypocrites, which will be discussed later. also, his sadness is valid as well—it's a shit situation all the way around, really. just the same, his anger with sirius is valid, and sirius' sadness is valid.

THEY'RE ALL VALID, THIS JUST HURTS 😭

sirius my beloved. him just. being so firm on doing whatever it takes to get regulus out of that arena alive, and like, the horrible complications of that when basically all his friends are going back in... OH HE IS NOT HAVING A GOOD TIME!!!

the fact that it's a family reunion with narcissa and bellatrix going back in. like, THAT'S a whole mess. this is all so messy. and then augusta and alice going in while frank has to be their mentor. PAIN!!! the fact that marlene was always going back in regardless, bc in her district there were only two victors to start with. oh, im FOUL for that one 😭

and finally. remus. my lovely, darling remus lupin. the utter whiplash of sirius' sad pov switching to remus' pov where he's excited. awful, oh im awful, im not a good person :(

THE WAY REMUS DIDNT EVEN THINK AT FIRST THAT IT WAS SIRIUS GOING BACK IN IM GONNA YANK MY TEETH OUT BY THE ROOT!!! he was so. like, he just. he literally didn't even let the thought form in his brain, because he just Couldn't. and then sirius had to tell him, and like... the fact that remus immediately broke down. some secret part of him wishing sirius never touched him at all??? 😭😭😭 IM UPSET

(i know i wrote it, shhh)

for those of you who need the reassurances: james and regulus will resolve things (...eventually). sirius and remus will have some somethings again soon enough, i promise!!! (maybe, one day, they'll even get to have everything)

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-pandora just wanting everything to stop being so sad (she is us, we are her)
-regulus "i can dish it out, but can't take it" black being a little shit and saying they broke up and then instantly regretting it when james shut him the fuck DOWN (lowkey sexy

of him imo)
-regulus looking like he'll murder someone!!!
-sirius getting the freedom to NOT act as he always does with the hallows
-sirius checking himself out in the mirror and knowing he's sexy
-again, dorcas being amazing!!!
-at least remus and sirius got to hug for a minute? :(

The Mission

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone.

warnings for this chapter:

-sexual content (a bit more heavy than usual, though there's no descriptions of what's happening in an exact play-by-play, so i still wouldn't label it as explicit, but you definitely know what's going on)
-references to past death
-references to past torture/beatings
-implied past child death
-guns/gun violence
-gunshot wounds
-mentions of blood
-depictions of violence
-murder/death (yes, in the present)
-depictions of a warzone
-child endangerment (due to the warzone)
-biological warfare used to kill masses of people in a very painful way
-most likely some medical inaccuracies

this is a war chapter. it's very, VERY heavy. people die, mostly not in detail, but some do. there are descriptions of people being hurt/shot at/in agony due to biological warfare etc. i will be putting in-depth warnings in the end notes, as well as places for people to skip/skim-read if they need/want to. please, please, please be mindful of the warnings, and take care of yourselves FIRST, always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aberforth is a very practical man, but he's also a proud one, and he knows that. It's part of the reason he's right where he is today. District six, born and raised—and alone.

Being Mayor of a district isn't quite what he expected it to be when he fought and clawed his way into the position, fully *determined* to get high enough within the system that he could actually make a difference, only to get where he was going and learn that there wasn't much difference he could make.

It scalds his insides at times, knowing that Albus was right.

Aberforth can't deny that he has taken care of his district, his *home,* to the best of his abilities. There's always a fine line to walk when planted firmly between the Hallow's demands and the district's needs. It's a constant balancing act, navigating which rules to bend and where to keep a firm hand.

He knows the people of district six respect him, the Aurors and every day people alike; he also knows how easily that respect can shatter when the Hallow puts them all under pressure he has no way to alleviate. For decades—for most of his life—he's been in the middle, treading carefully not to tip too far to either side, and now he has no choice.

Albus' doing, no doubt. Aberforth is no fool; he's aware his brother is behind it all, pulling the strings, pushing for war. Trying to make up for old mistakes. Making new ones.

Sighing heavily, Aberforth swallows down a deep swallow of whiskey, letting it burn as he stares at the phone on his desk. The phone Alastor Moody left with him years and years ago when he swept through district six on a victory tour for his tribute at the time. The phone that came in an envelope with a short, simple letter along with it.

The phone Aberforth has never bothered to use.

Many times—over the last six months especially—Aberforth has considered using it just to call Albus and ask him to *stop.* Whatever he's doing, whatever he's pushing for behind the scenes, just stop it. Just, after all this time, bring it to an end.

The death toll across the districts have been rising with the mounting rebellion and riots. People dying over petty crimes. People attacking Aurors over petty arguments. People, people, *people.* Does Albus not think of the people? Does Albus not realize the carnage he's helping spread?

District six has remained in a precarious position, the tension rising with each passing day, especially since the Quarterly Memorial announcement. It's at an all-time high since the reaping, since the district as a whole witnessed rebellion firsthand, and Aberforth knows there's no chance of stopping it from going further. The district is one push away from a riot

they can never come back from, and he knows exactly what push will get them there. And he can't stop it.

For years, he has kept this district safe. Tomorrow, he knows, he will fail to. Because, tomorrow, the day after the televised introduction parade, Euphemia Potter will be marched out into the middle of the district and beaten in front of everyone, and no one will spared from the violence of such a thing, because it's mandatory attendance for all. Even him. Even he will have to be there to bear witness.

Aberforth doesn't want to see it. He doesn't want to watch. He doesn't want to remember. District six hasn't used a whipping post since he became mayor, and the last person he remembers being whipped at all was Albus himself. Aberforth doesn't want it to happen, not again, and there's nothing he can do.

Well.

Well, there's something he could do. Something he has to do, because he knows the people of his district, and he knows that there will be a riot the moment Euphemia is marched out in front of the crowd and left to her fate.

What all residents of district six have in common—have always had in common, for as long as he can remember—is a fierce, unwavering sense of loyalty.

Putting his glass down, Aberforth swallows the bitter taste of his pride and picks up the phone.

It rings only twice before it's answered, as if it hasn't been nearly fifty years, and Albus' voice is soft, so very soft, when the line clicks and he murmurs, "Aberforth."

Aberforth's eyes sink shut, helplessly, because it *has* been nearly fifty years since he and Albus spoke. Even all these years later, one of their many arguments still ring in his ears.

I'm doing this for Ariana! Albus had shouted.

It's your fault she's dead! Aberforth had screamed back.

After all this time, Aberforth finds that the strength in Albus' voice has gone quiet. He sounds…old. Of course he does, because he's no longer a young man in his twenties. He's no longer the bright, glowing big brother Aberforth looked up to. Now he is a stranger, a withered voice through the phone, aged and still speaking with so much love. And loyalty.

So much loyalty, even now. That was always Albus' problem, his clinging sense of loyalty, and how that manifested when faced with loss, when tarnished with his own mistakes. What people fail to realize in district six is that a loyalty like this can lead to a dark path one can't come back from. Justice into vengeance into a point of no return.

Albus surpassed it long ago, that point of no return. He solidified it the moment he murdered Grindelwald. Aberforth had begged him not to. But, really, he was just begging Albus not to leave him. He didn't know it at the time, but he was.

Albus left him anyway, and inexplicably, he is still here. In an instant. No questions asked. He picks up the phone, and it's ridiculous, but Aberforth knows—even after all this time, after everything—Albus will do what he always did.

"Albus," Aberforth says gruffly, bracing his forehead with a shaking hand, "I…need your help."

Though his voice is different and time has surely changed more than Aberforth could ever know, Albus does, in fact, do what he always did as the big brother. Without missing a beat, without even a stutter, he says, "You have it."

~•~

Dorcas has been fighting with herself all morning, not knowing how she's going to convince Marlene to do this, but needing to find a way regardless. Every thought and plan she had seems so stupid, so now she has no plan at all.

And yet, here she is.

Sighing, Dorcas shakes her head ruefully before raising her hand to knock, ignoring the heavy thump of her heart as soon as she does it. There's about a minute, and then she hears faint steps approaching, which makes her tense up in anticipation.

When the door swings open, Dorcas blinks at the sight of Emmeline Vance standing in front of her in nothing but a silk robe that's tied around her. Okay, so did Dorcas go to the wrong floor? Press the wrong button on the lift? She could have sworn she was at the right room.

"Oh. Sorry," Dorcas blurts out reflexively. "I thought—well, I think I have the wrong room. Ah, I'll just—"

"Dorcas, hello," Emmeline cuts in, lips twitching. "Looking for Marlene? Because if you are, you've got the right room."

Dorcas stares at her, mind briefly screeching to a halt. There's no mistaking the sight of Emmeline and what it means. Dorcas can't help but notice that Emmeline is rather, ah, *naked* beneath her robe, which is quite obvious from how she has it tied. It doesn't seem to bother her one bit.

"Em, who's at the—" Marlene cuts herself off the moment she sees Dorcas over Emmeline's shoulder. For a split second, her lips part as her eyes light up, and just as quickly, all of that wipes away before Dorcas even gets to enjoy it. Marlene, like Emmeline, is in a silk robe that she's quite blatantly nude under, as if she just threw it on to come to the door.

"Right, well, I'm going to get dressed and head out," Emmeline announces, glancing over at Marlene with visible amusement, a smile twitching at her mouth.

Marlene cuts her a sharp look. "You don't have to—"

"I wanted to go see who turned up to train anyway, and since you're being lazy and don't want to come with me, I'll just go myself," Emmeline interrupts simply. With that, she turns around and sweeps away.

"Right. Thanks, Em," Marlene grumbles under her breath, then heaves a sigh and swivels to look at Dorcas, who is currently doing her level *best* to keep her expression as neutral as possible. "What do you want, Dorcas?"

"I wanted to speak to you," Dorcas replies stiffly.

"The feeling isn't mutual," Marlene tells her, voice sharp.

Dorcas shifts her shoulders a bit, trying her best to work the tension out of them. "Okay, let me rephrase. There's something I need to say to you. It's important."

"Yeah, I uh—" Marlene scoffs a little and reaches up to scratch at her eyebrow, making a face. "I really think it's a little late for that, Dorcas."

"Can you get over yourself for five fucking minutes?" Dorcas snaps. "I'm not here to fall at your feet and—and—"

Marlene arches an eyebrow when Dorcas falters, because she would, in fact, fall at Marlene's feet right here and now if that's what she wanted. The progression of their relationship hasn't changed much. To go from two people who fucked, to friends, to nothing—and through it all, Dorcas always wanted more. She still wants more, but that's not why she's here, and yet she would sink to her knees right now with one spoken word from Marlene. That's all it would take.

"Just five minutes," Dorcas murmurs. "Please."

Marlene studies her for a long moment in tense silence, and then her lips press into a thin line before she looks away with a sigh and steps to the side. "Fine. Come in."

Dorcas sweeps forward, though she hesitates in the doorway, stopping the second she comes closer to Marlene, so close she could reach out and touch. She can't stop herself from pausing in place and meeting Marlene's eyes, their gazes locked as they stare at each other, a charged moment steadily growing thicker with mounting tension. After each beat of Dorcas' heart, she finds it more and more difficult to breathe, like all the air in the room is being sucked right out through a damn straw.

Marlene is strangling the doorknob with her hand, and is it taking everything within her to keep her distance, too? Does she want to dissolve the space between them, too? Come together in a collision of heat and sparks they can set themselves ablaze with, too? Fuck, Dorcas hopes so.

"Right, I'll just be going now," Emmeline announces, clearing her throat and making them whip their heads towards her.

Marlene's face turns red, and she looks pissed off about it. Dorcas wants to trace the scar on her neck with her tongue and feel the heat of her skin between her teeth. Emmeline seems thoroughly entertained as she slips past them, pausing long enough to flash them both a grin before tugging the door from Marlene and shutting it behind her, laughing as she goes.

"Tea?" Marlene offers, so tense that she almost looks like she's braced for battle, or dealing with an ongoing one from within already. Her jaw is clenched as she turns and heads for the kitchen without waiting for an answer.

Dorcas follows, and she just—she literally can't resist. It's like an exposed nerve in a cracked tooth; until it's fixed, it's so hard to stop returning to the pain over and over. "So, some friend, huh?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Marlene mutters, swinging her head around to stare at her incredulously. *"Really,* Dorcas?"

"What? I'm just saying. You're the one who said it wasn't like that between you, so I was—"

"Yes, well, that was then and this is now. Your point? And, frankly, how is that any of your fucking business?"

"It's—not," Dorcas admits with a grimace, crossing her arms and leaning against the counter, lips pursed. "Should you be doing that, though? I mean, she's…a tribute, too, Marlene. What if—are you two going to—"

Marlene heaves a sigh and slams the kettle down on the stove hard enough to make Dorcas shut up. "Since you're so fucking curious, it's *not* like that between us. We're friends, who just so happened to want to fuck today. She's just the one who showed up at my door first."

"What if I came a little earlier?" Dorcas asks, glancing over at her, unable to stop herself from seeking the answer, wanting to know so badly she can barely think of anything else.

"Well, you didn't, so," Marlene mutters, averting her eyes.

"But if I had?"

"You *didn't."*

Dorcas swallows. "I wanted to. I just waited too long. I was—"

"Late," Marlene cuts in, looking at her again. "Too late. Yeah, you always are, aren't you?"

"Marlene," Dorcas says softly.

Clearing her throat, Marlene reaches for teacups. "In any case, I needed a friend, and you're certainly not that anymore, so I don't think it matters when you do or don't show up."

"Look, I get that you're upset—"

"I'm not upset."

Dorcas scoffs. "You're *clearly—"*

"Actually, no, I *am* upset." Marlene plants her hand on the counter and swivels to face her, eyes blazing. "Fuck it. I'll probably be dead by the end of the week anyway, so *yes,* I'm upset. I'm upset because I can't—no matter what I fucking do, I can't get you out of my head, alright? I can't—I don't know what you did to me, but I want you so much I can barely stand to be around you. I'm upset because you're here, so what the *fuck* do you want? Say what you've come to say, and then *go."*

"I never gave Lily a ring," Dorcas blurts out, freezing the moment the sentence tumbles from her mouth. That was not what she came here to say, but—well, it's out there now. Marlene stares at her. "You asked before what was different about how we're—how we were friends and how I was with anyone else. Lily—she is my friend, alright? She is, but it's different. It was always different."

"Lily," Marlene says quietly, rolling the name around in her mouth like she's tasting it. She looks like she wants to chew it up and spit it out. It's unbearably attractive. "Pretty name."

"She knows about you," Dorcas whispers.

Marlene straightens a little, fully just abandoning the tea entirely at this point. She hadn't even cut the stove on. "Does she? And what does she know, exactly?"

"If I'm lucky, the same sort of things Emmeline knows about me," Dorcas replies, because if Emmeline is Marlene's friend the way Lily is Dorcas', then Emmeline's looks of amusement

and delight would make total sense. Lily would be no different if she was caught in that situation.

"You're so—you just keep *confusing* me," Marlene croaks, squeezing her eyes shut. "That's not fair, Dorcas, especially not now. I'm in the arena in three days, so whatever you're trying to do, you better do it quickly."

"Listen to me," Dorcas whispers fervently, moving forward to reach out and grab Marlene by both arms. Marlene instantly goes still, inhaling sharply as Dorcas slides her fingers down to Marlene's wrists, circling them lightly. "I need you to do something for me, okay?"

Marlene searches her gaze and rasps, "What?"

"I need you to wear this, even in the arena, and *don't* take it off or lose it, not for anything," Dorcas tells her, pushing her hands down further to cradle Marlene's fingers, pressing the ring down on her thumb. It makes Marlene jolt, her throat bobbing on a harsh swallow as she glances down at it.

"Are you fucking joking?" Marlene hisses, and when she lifts her head, her eyes are blazing.

"Please. I need you to do it, okay? Trust me." Dorcas squeezes her hands, holding her gaze. "I need you to trust me."

"You haven't given me one reason to trust you, Dorcas," Marlene says stiffly, nostrils flaring.

Dorcas nods carefully. "I know. Do you trust me anyway?"

"Somehow, for some fucking reason, I really do," Marlene snaps, glaring at her. "And it pisses me off. *You* piss me off."

"As long as you'll wear it, you can be as pissed off as you need to be," Dorcas tells her bluntly.

Marlene scoffs. "Your five minutes are up."

"Are they?" Dorcas asks, holding her gaze.

"Get out," Marlene tells her sharply.

"Get fucked," Dorcas replies, just as heated, just as pissed off and desperate and—and *wanting*. Oh, she wants so much, she wants more, she wants—

Marlene makes a furious sound in the back of her throat, then darts her hand out to snag the back of Dorcas' neck and reel her into a rough, open-mouthed kiss, and it's everything. Immediately, it's the most important thing. A war could break out right on the other side of the door, and Dorcas would let it wage on to stay right here, just like this, with Marlene.

As soon as their mouths meet, all bets are off. Dorcas is shoving Marlene back against the counter and helping lift her up on it at the same time that Marlene frantically scrambles up the length of it and spreads her legs to drag Dorcas in between them. Dorcas is more than willing to be there, but she clamps down on Marlene's thighs and stops, which does not go over well with Marlene, who tugs at her restlessly.

"Just—no, relax, I'm not—I mean, this isn't just your suite, Marlene. Where's your handler? The other tribute? The servant? We can't do this here," Dorcas gasps out.

"Out, out, away. No one's here. It's just me and you," Marlene says rapidly, her chest heaving, eyes feverish. "We can do this here. We're absolutely doing this here. Come here."

Dorcas goes. Of course she does. How can she not? Without any fuss, she starts frantically plucking the rings off of one hand, each clink of them hitting the counter making Marlene groan. Marlene folds in to kiss her again, and as soon as Dorcas' hand is free, she tugs on the

tied part of Marlene's robe, letting it fall open and immediately slipping her hand up her inner thigh to make use of the access.

Marlene's mouth falls open on a soundless moan, a breathless gasp, her fingers digging into Dorcas' hip and shoulder, where she's holding onto one of each with her hands. Dorcas can *feel* the shudder that ripples through her body, and she curls out her tongue in Marlene's mouth, humming in satisfaction when Marlene responds by kissing her hard, a little messy, with teeth and tongue and unabashed desperation.

It's a fucking wreck from start to finish, a build-up of heat and anger and desire that goes spilling out all around them. They're not paying attention, so countless things go clattering to the floor in their reckless movements, not that either of them really care. It's a difficult angle, honestly, but they're too far in to stop now, so Dorcas makes it work.

Marlene's head falls back, and Dorcas uses the opportunity to immediately work her mouth down the side of her throat, worrying skin between her teeth and feeling the scar there under her tongue. Marlene clutches at her, legs opening wider, which is actually very helpful, seeing as it gives Dorcas' wrist more room for a better, steadier motion.

"Oh my fucking—" Marlene chokes off, her hand on Dorcas' shoulder flying up to clamp down on the back of her neck under her braids, nails pressing in so hard that it *burns,* but Dorcas doesn't mind. She's pretty sure Marlene doesn't even realize she's doing it, a little too caught up to even be aware. It feels good. All of this feels so fucking good. "Yes, yes, yes, yesyesyes—"

Marlene's chant of approval gets higher in pitch, and it's not very long before she's tensing all over, a mixture of Dorcas' name and truly impressive curses tumbling from her mouth. Her back arches, which is also an impressive feat, considering their position. She nearly falls right off the edge of the counter, and probably would if Dorcas didn't pin her in place, holding her there, not stopping or slowing down until Marlene is genuinely just panting and twitching against her.

Dorcas waits for her to slump backwards, breathing hard, admittedly pleased that Marlene's legs are shaking as they drop a bit, all the energy seeming to go out of her for a moment. Marlene just breathes, eyes closed, face flushed. She looks debauched and delectable spread out on the counter, her robe open by her sides. Dorcas stands there and observes.

When Marlene's eyes flutter open, Dorcas leans in to kiss her quickly, knowing she prefers to see it coming, especially when she feels particularly relaxed or vulnerable, or otherwise it will just make her tense up again—and not in the good way.

"Okay?" Dorcas checks as she draws back.

"Yeah, I'm—yeah," Marlene mumbles.

Dorcas studies her face and murmurs, "Have you *been* okay?"

"You mean about the drinking?"

"Well, just in general, really, but that too, I suppose."

Marlene clears her throat and sits up a little, moving slowly and getting situated, drawing her robe around her loosely, though she doesn't tie it. "Yeah, I—well, my mum helped me dry out. Dad tossed all the liquor in my house and threatened everyone who would sell me booze, so they—stopped. I still had a stash. Just one. I—I couldn't—I don't know why, but I couldn't bring myself to toss it out. I would just…go look at it and let it, like, mock me or something. Fight the temptation daily, because it's like I need something to fight."

"It's good that you asked for help, though," Dorcas says.

"Maybe, but I—I relapsed," Marlene replies, grimacing and averting her eyes. "I still had my stash, and the night of the Quarterly Memorial announcement, I went right to it. That's when I realized I was just saving it in case I ever needed it. I was fighting, alright, just for the wrong thing."

Dorcas sighs. "Marlene, you were doing your *best,* and that's all you can do, okay? A relapse doesn't—it doesn't make you a bad person. It doesn't mean you failed. You're *human,* and

these things happen."

"I suppose it was to be expected. I mean, I just learned I was going back in. I wish I hadn't done it, though, and drying out a second time was a bitch," Marlene mutters. "But I'm lucky. I had my parents, my aunt and uncle, and my cousin. Well, I had a lot of support, honestly. I'm grateful, because I want to go back to the arena with a clear head. I want to go as me, not as the person I tried to be for the Hallows."

"I'm proud of you," Dorcas whispers.

Marlene swallows harshly. "I'm proud of me, too."

"Good. You should be," Dorcas tells her firmly, leaning in to slip her arms around her back and drag her closer, eyes falling shut as Marlene melts into her with a quiet sigh. For a long moment, they stay just like that, and then Marlene pushes her back and reaches up to run her fingers through her hair.

"Shouldn't have done that. Fuck," Marlene croaks. "Oh, fuck *you.* Really, just—just fuck you, honestly. *Dammit."*

"Marlene—"

"Just go. Just fucking go, Dorcas."

Stepping back, Dorcas wavers in place, swallowing. "Promise me you'll wear the ring."

"I promise I'll wear your stupid ring," Marlene grumbles, scowling off to the side.

"Thank you." Dorcas hesitates, then steps forward and reaches out to cup Marlene's jaw, leaning in to brush a kiss to her cheek. Marlene's eyes flutter shut, and she releases a shaky

breath before leaning into it, resting her temple against Dorcas' forehead. Dorcas closes her eyes, too.

"You'll be the last thought I have, you know," Marlene whispers. "Before I die, it'll be you. I just know it."

Dorcas breathes in and out and fights the gripping urge to wrap Marlene up in her arms and take her away. Sneak her out. Sneak everyone out and get them to the Phoenix. She wants to, but she doesn't have the time or resources or support to manage it. They'd all be killed before they took one step out of the building.

She needs to go. She has to go, because she has one shot to do the only thing she can, at this point. There's too much to do and so little time to do it, but for Marlene, she'll make it happen. Whatever it takes, she'll get it done.

It's a strange time to realize she's fallen off into the deep end of love with no way to resurface, but after all that resistance and determination to keep her priorities straight, here she is anyway. All of it, everything, is for Marlene now.

"Don't die," Dorcas says shakily, pulling back to look at her, holding her gaze. "Whatever you do, don't take that ring off, and don't fucking die."

Marlene gives her a sad smile and murmurs, "I'll do my best."

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"Evans, get ready, we have a mission," Kingsley calls, banging on Lily's door repeatedly.

Lily's head pops up from between Ember's thighs, and she ignores her groan as she swings herself to her feet quickly, yelling, "A mission? We do?!"

"You have two minutes!" Kingsley informs her.

Ember whines. "Seriously? *Now?"*

"Sorry," Lily says distractedly as she rushes to her closet to find the clothes assigned to her specifically for missions, though she's never had a chance to wear them until now. Ember buries her face into Lily's pillow and releases a muffled scream, which makes Lily wince. "Okay, hey, I know it's shit, but I really do have to go. I'll, ah, make it up to you later."

Ember just releases more sounds of frustration, and Lily can only finish getting dressed and stop by to kiss her quickly on the way to the door, having to peel herself away when Ember does her absolute *best* to get her back in bed. Lily slips out of the door quickly, blocking the opening to protect Ember's modesty, not that Kingsley is looking.

"Follow me," Kinglsey says, then leads her away.

Lily can feel her nerves tangling up, a mixture of excitement and fear. She's been training for this for…basically a year, at this point, and apparently she's now cleared for missions. Is she ready? She *feels* ready.

The Phoenix's highest level is the most secure, seeing as it's the only way in and out, if you exclude the vents. There's a whole hanger bay dedicated to heli-carriers, either stolen or built, or both. They're rarely used, seeing as the Order is a silent organization, and that would draw too much attention. Very few people even bother to become pilots, seeing as it's basically viewed as the 'lazy job'. Of course, Sybill always says that's exactly why she chose it, usually with a grin on her face when she does say it. Despite being trained, she's never even flown anything before. Lily finds it hilarious.

Most of the activity around the higher level seems to be at the train, which is—as far as Lily knows—the usual mode of transportation for missions, seeing as it's underground and off-grid. They can get to each district and the Hallow from a network of stations below the dirt. Practically *everyone* is trained to be a conductor. Even Lily can drive the train.

"Alright, mission debrief. Gather up," Kinglsey calls out, clapping his hands together. Lily joins the forming crowd, her heart racing, paying attention. "Mission location—district six. We got a tip about a possible riot, so we're going to be a little early this time. We have targets for retrieval; Euphemia and Fleamont Potter. We will *not* leave that district until we have them both enroute to the Phoenix, am I clear?"

"What if they're dead?" someone asks.

"Then we retrieve their bodies, if it's at all possible," Kinglsey says bluntly. "As usual, there will be two teams. Team A will be moving into the district, while team B will remain at the rendezvous point. Each team has their point-lead giving the orders; that's me for team A and Bones for team B. Each team has their field medic, in case they need to carry out triage to the best of their abilities—our targets are priority, before anyone else. Each team has their gunners, the people whose main jobs are to provide defense, cover fire, and assistance in sticky situations. Everyone will have a gun, but not everyone will be free to use them at every second, and we will be up against more guns than we've got."

"Team B, we do not move out until we have Euphemia and Fleamont Potter with us, no matter who else arrives, or what state they're in," Edgar declares. "We hold position and do regular sweeps for any incoming stragglers."

"Speaking of stragglers," Kingsley adds, "the targets are our priority *first.* Team A, you can direct people to the rendezvous point, but do not waste time doing so unless you have no other choice, and do not stop to escort them. People will be hurt, in danger, and in need of help—and you *cannot* stop for them, not before the targets are acquired."

Lily feels her mouth go dry. She's a medic. How the fuck is she supposed to fight every instinct to *help people?* What if…? What about children? What if she could save—

"We will likely split up in the field, which is a common occurrence on a mission," Kingsley continues, reaching into a box to start passing out small hand-held devices with a keypad on it. "That's why you were all taught codes. You know them. *Use* them to communicate. As soon as the targets are acquired, send out the correct code, and everyone else will hear the ping from their Notif, which will give us the clearance to start helping others."

Lily grabs her Notif when it's held out to her. She sort of hates it, just because there's a *ridiculous* amount of codes to have memorized, but she finds a helpful little tab when she boots it up that lists out codes for her. *TA* for target acquired, and the code to go with it being 0310. She starts internally chanting it in her brain, but stops when Kingsley begins talking again.

"We need two pings for targets acquired, one for each. There's no way to communicate which you've gotten, unfortunately, so we'll just be on the lookout for either in the case of one ping being sent out, meaning there's still one more target to find. Only once we've gotten two pings can we turn our attention to any others," Kingsley announces. "The most important thing; if your point-lead calls for the team to fall back, or sends out a fall back code, then you fall back *immediately.* Understood?"

A low murmur of agreement sweeps through the crowd.

"Good," Kingsley declares. "As soon as I call your name and assign you to your team, collect your gun and packs, then board the train—medics, you have the packs with the orange stripes. Clark, team B. Delworth, team B. Diggory, team A. Evans, team A. Fargo, team B…"

Lily breaks from the crowd to bypass the table on the way to the train, grabbing her medic pack and gun on the way. She doesn't put on her pack as she gets on the train, finding a seat so she can go through it. Technically, she already knows what she'll be equipped with, ammo and various things for triage medical purposes, but she still feels better exploring it and getting comfortable with where everything is.

So, that's what Lily does until the train starts moving, just familiarizing herself with her supplies, unloading and reloading her gun, trying to remain calm. Kingsley and Edgar go up and down the aisle, answering questions that Lily listens to, filing away the answers. When things get quiet, Kingsley dumps himself in the seat next to her.

"Team A, huh?" Lily asks lightly.

Kingsley shoots her a dry look. "You're too good of a shot to waste at the rendezvous point." When Lily grins, Kingsley chuckles and shakes his head, then his face softens as he catches her gaze. "Nervous?"

"Excited," Lily says, because she read somewhere once that the feeling of nervousness and the sensation of excitement come from the same place in your brain, and if you can convince your mind to believe it's one instead of the other, your brain doesn't know the difference. Honestly, it's not working.

"It's not going to be clean. Missions are never clean. They get messy and go wrong all the time," Kingsley warns her. "Just remember your priorities, and you'll be fine."

"Right. Euphemia and Fleamont Potter." Lily raises her eyebrows at him. "What's that all about, King?"

"None of our business, Red. We're just the feet on the ground going in and bringing them out," Kingsley murmurs.

Lily leans in, voice lowered, and mutters, "But if you had to take a guess?"

Kingsley glances around, then quietly says, "If I was guessing, I'd say it's a major turning point for the war. They're highly known figures—or Euphemia is, at the very least—and having a connection to James, Sirius, and Regulus is no coincidence."

Lily hums and leans back, turning her gaze down to her gun, staring at where the safety is on. It's a good metaphor for what's coming, she thinks, because the safety will eventually have to come off. Just the same, the war will eventually have to be fought. She thinks this just might be the first shot fired.

Of course, there have been a lot of recent missions bringing in people rescued from all over the districts. A lot have come from five, which must have been interesting for Kingsley, who is from there originally. Still, there haven't been any specific targets for a rescue mission before, and as far as Lily knows, they've never gotten a tip *ahead* of a riot either. War is coming, and it's coming fast. Very fast.

Mercy on them all when it gets here.

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Aberforth answers the phone as soon as it rings. There's complete silence on the other end of the line, which makes him roll his eyes like he's young enough to do something like that again. Siblings will bring it out in you every time.

"Patronus?" Albus asks, and if Aberforth isn't mistaken, there's a hint of faint amusement in his voice.

"Goat," Aberforth says with a sigh, and if they were the young men they used to be, he's fairly certain that Albus would be snickering under his breath right now. "Are the ridiculous code words absolutely necessary, Albus?"

"Of course, or I would not insist on them," Albus says.

Aberforth doesn't believe that for a second. Albus used to love messing with people, and he doubts age has changed that very much. Perhaps made it more vindictive, if anything. "This is a secure line. You *know* it's me."

"I can never be sure that someone else hasn't found it, and if you don't respond with your proper answer, then it's a clear sign you're not alone or able to speak freely. It's a matter of safety and secrecy, Aberforth."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. What do you want?"

Albus pauses, then murmurs, "These teams are on the way."

"Will they arrive in time?"

"I believe so, or very close to it."

Aberforth exhales. "They sent in a new head Auror. He arrived this morning and rounded up the rest with clearance from the Hallow to, ah, handle everything from here. He… I don't know what he did, Albus, but he had cases full of what looked like medicine of some sort. All the Aurors were gathered up for it."

"Not a good sign," Albus comments.

"Don't you think I know that?" Aberforth snaps.

Albus is silent for a long moment. When he does speak again, his voice is very quiet. "Flee, Aberforth. I'm asking you to—"

"No," Aberforth cuts in harshly. "I'm not leaving. It's my *home,* and these are my people. You may be fine with abandoning—"

"Aberforth," Albus interrupts, his voice sharper than it has been thus far, since Aberforth heard it decades ago, "your home is likely at great risk of being wiped right off the map, you and your people with it. If you stay, you will *die."*

"Then so be it," Aberforth says simply.

"You will be safe here, with me," Albus rasps.

Aberforth scoffs. "Do you think I am afraid, Albus? I'm not. If I die here, then I shall die with no regrets. Can you say the same?" Silence is his only answer. To drive the knife in deeper, Aberforth continues, "Our sister is buried here, Albus."

Again, more silence.

Helplessly, Aberforth turns his gaze to glance out his window, looking over the tree at the edge of his property. The one they planted for Ariana, along with her ashes beneath the base. He's seen the boy—the youngest Black—out there often, throwing his daggers at the bark, or simply sitting on the fruitful roots weaved through the earth below.

Sometimes, Aberforth would have to fight the physical urge to run the boy off, but the memory of Ariana always stopped him. She liked having friends, visitors, especially when it was those in need of comfort. Ariana was comforting, very kind, and she didn't like to be lonely. Every time he considered getting up to make the boy leave, it was like the echo of Ariana's small hand would come down on his shoulder and stop him. It was nice to feel her near again, and he has the boy to thank for that.

Aberforth knows he and Albus don't see eye-to-eye on this. Loyalty can manifest differently for everyone. Aberforth's loyalty keeps him here; Albus' loyalty took him away. He doubts they'll ever forgive each other for that.

"Aberforth," Albus says softly. "Please."

"Goodbye, Albus," Aberforth replies, and then he hangs up.

~•~

"Alright, everyone, get ready," Kingsley calls, pushing to his feet. "Remember, the Aurors will be armed and dangerous, so shoot to kill. Priority targets are Euphemia and Fleamont Potter. Let's move."

Lily swings her pack on her shoulders and grips her gun, flicking the safety off and following Kingsley off the train and up the hatch to the surface. They come out in the middle of the woods, moving in silence outside of the sound of their gear shifting and hitting their bodies.

Team B stops at the rendezvous point, which is the midway point between the district and the underground station. Team A carries on, cutting the group traveling together in half.

Lily would be lying if she said her heart wasn't racing right now, her palms a little sweaty from where she holds onto her gun. They went over everything on the train thoroughly, passing around photos of Euphemia and Fleamont, asking questions and coming up with scenarios to watch out for. Even still, Lily is on edge. She hasn't been this far out of the Phoenix in six years now. It's different than just sneaking to the surface through the vents.

District six is built like a square, and they're going right to the center courtyard, apparently. They start out at one corner, and Lily can't help but feel uneasy by the eerie silence and stillness that exists out here on the sidelines. Kingsley did warn them, making it clear that everyone would be gathered in one place.

It's not until they get closer that they hear the screaming.

"Spread out," Kingsley orders, glancing back at them. "Flank the courtyard and push in. Go now."

And so they do.

Lily slips off to the right and follows an alley in between two homes, jogging carefully with her gun down by her side. The shouting increases in volume as she gets closer. It feels like her blood turns to ice when she hears the spray of gunfire, the harsh crack and pop of bullets flying, accompanied with more screams and the sounds of pounding feet scattering all over.

There's a break at the end of the alley, and as soon as Lily swings around the corner, she has to fling herself back. She sucks in a sharp breath and cranes her head past the brick wall, her body tensing as she watches an Auror drag a man right through the street. He's not Fleamont, but…

Lily pushes herself forward at the same time that the Auror dumps the man on the ground, pinning him with their boot. They point their gun at his head, and before the trigger can be pulled, the Auror's head snaps to the side as their body falls. Lily lowers her gun, releasing a deep breath. Her fingers are steady, despite just pulling the trigger. The man on the ground doesn't even hesitate, scrambling for the gun off the body and darting off without even stopping to look to see who saved him. Lily stands there for a long moment.

She stands there.

Just stands there.

Lily has only ever shot one person, one Auror that had been chasing her while she was running, and she hadn't shot to kill. She'd only managed to shoot them in the knee, then kept running, and then she was shot in the shoulder for it. If Kingsley and his team hadn't arrived when they did, she suspects the next shot would have been to the head.

The Auror she shot died anyway, but she didn't kill them. She's never killed anyone, until now. A person. Someone who had a life to live until she took it away.

Someone who was about to take another's life, Lily reminds herself, firming her jaw and forcing herself to keep going. She jogs past the body and doesn't look back.

The closer to the courtyard she gets, the more chaos there is to find. People running. People screaming. People fighting, and people dying. There are dead bodies on the ground, some that are Aurors, some that are not.

Lily keeps going.

On the outskirts of the courtyard, Lily can see people from her team in the midst of fighting, Kingsley among them. Aurors are rounding people up and dragging them in the center building, shoving them in and *keeping* them in. Blowing out a deep breath, Lily starts running, then runs right into a fight, because an Auror quite literally slams directly into her.

It's immediately a mess. There's a lot of shouting, and she falls back into someone else, trying to get her bearings as the Auror swings their gun up. Lily blocks it and shoves it down, jerking her knee up into their abdomen and slamming her palm upwards against their nose with *force.* The Auror immediately grunts and stumbles back, clutching their face, and by the time they straighten up, Lily is pointing the gun between their eyes and pulling the trigger. The Auror falls.

Lily turns in just enough time to watch a woman tackle the other Auror to the ground, and the Auror doesn't seem to have a gun, which is probably for the best, or the woman would be dead. As it is, she puts up a valiant fight, scratching and clawing and snarling, quite the powerhouse, honestly.

Without waiting, Lily marches over and tugs the woman back, putting a bullet in the Auror's skull.

What Lily *isn't* expecting to happen is for the woman to launch herself off the ground and go right for *Lily* next. It catches her off-guard, and she grunts as she goes sailing backwards, hitting the ground so hard that her breath punches out of her. She only gets a flash of brown skin, curly hair, and frenzied black eyes before the gun in her hands is ripped away.

"Hey!" Lily shouts, scrambling to her feet at the same time the woman does, only to come to an immediate halt when she finds herself staring down the barrel of her own gun. Oh, what the fuck? Lily grinds her teeth. "Are you mental? Give that back. I'm here to *help.* Do I look like an Auror to you?"

"Don't care," the woman says shortly. "I need this."

Lily narrows her eyes. "Do you even know how to shoot a gun?"

"Pull the little trigger-thingy, right?" is the cold response.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. I don't have *time* for this," Lily hisses, taking a step forward. "Don't point a gun at someone if you're not going to pull the fucking trigger, and you're *clearly—"*

The woman lowers the gun and proceeds to fire it right at Lily's leg, which—okay, maybe that's a little on her, actually. Taunting someone with a gun—bad idea. Noted.

"You fucking *shot me!"* Lily bursts out as she crumbles to the ground, a line of fire licking along the outside of her thigh. It's just a graze, really, no entry or exit points, but it still fucking hurts. She gapes at the woman. "You… You shot me."

"Like I said, pull the little trigger-thingy," the woman repeats, taking a step back. "The name's Mary, by the way."

Lily releases a stunned huff of laughter, gaping up at her, at Mary, even as she says, "Lily. I'm Lily."

"Thanks for the gun, Lily," Mary tells her, then turns and takes off running without looking back. She's sprinting in fucking *heels,* too. Oh, she's insane, clearly.

Lily can only gape after her in pure astonishment for a moment, absolutely *riveted* by watching her go, and then the burning ache in her thigh reminds her of the severity of her situation. She's quite literally in an active war zone, in need of patching up, and in constant danger. There's no time to waste, and so she doesn't waste it.

The adrenaline helps her rush through slapping a bandage over the graze, because now isn't the time to worry about properly cleaning it and tending to it. She just has to get to a point that she can stand up and keep going, and as soon as she has, that's exactly what she does.

Thankfully, there's no shortage of guns in the courtyard between all the Aurors, though it's different ammo, so she won't be able to reload if she needs to. Doesn't matter. She throws herself at the first Auror she comes across, one that's dragging a teenage girl by her arm, the girl screaming and calling for her mother. The moment the Auror is distracted, the girl runs away, and Lily gets a new gun.

"No! No, Fleamont! *Fleamont!"*

The shout snatches Lily's attention, and she whips around in just enough time to catch Euphemia Potter running full tilt across the courtyard towards a group of Aurors that are dragging a man—Fleamont Potter—to the blocked off part of the courtyard, a whole line of

Aurors keeping people in one spot. Lily shoves forward through the crowd, not close enough, but if she can get the right vantage point…

In the middle of everything, there's a fucking whipping post that halts Lily right in her tracks, memories flashing through her mind that make her stomach churn. Remus…

For a second, that's all she can see. Remus locked to the post, his back bleeding and torn to shreds, head slumped. Every time she found him like that, his breathing was so shallow. Past all the screaming and gunfire that rings in her ears, Lily swears that she can hear it again. How he breathed.

Just for a second.

And then Lily is rushing forward to grip the post and fling herself up on the structure that supports it, climbing higher until she can see right over the crowd. She raises her gun, breathes in and out, the whole world narrowing down to the four Aurors pulling Fleamont along.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Quickly, one right after the other, the Aurors drop. She got two in the head, one in the thigh, and the last in the shoulder. It's the best she could do from this angle, but it's enough. It allows Euphemia to reach her husband, and she scrambles forward to drag one Auror back, slamming them ruthlessly down on the ground. She yanks so hard at their head that, even from here, Lily can see the awkward angle of their neck, indicating that Euphemia just broke it.

Kingsley is there, suddenly, shooting the last Auror in the head, no different than he did when it was Lily's life on the line, finishing what she started. He's there with the targets, and Lily starts climbing down, because she has no doubts that Kingsley will get them to safety.

Either way, they may need assistance, so Lily drops down and ignores the throbbing in her leg as she starts sprinting yet again. Her lungs are burning. Her heart is racing. Everything is so loud and bloody and *quick.* It's all happening so fast.

Kingsley and Amos are with Euphemia and Fleamont when she reaches them, and it's immediately clear that they're not *quite* managing to acquire the targets. Kingsley is doing his absolute best to coax Euphemia and Fleamont out of the district and to safety, but it's not working out so well for him.

"We can't just *leave them!"* Euphemia bursts out, shoving Kingsley's hand off her arm. "My back would be torn to shreds if these people didn't fight for me before the whip could ever be raised. They didn't even get to strap me to the post, and if you think I'm abandoning my neighbors, my *people—"*

"Listen to me, Mrs. Potter," Kingsley says soothingly.

"Yeah, really noble, but you're just keeping these people from better help than you and Mr. Potter alone could give them," Lily cuts in as she quite literally comes skittering up the steps, gun held secure by her hip. "As soon as you and your husband are at a secure location, the rest of the team are cleared to provide aid to everyone else. Sticking around for these people is actually *worse* for them, so fucking move already."

Kingsley sighs and gives her a look which quite clearly states *really, there was no way you could have put that more delicately?* This is ironic, seeing as they're surrounded by people dying at all sides. There's no fucking time to be delicate.

"Euphemia," Fleamont croaks, "you're bleeding."

In seconds, Lily has her pack off and she's kneeling on the step beside Euphemia, studying the gunshot wound on her abdomen. She grips Euphemia's hip and twists her, lips pressing into a thin line as she looks and feels for an exit wound, but doesn't find one. Lily rifles through her pack and does what she can for now, barely even listening as Euphemia stutters out reassurances to Fleamont, while Kingsley and Amos steadily try to coax them into agreeing to leave.

Lily focuses on her task and doesn't tune back in until she stands up and declares, "There's no exit wound, which could mean there's internal bleeding. Either way, wherever that bullet went, it's going to need to come out, so we need to get you medical attention sooner rather than later, Mrs. Potter. Now, Mr. Potter, if you don't want to see your wife die, you'll pick her up and drag her out of here if you have to."

That seems to be the right button to push, because Fleamont manages to do what no one else could—convince Euphemia to leave. Kingsley, Amos, and Lily travel swiftly together through the courtyard, ushering Euphemia and Fleamont along. It's hard to keep Euphemia from getting involved in fights; she keeps trying to stop and help people, and even Fleamont falls prey to the urge from time-to-time.

Lily can see a lot of people running ahead, and she knows there have to be some that have managed to escape already, but she's practically *itching* to get back here and help round up more people to save them. Focusing only on two targets is restricting, and Lily would much prefer—

"Stop it! Stop resisting! You're only causing trouble!"

"Let me *go!* Mum's over there. They took Mum!"

There's a lot of strange things that have taken place already, but Lily is admittedly baffled by the sight of two men—who are not Aurors, one older than the other—grappling with each other. The oldest is trying to snatch a gun from the youngest, and that's when Lily realizes that the young man is the one who was nearly shot earlier. He'd come back for his mother.

"You can never do as you're told!" the older man bellows, pitching himself forward with a scowl. "If you don't cause any trouble, if you just listen and follow the law, your mother will be *fine.* You're just making it worse. You make *everything—"*

The gun goes off, and the man releases a choked noise, stumbling back a step. The younger of the two holds the gun steady, jaw clenched as he continues to point it at the other man, not looking regretful in the slightest. The oldest man raises his fingers to his chest, where he's bleeding profusely.

"I told you to let me go, Dad," and oh, oh, that's his *son.* That man just shot his own father. "Mum is over there, and I'm getting her to safety. Not even you are going to stand in my way."

Lily exhales in surprise, but she turns to keep going just as the man crumbles to the ground, definitely mortally wounded. He was just shot in the chest point-blank. Unfortunately, the commotion managed to catch Euphemia's attention, and despite possibly being mortally wounded as well, she whips around to stare at Fleamont with wide eyes.

"Flea, it's Crouch," Euphemia hisses. "Our boy's boy's boy. Regulus' boy. We can't just—"

Fleamont's face twists, and then he groans, "Oh, *alright."*

"Wait, wait, don't—" Amos curses as they pivot in perfect sync and start right after the man —Crouch. Not the father bleeding out, but rather the son currently being body-blocked by three Aurors. Amos reloads his gun with a huff. "I have never met people so resistant to being saved in my *life."*

"Stay on the targets," Kingsley orders, and so they do.

Crouch visibly doesn't know his way around a gun, not with efficiency, but he's not scared to throw a punch, that much is obvious. He is, however, quite outnumbered at the moment, meaning Fleamont and Euphemia reach him just as he's being shoved to his knees, a gun pressed to his head. Fleamont slams into the Auror before they can pull the trigger, and Euphemia throws herself forward as well to shove another back, one arm wrapped around her middle and still fighting despite that.

Crouch goes for the third, gripping them by their sleeve and tossing them harshly to the ground. One doesn't need to know their way around a gun in close proximity; all you have to do, really, is point and shoot. Crouch does.

Euphemia wrestles the gun away from the Auror she attacked, also pointing and shooting without a second of hesitation. Lily and Amos barrel in to help Fleamont, who—despite being a very large man—is struggling to get the gun. Amos handles it for him, ruthlessly kicking the Auror in the face while Lily fists Fleamont by the back of his shirt and bodily drags him out of the line of fire, while Kinglsey takes aim and shoots.

Fleamont and Lily stumble all over each other, and then they collide to the ground in a messy tangle of limbs when a wash of screams split the air so loudly that it's like an explosion. It's a cacophony of pure, unadulterated agony, enough to make Lily's ears ring and her heart pound with fear. For a second, she's just clinging to Fleamont, her breath punching out of her as the screams get louder, and then—all at once—they both rush to push themselves up again.

The center of the courtyard is the source, and Lily can hear people trying to run away, still blocked by Aurors, begging and pleading to be set free. Then, one right after the other, those pleas give way to screams, too, adding to the rest.

The line of Aurors break, and someone comes stumbling out, but they're shrieking when they collapse to the ground, writhing in place and clawing at their own skin. From between the Aurors, a bright green fog begins to pour out.

"No! No, Mum! *Mum!"* Crouch bellows, throwing himself forward against Euphemia and Amos, who are desperately pushing him back. He fights against them, and Fleamont rips away from Lily to go help drag him back.

"Fall back! *Everyone fall back now!"* Kingsley shouts, his voice raised until it's almost booming, and he already has his Notif in hand, sending out the codes.

Lily feels her Notif vibrate in her pocket, giving a loud *ping.*

"Kingsley," Lily chokes out, "what the fuck is *that?* What's—"

"Fall back!" Kingsley roars. "Don't wait, just *go!"*

So, Lily does.

The screams get louder, closer, and Lily doesn't think. She just runs. She's not alone. Kingsley is shoving Euphemia in front of him to get her moving, while Amos and Fleamont bodily lift Crouch and take off running with him.

All around her, there's chaos. Shouts to run. Everyone trying to get away, knowing a threat when they see one. Lily sees Auror after Auror come pouring out of the fog, not screaming, completely unharmed. Those that aren't Aurors hit the ground in clear agony. The shrieks are spreading all over the courtyard now, more people falling to the ground and screaming like they're enduring the worst pain they've ever felt in their lives.

Lily keeps running.

There's a spray of gunfire towards the west side of the district, in the direction of the rendezvous point, and they all burst out to see a line of Aurors blocking the woods, guns held aloft. They start shooting the moment people arrive.

Lily scrambles to duck down behind a bin, her chest heaving as she squeezes her eyes shut and takes a second to make sense of what's happening. It comes to her slowly, too slowly, that the green fog is being used to kill people quickly, and those that try to run are met with bullets, leaving everyone trapped. They need a breach, or everyone is going to die.

Everyone is now running in the opposite direction, away from the gunfire, leaving the line of Aurors still in place, blocking the escape route. There are Aurors coming up behind as well. Lily has no fucking idea how they're going to—

"Get down!"

The warning comes from up ahead, and Lily's mouth drops open at the sight of a fucking grenade sailing right through the air, thrown by a man at the front bearing a startling resemblesance to Dumbledore.

Lily ducks down and feels the harsh impact of the explosion when the grenade goes off, the ground shaking and her ears ringing in the aftermath. It kicks up dirt and sends bodies flying, but—well, that's the breach they need.

"Go, go, go!" The older man who really could be mistaken for Dumbledore starts ushering people into the woods, and everyone makes use of the breach immediately.

Most of the Aurors in the line were blown up, but a few scattered, and fewer still remain. But they do, and they start shooting as people rush by, sending people to the ground.

Kingsley doesn't even have to give the order. Amos and Lily immediately start raising their guns to provide cover fire, trying to keep the opening. Some people are making it through and disappearing into the trees.

Lily presses forward, gaining more ground, and one Auror drops. Then another. A third. It takes Lily a second to realize that it's not all her and Amos. It takes her even longer to locate the rest. Mary, Crouch, and Euphemia have guns as well, and though they don't have the best aim, that isn't stopping them.

They're going to make it.

Lily can see that they are. Mary has a boy tucked up against her side, blocking him as she shoots. Crouch is a fucking mess, clearly, barely able to stand up straight, bloody and bruised and still bellowing about his mother. Euphemia is covering the rush of the crowd while Fleamont is directing them with the other man that looks like Dumbledore.

Then Kingsley is there, shouting for everyone to run, and Lily has never heard him sound so frantic. One daring glance over her shoulder tells her why. The green fog is catching up to them, spilling from the alleys behind them. It's a thick cloud that hangs low to the ground, not spreading higher, but traveling in one clump. Aurors dart out of it, unharmed.

From behind, a small family of three—one being a frightfully young child—comes rushing towards them, and Euphemia gasps out, "Andromeda!"

"Go, go, Ted, go," Andromeda is chanting, trying to push him away. She's hobbling, covered in blood, and he's helping her along with his arm around her waist, while his other arm is carrying the child, who is hiding their face in his neck.

"Help us, please," Ted chokes out, and it's like Fleamont fucking teleports, rushing to their sides. Ted immediately hands off the child, eyes wild and desperate. "Take her and go, make sure she gets out, I can't go fast enough *and* help Andy."

"I *said* for you to leave me," Andromeda hisses.

"Never, darling," Ted replies, nodding gratefully as Fleamont holds the sobbing child and immediately darts off.

"Pull back, we have to go *now!"* Kingsley orders, and that's the final call, but Lily still rushes over to help support Andromeda from the other side, helping her as much as she can.

Fleamont has already gone. Mary quite literally just snatches the boy up off his feet and fucking *sprints,* Crouch right behind her with Amos dragging him along. Kingsley and Lily bring up the rear with Euphemia, along with Ted and a very injured Andromeda.

The man who looks like Dumbledore doesn't move.

"Aberforth, are you *mad?!"* Euphemia shouts, pausing long enough to face him. "Come *on!"*

The man—Aberforth—just says, "No."

"Aberforth, we don't have time for this!" Ted snaps, actually trusting Andromeda with Lily and Kingsley as he breaks off to rush over to Aberforth.

"No! No, I'm not leaving!" Aberforth snarls, lashing out and shoving Ted away, his blue eyes flashing. "It's better to die here than—"

Aberforth doesn't finish, the rest of his words drowned out by the sharp crack of a gunshot, and Ted's head jerks to the side before his body falls to the ground.

Andromeda screams.

She screams in such a way that Lily thinks, for just a moment, that the green fog got her, too. A chill goes up Lily's spine, her breath punching out of her as she stares at Ted, wide-eyed, not moving. She doesn't rush forward to provide medical assistance. There's nothing to assist.

He was shot in the head. His death was instant.

Aberforth has gone pale, and for just a second, Lily wonders if he still thinks it's better to die here.

Andromeda flings herself on the ground beside Ted, sobbing and lashing out when Kingsley tries to pull her back. She clutches at him, chanting his name over and over, and Lily swallows past the lump in her throat to rush forward to help Kingsley, though it does little good. Andromeda isn't budging.

"Mary, *keep going!"* The shout from Euphemia is followed quickly by her arrival, accompanied by Crouch and Amos, the three of them surging forward to help as well. Euphemia crashes to her knees beside Andromeda and starts speaking rapidly. "I know, okay? I'm sorry, I know, but *we have to move."*

"Ted," Andromeda chokes out, curling down over his body, her shoulders heaving as she clings to him.

"Think about little Dora. She's your daughter, and she needs you, she still needs you, so you have to get up. I'm so sorry, but you have to get up now," Euphemia continues in a frantic rush, grabbing Andromeda by her shoulders and *tugging*. "Come on, we have to go. Don't do this. Andromeda—"

Between Euphemia and the rest, they manage to drag Andromeda off and away, having to keep a firm hold of her while she screams and sobs and fights each of them. They have no choice, no other options, and they have to go. So, they do. They all do, except for Ted, whose body remains vacant and still on the ground until it's swallowed by a green fog, disappearing from sight and left behind.

They run. They make it to the rendezvous point. Everyone who got out in time reaches the safety of the train. By the time they make it there, Lily has run out of bullets, and she doesn't know how many people she's killed. But she's alive, and so are the targets, and so is everyone else who made it.

Most didn't.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you here for the warnings and such:

people you know that die in this chapter:
barty's parents
ted (andromeda's husband)

if you want to skip the war portion, don't read the second lily pov. ill put a summary of what happens below for those who want to know, but don't want all the heavy, descriptive details:

lily is selected for a mission to rescue effie and monty from district six. the team going in gets there before effie can be punished for assaulting aurors at the reaping. the district is in a state of chaos, and lily kills the auror who was about to kill barty. it was her first kill. she bumps into mary, who is fighting an auror. after lily helps her, mary proceeds to attack her and take her gun. they get into a mild argument, in which lily informs mary to

not point a gun at someone if she isn't going to shoot. mary proceeds to shoot her in the leg. it's a graze on her thigh, so lily is fine. mary runs away, and lily returns to the mission at hand.

she hears effie screaming for monty and assists in saving monty from aurors by climbing on the whipping post and shooting them. when she reaches them, along with kingsley and amos diggory, effie has been shot (she has a POV, she'll be fine), but this is what helps coax her into actually leaving the district. on the way, they come across barty, who is arguing with his father and fighting over a gun. barty's mother has been taken to a part of the courtyard where large groups of people are being held by aurors. barty shoots his father and intends to go save his mother. effie and monty run to go help him.

the horcrux hornet venom has been made into a "green fog" that does no differently than it would from the horcrux hornet itself. when inhaled, people die swiftly and in a lot of pain. the aurors release it on the district, which is when barty's mother dies and everyone has to run. the exit out of the district is blocked by aurors, but aberforth throws a grenade to make a breach. andromeda, ted, and nymphadora arrive—andy very injured. fleamont takes dora and flees. everyone else tries to run as well, except for aberforth. ted goes back for him and is shot in the head.

everyone else makes it out—effie, monty (with nymphadora) barty, mary (and her little brother), andromeda, kingsley, amos, lily, and aberforth. it's noted that most of the district didn't make it out at the end.

for everyone else...

there's something i wanted to address here that has less to do with the chapter and more to do with the fic overall:

❗ PSA PLEASE READ THIS, IF NOTHING ELSE ❗

ive been seeing a lot of people being upset by the fic for being angsty/heavy, or not liking certain things about how the story is going, or how they ASSUME the story is going to go. and like, i get it, things aren't great at the moment in the fic, but i am imploring you to not be rude/angry at me about something that you haven't even read yet. you don't know what's coming in the future or how it will be resolved, and to automatically assume that i won't do it justice by your standards in my story is unfair and actually pretty disappointing. like, to be completely honest with you, id really just rather you not read the fic at all if you're not happy with what you're reading, or just wait until you know the resolution is here before you pick it back up again.

i warned all the way back in chapter one that this fic would be very heavy and very angsty, and you chose to read it. you can choose to stop as well, if you don't like it, and that's OKAY. that's valid. the warnings are there for a reason, please don't hesitate to use them and just nope out of the fic. genuinely, just don't read if you're not enjoying it, because seeing people be rude/harsh about it is just...exhausting, honestly.

im just asking for everyone to be patient and trust the process, or quit reading altogether, and not be rude no matter your decision. the warnings are there. i do everything i can to

make this fic as safe as possible for everyone who wants to read it, and i support anyone who can't/doesn't want to. the same respect i try to give to all of you is all im asking for in return. you're here because you choose to be here. if you're not happy here, choose to leave.

Getting Ready

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-references to past murder
-very brief threat of gun violence (no one is shot)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus stares over the edge of the balcony from his chair, feeling the gentle breeze run fluttering fingers through his hair. The Hallow is busy today. There's a crowd of people standing down below with posters, protesting.

It's strange. Regulus has never given much thought to how the Hallows views the Victors. Tributes? Yes, he knows they just view them as new characters to meet, to fall in love with, to inevitably watch die. But the *Victors?* Well, Regulus is only just realizing it, but the Hallows do not fuck around when it comes to their beloved Victors. Their favorites. Their celebrities.

Riddle has possibly made a mistake, and maybe Regulus is relishing in that a bit too much. The reintroduction parade yesterday went just as the first one he participated in did, except this time he was standing next to his brother when he was shown off to the Hallows.

But the Hallows know him already, or they believe they do, and they *definitely* believe they know Sirius. There wasn't an outcry of excitement and delight for what's to come. Instead, the crowd was fucking *furious* . People were sobbing; people were yelling in protest; people were looking at Victors that were supposed to be safe and *raging* that they no longer were.

It struck Regulus then that there were people out there in that crowd that love him. Not traditionally, not truly, because they don't actually know him, not really. But, in some unfathomable way, they have love for him. He means something to some of them. Some idolize him. Some care about his well-being.

It's completely detached from reality, yes, but they do. James would find beauty in that. Regulus, of course, struggles to. It annoys him, honestly. Nonetheless, he finds it fucking *hilarious* that Riddle isn't getting the reception he was likely hoping he would. There are some people excited, sure, but a lot of them are *not* happy about their favorites being tossed back into the arena. Yeah, Regulus isn't too happy about it either.

So, the protesters down below are a genuine source of entertainment for him at the moment. These people dragged themselves out of their homes to stand on the street and shout about how unfair this is. They literally organized a protest to address what's wrong. They're a bit late to that realization—it would have been nice if they had seen it years ago—but he supposes they've got the spirit.

"That's not going to end well, you do realize?" Remus mutters, but he doesn't sound like he actually cares.

Regulus hums. "Yes, I know."

"You seem pleased."

"It'll piss Riddle off, probably, so I am."

Remus snorts. "Alright, that's fair."

They lapse into silence, just listening to the indistinguishable shouts from down below. They're too high up to be seen, so they're the hidden spectators enjoying the show for once. Sometimes, turning tables can be fun.

Remus has been out here on the balcony with him ever since they bumped into each other in the kitchen in the early corners of this morning. Sirius, Pandora, and James hadn't woken up yet, but Regulus hadn't even slept the night before. Remus turned up, just like he's supposed to, but it didn't take very much to get him to abandon making breakfast and come outside with him instead.

They haven't talked about it.

Any of it.

Regulus knows that Remus is aware Sirius is going back into the arena with him. He knows this because he heard Remus crying all the way from his room. Just another person who is hurt because of Regulus. Sirius would be safe right now, if he hadn't—but he did. He did, and now Regulus knows what Remus sounds like when he weeps. It's heart-rending.

"You seem better, you know," Remus announces abruptly. Regulus swivels his head to arch an eyebrow at him, but Remus doesn't look ashamed. "I mean it. Despite…all of this, you've come a long way. I thought—well, I got to see so little of you over this past year, so I figured you'd like to know that there's visible improvement."

"I, um. I mean, I've gotten better in some ways. In other ways, it's still much of the same," Regulus murmurs. He clears his throat and looks away. "Less nightmares, even if they haven't fully gone away. Less paranoia. Less aversion to contact. Still can't fucking shower, but…it's gotten a easier to navigate."

Remus' lips curl up. "That's good, Regulus."

"It's redundant," Regulus corrects bluntly. "I got better—I was still getting better, and just in time for—"

Regulus cuts himself off, and they fall silent, because there it is. Neither of them speak for a long moment, the weight of reality bearing down on them. When Regulus turns his head, Remus is staring listlessly down at his fingers, his mouth twisted like he's trying so hard to fight some great emotion.

"He volunteered for me again," Regulus says, and Remus' head snaps up. Something passes between them, that knowledge sitting between them. Regulus can see it there, in Remus' eyes,

the realization that, if not for Regulus, Sirius would be safe. It's painful to see. "We promised each other we wouldn't, and he still did. Isn't that the worst thing you've ever heard?"

Remus' face scrunches a little, making the scar there crinkle up in certain places. "You're angry with him."

"Angry doesn't even begin to cover it," Regulus admits.

"Regulus," Remus chokes out, shaking his head.

"You can hate me for it. Do what you need to do, and I've—got your back on that," Regulus continues, fighting the swell of emotion making his chest feel tight. "But don't forget to hate him for it, too. I begged him not to, Remus. He did this."

Remus squeezes his eyes shut. "I don't hate you, Regulus. I don't hate him either."

I wonder what that's like, Regulus thinks.

They fall silent again, the ease between them gone; he misses it already, but there's nothing he can do to get it back, because they're all trapped in this, stuck with this fucked up reality they can't break free from. This is all there is, for all of them.

Down below, Aurors arrive to break up the protest, and the show comes to an end.

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Sirius knows Remus is avoiding him. Bit of a prick move to go hide with Sirius' brother to do it, but Sirius isn't stupid. He knows Remus wants space right now. He can't blame him.

The thing is, Sirius doesn't know what to do about this. Of course he wants to respect Remus' need for space, but he also wants to spend as much time with him that he can while he still has the chance. At this point, they're all just wasting time.

And 'all' does include James, yes, who is throwing his version of a tantrum at the moment. Sirius isn't agitated by it; he's the last person who gets to judge someone for throwing tantrums, with Regulus being a close second. Maybe that's why they're allowing James to do it without interference, without speaking up, without stepping in to try and make it better. The truth is, Sirius thinks they both—he and Regulus—have this inner fear that they're only capable of making it worse.

Honestly, Sirius is just scared overall. He can't remember a time that James was this angry. Like, about anything. It doesn't help that Regulus is just as furious—or no, he's something else, something worse, somehow. Not angry. Just done. When it comes to Sirius, he's just *done.*

So, in reality, Sirius wants to go find Remus and hold onto him, bury his face in Remus' shoulder and waste the whole day away just hiding there. They've already wasted half the day already. Technically, Sirius and Regulus could be making use of the training room today, but neither of them have bothered. Sirius doubts most of the tributes will bother, honestly, at least on the first day. Tomorrow, before the evaluations? Yeah, probably. Sirius will pop in long enough to secure allies for him and Regulus, then come right back to Remus, because he's more than confident in his abilities to fight, thank you.

However, Remus needs…space right now, so Sirius is left with what he's really dreading, possibly for the first time in his life. Well, the first time that he can recall, at least.

"James?" Sirius calls weakly, knocking on his door. "Can I come in?"

"Yes, fine," is James' quiet response.

Sirius shuffles in warily, his lips tipping down when he finds James sitting on his bed against the wall, head resting back against it, eyes shut. James doesn't open his eyes, not even when Sirius sinks down on the edge of the bed.

"Can we talk?" Sirius asks.

"Go for it," James mumbles, his voice bland and lifeless.

"Are you, ah, alright?"

"Does it look like I'm alright, Sirius?"

Grimacing, Sirius reaches up to rub his palm over his mouth, then heaves a sigh and lets his shoulders slump. "Okay, just get it over with. Go on, let it out. Yell your head off."

"I don't want to yell," James says.

"Think you might need to, though," Sirius tells him, trying to prepare himself for it. His stomach is in knots, and James doesn't bother responding at all. "If—if you just get it out, and you can get past this, then—"

"There is no getting past this," James interrupts, and he doesn't sound angry. He sounds exhausted.

"Please don't say that, James," Sirius croaks.

James' eyes flutter open, and he just looks at Sirius, just studies him slowly, diligently. Softly, he says, "You're planning to get him out."

Sirius takes a deep breath, then nods. "Of course I am."

James makes a harsh, choking noise. "What do I do with that? What am I supposed to do with that, with any of this? It's all fucked. How could he do this to me?"

"There was no right answer to this," Sirius rasps. "There was no way any of us could—could get through this without it all going to shit. The truth is, we were all fucked either way."

"You broke your promise, too," James whispers.

Sirius swallows harshly. "Yeah, I—I did. James, I didn't mean to. I heard his name, and I just—I couldn't just—"

"He meant to," James says, his voice cracking. "That's the difference. He lied to me, *on purpose,* Sirius. He was always planning this, and—and I can't—it's all such a mess, because my mum is safe because of him, but he still—it's not that I want her in danger, or you, it's just that he *meant to—"*

"James," Sirius cuts in gently.

"This hurts so fucking much," James chokes out. "It hurts, and he knew it would, and he *meant to* hurt me."

"It was always going to hurt anyway, no matter how it went, and I'm sorry that it is. I'm sorry that I have to leave you. I'm so sorry, James." Sirius blinks past stinging eyes. "I can go in and make sure he gets out, and you two will—you'll work it out. You'll live and be happy, and I'll—I'll still be there, because just like you're always with me, I'm always with you."

"But you *won't* be," James says, his chin wobbling.

"Forgive me anyway," Sirius begs, because he needs it, even if it's a lie. He doesn't want to die without James' forgiveness.

James seems to choke on a sob, gasping on it, shuddering and shaking through it as he hunches in himself and breaks down all at once. And still, through his tears, for Sirius, he

finds it within himself to say, "I do. I do forgive you, Sirius."

"James," Sirius says, his voice soft and hoarse, and he slides further up the bed cautiously, unsure if—

The moment he comes within range, James unfurls and reaches out to snatch him close, clinging to him as he heaves out deep, gasping sobs. James' fingers twist in the back of his shirt, holding him so tight that it's hard to breathe, but Sirius grasps him back and lets his lungs protest.

"I can't, I can't do this, Sirius, I can't, please," James whimpers, the words tumbling out of his mouth. He doesn't stop crying for a long time, but when he does, he sags into Sirius' arms and repeats, "I can't do it."

"You don't have a choice," Sirius murmurs, peeling back and grasping James by his shoulders, holding his gaze.

"Yeah, because of *him,"* James says, and there's strength in his voice again, finally, fueled by anger. "You think me and him will be happy? You're *wrong.* I fucking hate him. I hate your stupid fucking brother and his stupid fucking lies and his—"

"Alright, lay off," Sirius cuts in, a little sharp, but James just continues to glare. "Look, you need to—"

"I don't want to talk about him," James interrupts coldly. "We won't work it out. Me and him, we won't be happy, Sirius. He's—I just can't. He's the one who—he—"

"Regulus. His name is Regulus. You can say it."

James purses his lips and looks away, stubborn.

"Listen to me," Sirius insists, "if you don't—"

"I *won't* talk about him," James corrects, his eyes flashing, jaw firming. "I'm not doing it, Sirius. It's done. Me and him—we are *done.* I hate him, and that's it."

Sirius heaves a sigh and pulls his hands back. "James—"

"I said *that's it!"* James explodes, and Sirius instantly shuts up. Alright, so James isn't ready to talk about Regulus. Got it. Maybe it's best if Sirius revisits this later.

"Okay, sure, that's it," Sirius mutters, not believing it for a second. "You, ah, hate him. Not my business, but his well-being *is* my business as his brother, so… Well, whatever else, I know I can ask this of you and be certain that you'll do it. I'm going to make sure he makes it home, so just… Take care of Regulus, James, please."

The last time Sirius asked James that, he was sixteen and heading for the arena. James didn't get to answer then before Sirius was dragged away, and he doesn't answer now, but Sirius doesn't need a response to know he'll try his best.

He always does.

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"Ah, are you all avoiding me, then?" Pandora asks, poking her head out the door to the balcony.

Remus points at himself and corrects, "Sirius, actually."

"And James," Regulus mutters, raising a hand.

"Fair enough," Pandora muses as she sweeps out to plop in the chair across the table. "Suppose I'll come avoid them, too."

"What reasons do you have to avoid them?" Remus asks, lips twitching as he arches an eyebrow at her.

"Well, Sirius is all mopey, which makes me sad," Pandora explains, shooting Remus a pointed look. Right after, she shoots Regulus a pointed look, too. "And James is all…angry, which makes me concerned. I need a break, honestly, so neither of you are allowed to be anything other than calm and neutral for the next five minutes, please and thank you."

Remus chuckles and echoes her with, "Fair enough."

For the next five minutes, they literally do not speak or do anything other than gaze out over the balcony. Pandora starts humming quietly, and it's soothing. Remus closes his eyes and tips his head back, breathing in and out, in and out.

"Pandora," Regulus says, eventually.

"Hm?"

"I—I wanted to ask… How's your father?"

Remus opens his eyes and glances over at Pandora, who takes a deep breath, then mumbles, "He's—yeah, he's still mostly the same. Still sick. Not getting better, and—and the healers say there's not much time left, maybe a month or two."

"I'm sorry," Regulus murmurs. "I wanted to… Well, I had hoped that I could—be there for you when…" He exhales and looks away. "The only reason I brought it up is because, ah, I have a bit of advice. Just, um, have someone with you when you're sorting through his things. It helps."

"Okay. Thank you," Pandora whispers. She pauses, then frowns at him. "Wait, I thought you said you didn't know anything about the process?"

Regulus blinks at her. "Oh, well I still don't, really, but my parents died on the last night of the victory tour. House fire. We found out when we got back. It was—well, we're certain it was Riddle's doing, but either way—"

Remus is up and out of his chair in a heartbeat, jerking the door open and practically *sprinting* through Regulus' room and down the hall. He bursts into Sirius' room and finds it empty, then swivels to go to James' next. Doesn't even knock, too frantic to even consider it, and Sirius is there with James, both of their heads snapping up as he rushes in.

Sirius springs up off the bed, swiveling towards him with wide eyes, seeming to hold his breath.

"Your parents died," Remus chokes out. "Your parents died, and I didn't know, and I wasn't there. I couldn't be there."

"Remus," Sirius says, his face softening.

"I'm *sorry,"* Remus tells him, heartfelt and desperate, full of so much regret and sorrow and grief for so many things, because it's hitting him all at once that he misses so much with Sirius, too much, and here he is like a damn fool, missing more.

"Okay, hey, it's—that's okay, Remus. It's not your fault. Come on, don't do that, yeah?" Sirius moves closer, holding out his hand with visible trepidation. "Let's just—we'll go and talk about it, alright? Can we go? Will you go with me?"

Remus would honestly follow Sirius anywhere, into anything. He reaches out and takes Sirius' hand. Sirius shares a look with James, who nods in silence, offering Remus a weak, trembling smile. It's clear that he's been crying.

A few moments later, Sirius is leading Remus right into his room and straight to the bed. He kicks off his shoes and drops Remus' hand, climbing into bed and getting situated before peering up at him with blatant hope in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Remus whispers again as he slides into bed next to Sirius, curled up on his side, facing him. Just looking at each other. Not touching. "I should have been there."

"Remus, you quite literally *couldn't,"* Sirius murmurs. "And I don't blame you for that. And…actually, in a way, you *were* there for me, really. You know, I would go out every night and talk to the moon like I was talking to you, and I was. Every time, I was just talking to you, and talking to you helped. Even with my parents dying, it helped."

"It's not the same," Remus croaks.

"But it was something," Sirius says softly. "To me, that was everything. Please don't diminish the way you managed to take care of me, even when you couldn't be there."

Remus blinks hard and fast, swallowing thickly. "Okay, I won't do that, then. But I've—I failed to be here for you today, Sirius, and I'm sorry for that."

"You're human, Remus, and you needed space," Sirius tells him. "There's nothing wrong with that. It's okay."

"I didn't," Remus rasps. "I'm just scared."

Sirius' eyes go gentle, unbearably so, and he reaches out tentatively to cup Remus' jaw. The moment he leans in, Remus meets him halfway, sinking into their first kiss since their last at the party on the victory tour. Sirius' mouth is just as warm, just as inviting, as Remus remembers it.

"I love you more than the tides love the moon," Sirius breathes out, shifting closer, his fingers trembling as they drift down the side of Remus' neck. "I'm as temperamental as the ocean, and just the same, I'm at your mercy. Give me a ship, and I will wreck it at your command."

"Sirius," Remus whispers, struggling not to fall into Sirius' tender croon and the gentle give of his body.

"Can't steal the moon, can't keep the stars, but can't we be grateful to love them anyway? Despite everything, I'm grateful to love you, Remus," Sirius whispers back. "Are you?"

"Yes, sweetheart, of course," Remus confesses, his voice catching, a little choked up, because it's true now more than ever. He has a galaxy of stars in his arms, and he can't keep it.

Remus ducks in and kisses Sirius just so he won't cry.

Sirius makes a soft noise into his mouth, hand sliding around to cradle the back of Remus' neck, holding him there. It's a slow kiss, deep and unhurried, reverent and thorough. Remus takes the time to relearn Sirius' lips, not that he ever forgot them, but he does fall into the relief of meeting them again after so long. He can't help it. Sirius is worse than a fucking drug, and Remus never wants to quit him.

"Oh, oh fuck, I missed you. I've missed this," Sirius mumbles as he scoots even closer, inhaling sharply as he slides his hand up into Remus' hair. "Shit, I've missed you so much."

"Not a day has gone by where I haven't thought about you, Sirius," Remus replies. "I closed my eyes every night and dreamt of you. It's always you, in any world, in any lifetime."

Sirius, after all this time, still blushes as beautifully as ever. Warmth pulses in Remus' chest when he sees it, that flush that rises to his cheeks when he's flustered, or pleased, or all of that and more. He's precious. Just precious.

"Any lifetime?" Sirius bites his lip. "What about the next?"

"That one, too," Remus murmurs. "Maybe it'll be kinder to us than this one has been."

"Maybe, but for now, this one isn't so bad," Sirius tells him, his breath hitching as he finally slots into place, where he's been trying to get this whole time, pressed right up against Remus. He looks so pleased with himself. "No, not so bad at all, not at the moment. Because here you are. Here we are, for now."

"It's something," Remus says, lips curling up.

"It sure is," Sirius agrees and sounds wholly, wholeheartedly content and adoring about every bit of something they get to have. It's never nothing, and that's always been enough, hasn't it? It still is. It has to be.

Remus finds himself being kissed again, with more fervor this time, more intensity and purpose. Sirius' fingers tighten in his hair, and Remus adjusts. The tone shift steals his focus until he's gripping his way down Sirius' thigh, finally hooking his fingers under his knee and tugging Sirius' leg over his hip.

Sirius moans into the kiss, loud and proud about it, and this sends a helpless thrill through Remus immediately. He wrenches Sirius closer, suddenly bereft for all the day he's wasted so far not doing exactly this. A fog fills his head, and he breaks the kiss to mouth his way down to Sirius' throat.

"Oh, yes, that's—mm, Remus, wait a second," Sirius wheezes, and so Remus does, pulling back to blink at him.

"Alright?" Remus checks.

"Brilliant," Sirius says weakly, and then he coughs a little, his face turning a *vibrant* red. "I just—well, I was wondering if we could… Um."

Remus smiles at him fondly. "You want to try something? You can just ask, Sirius, it's fine. I'll probably say yes anyway. I can't imagine there's anything I wouldn't do, as long as I'm doing it with you."

That's the right thing to say. Remus can tell immediately that he just hit the bullseye, because Sirius relaxes, and his eyes light the fuck up like he's just discovered a new function on a toy he never even knew existed. Oh, it does *this,* too? Yes, yes, it does. Remus struggles to stifle a laugh at the pure delight on Sirius' face, his palpable excitement and glee.

"I want to try—the other way," Sirius tells him. "Let me give it a go at realigning *your* spine this time, if that's alright."

Remus snorts. "Do you actually think of it like that? As that phrase, I mean. *Spine realignment."*

"James is a terrible influence, but no one knows that because they think he's all sweet and innocent. He is *not.* He's a naughty little heathen who—" Sirius gasps, and then he props up on his elbow. "Remus, they did that. The spine realignment; it happened. Well, probably. I don't know the details, thankfully, but you get my point."

"James and Regulus?" Remus asks, eyebrows shooting up.

Sirius nods like a bobblehead. "They spent, like, two days straight just…" He wrinkles his nose. "Well, you know."

"So, what the fuck *happened?"* Remus blurts out. "Regulus didn't say much, but I gather they're…fighting? I mean, I know this is all shit, but James seems really, ah…"

"Regulus volunteered for James," Sirius murmurs, and Remus sucks in a sharp breath in between his teeth. "Yeah, but it gets worse. He, um, sort of promised James he wouldn't—I mean, we *all* promised we wouldn't volunteer for each other—but Regulus was lying about it. I didn't—I wasn't lying when I promised Regulus not to volunteer for him, or I didn't think I was, but then I heard his name, and I—I couldn't just—and now Regulus fucking hates me,

like genuinely. He says I'm dead to him. And James says he hates Regulus, except of course he doesn't, and it's—it's all just such a mess, Remus."

Remus blinks. A lot. All he can say is, "Oh, that's so fucked up. All of this is *so fucked up."*

"I *know,"* Sirius agrees with a groan, dropping his head forward to bang it against Remus' shoulder, and then he pops right back up. "I don't want to think about it anymore. You never said if—if we could…do that. If you don't want to, that's okay. We can do something else. Or if you don't—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in, before he can ramble and talk himself out of it entirely, "it's fine. We can do that."

"Yeah?" Sirius breathes out, his face flushing again, but as a sign of eagerness. His eyes dance with anticipation.

"Yeah," Remus confirms, lips curling up, his own anticipation causing a spread of warmth under his skin.

Like he can feel it, as if he's drawn in by it, Sirius surges forward to kiss him, and Remus is so grateful that he did.

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Sirius works with Pandora to round everyone up closer to the evening. James and Remus stand in a corner and murmur back and forth while Sirius and Pandora squabble about how to get the screens set up for what they need. Regulus sits in silence, staring down at his fingers without a word.

In the end, Sirius and Remus sit together, and Regulus sits alone, while James, who won't even fucking *breathe* in his direction, takes a seat next to Pandora. Regulus also won't even acknowledge Sirius' presence in any capacity.

"Right," Pandora says with a deep breath. "So, the schedule is the same as usual, despite being the Quarterly Memorial. The training room will be open today and tomorrow, and in the evening tomorrow, they'll do evaluations. It's very—relaxed this year, less of a required attendance, so you can go or not go as you like. The next day are the interviews, and then—"

She doesn't finish, but they all know.

"I doubt most people will be going to the training room, and I'm just—not," Sirius declares bluntly. He clears his throat and looks at Remus. "I'll pop in tomorrow just to get allies for me and Reggie, but otherwise I'm not wasting time in there."

"Is it a waste, though?" Remus asks wearily. "I mean, no offense, Sirius, but it has been… eleven years since you've, um, had to…you know, fight. If—if you needed to brush up—"

Sirius can't stop himself from laughing. The sound of it doesn't really feel appropriate for the current atmosphere, but he can't help it. Remus blinks at him, startled, and James coughs like he's struggling not to laugh, too. Pandora tucks her lips in, visibly amused. Regulus doesn't react at all.

"Trust me, I'll be fine," Sirius assures him, wholeheartedly confident about this.

Remus still looks unconvinced, which is sort of cute, honestly. Like he can't even imagine Sirius being a threat. "Being cocky isn't the same as being *competent,* you know."

"No? You don't believe me?" Sirius challenges, raising his eyebrows slowly and tilting his head. Remus' gaze flicks over his face, lingering on Sirius' mouth where a slow grin spreads, and then he narrows his eyes when he looks back up, slowly shaking his head. Sirius hums and hauls himself up to his feet, reaching out to put his foot against the coffee table and slowly push it back to make room. When he turns back around, he claps his hands. "Alright, come on."

"What?" Remus blinks again. "Where am I going? What are we doing?"

Sirius snorts and reaches down to grab Remus' hand, tugging him to his feet. "Since you doubt me, I'll prove it to you. Strong as you are, surely you can take me, right?"

"That's not what I meant," Remus says weakly, his hands hanging limp by his sides. "I just—I was only saying not to neglect the opportunity to—"

"No, no, I wouldn't want to be too cocky, Remus," Sirius interrupts, waving his hands and stepping back. He bites down on a smile when Remus heaves a sigh, still grumbling that he *didn't mean it like that,* but Sirius isn't insulted anyway. "I'm about to show you that you have nothing to worry about. Now, take a step forward. Just one."

"This is—maybe it's just me, but it feels very…" Remus coughs and gives him a *look.* Sirius waggles his eyebrows at him, and he actually flushes a little. Oh, he's into this. He's *so* into this right now. Sirius has never felt such glee in his *life.*

"Come here," Sirius insists, crooking a finger at him.

Remus huffs out a weak laugh, shaking his head, but he does indeed take a step forward, and his hands come up almost automatically, like his first instinct is always to reach for Sirius the moment he comes within range. This time, he doesn't make it that far. Sirius darts his hand out to grab his wrist, tugging sharply and kicking out with his foot to hook it around Remus' knee, sweeping his leg out from underneath him and sending him straight to the floor. It happens in about five seconds, and then Remus is landing flat on his back with a thud and a punched-out *oof.*

Sirius clicks his tongue and rolls his head to the side, peering down at Remus with a quiet hum. Remus blinks up at him, wheezing a little bit. He looks good like that. Well, he always looks good, but Sirius is not immune to the sight of a dazed Remus Lupin, gazing at him without hiding his awe. He saw it earlier when they were—

"You barely even *moved,"* Remus blurts out. "What the fuck?"

"You think I spent the last eleven years doing nothing, Remus? Maybe it's the trauma, but you don't really just *stop* being prepared for anything after the arena, especially when you're a mentor," Sirius tells him, amused. He holds his hand out, smiling gently. "Let me help you up. Are you alright?"

"Oh, I've never been better," Remus replies, reaching up to grasp Sirius' hand and let himself be hauled up, eyes bright as they rake up and down Sirius' body. "Competent. Right, got it. You've certainly made your point."

"Want to know something sexy?"

"Absolutely I do."

Sirius grins at him. "I can do that swing thing where I, like, climb your body while you're standing and toss you to the ground with my thighs wrapped around your head."

"I don't believe you. I need proof immediately," Remus says, and Sirius bursts out laughing, shuffling forward to slip his arms around Remus, muffling his laughter in his shoulder.

Remus chuckles and presses a kiss to his temple, squeezing his hips before ushering them back to their seats. Sirius feels better, just knowing that Remus is—well, he's not okay, last night was proof of that, but he's not letting that come in between them. It's a huge relief, honestly, because Sirius was so scared that Remus would pull away permanently.

They never have enough time, and Sirius doesn't want to waste one second that they do have. He wants to spend as much time together as he can get away with just being…happy, or as happy as they can be with all of this going on.

"Alright," Sirius announces. *"Today,* we're brushing up on the other Victors and their games, which means we're watching highlights and taking notes. It'll be, like, a group-bonding activity for all of us. Get cozy, turn the lights down low, kick back and relax a little as we—"

"Sirius," James says shortly, and Sirius promptly shuts up.

"I thought it was funny," Remus whispers in his ear, most likely just indulging him, but it makes Sirius press a smile into his shoulder nonetheless. Remus slips an arm around him, one hand coming up to lazily play with his hair, and this—it's exactly *this* that Sirius wants. Just this. Them.

Their something.

~•~

Regulus is pretty sure he's got the layout of the land as far as the other tributes go. There's Sirius, of course, whose games Regulus knows backwards and forwards; it's practically engraved into his brain, even eleven years later.

In district one, there's Bellatrix and Narcissa, which is a whole mess just on its own, and that's not including how fucking *ruthless* they both were in their games.

Bellatrix approached her games like—well, like a mad woman. She was a death eater—of course she was—and she had no shame in slaughtering anyone she came across. The death eaters made it to the end in a group of five, and Bellatrix was the last one standing after they turned on each other.

Narcissa was *not* a death eater, but she seemed to have made allies with the death eaters and practically every other tribute that was willing to fight. She portrayed herself as delicate, in need of protection, and she barely had to lift a finger until it came time to shoot someone in the back. And she did exactly that, over and over again. She even did it to win. Literally, at the end of the games, she shot a man in the back with an arrow before he could even realize that the previous cannon meant there were only two tributes remaining.

From two, there's Yaxley and Rabastan Lestrange, both death eaters in their games. Yaxley won by riding the coattails of his betters and getting lucky in the end. Rabastan won by being a favorite among the sponsors and getting a lot of support.

District three is Alecto and Thorfinn—also both death eaters in their games. Both strong, both ruthless, both *smart.* It's the blatant intelligence that really worries Regulus, because most death eaters—from what he's seen—win because of brute strength or just a group effort until the very end, as well as favoritism from the sponsors. But Regulus can tell that Alecto and Thorfinn *are* two to watch out for, because they're the sinister sort completely unafraid to play mind games, too.

Four is Majesty, who wasn't a death eater, but they were a little thief. Secretive and light on their feet, Majesty won the games by literally sneaking around, planting bombs and mines, then running away. They never actually fought anyone, moving through shadows and staying out of sight. Another smart one. Asher, in contrast, poisoned a water supply and killed everyone off that way; her games lasted two days, and she came out entirely unscathed.

Alice Fortescue and Augusta Longbottom from five, and Regulus can tell that this is difficult for Sirius the moment the highlight reels start playing. Alice won their games a year before James and Regulus, and they did so more traditionally, just by fighting when they had to. They weren't a death eater, and they had to kill a couple of death eaters they came across, but other than that, they mostly stayed to themselves until the very end where there was a brutal fight that only they got up and walked away from.

Augusta is an older woman, and in her time, she was deadly. Out of everyone, other than Sirius, she has the highest kill count, which rounds out at nine people she killed in her arena. She's sixty-three years old now, but that doesn't automatically mean she's weaker or less capable. After all, Effie is fifty-four, and she's *dangerous.*

Seven has Victors who won their games in similar ways. Lester and Henri both stayed mostly hidden and ran from danger, all the way up until the end. Henri got lucky when it was just him and another tribute, the last dying of dehydration before the final fight could even reach them. Lester—he didn't get lucky and had to fight at the end, but he had a crossbow, and didn't miss when he shot it. He makes Regulus think of Mathias.

Both from eight—Alowyn and Warwick—won their games through environmental means, though they both got into various fights along the way. It's just that the elements handled the competition for them, for the most part.

Emmeline from nine, which does make Regulus' stomach drop out from under him, because he actually does like her, and her highlight reels make it clear she's a threat. She's fucking *unshakable.* She never once breaks down or falters, not even when killing people. She's also a bit of a loose cannon from what Regulus sees; random things would just set her off, and then someone would be dead moments later. The blood never seemed to bother her, from his viewpoint.

"No, that's just how she coped," Sirius murmurs, when James, who also notices, speaks up to ask. "She compartmentalized *a lot* in her games, or so she's told me. It hit her after, though."

Dixon was Emmeline's mentor before she took over for him, and he was a death eater as well. He's older now, but still someone to be concerned about, just because of how strong he was and likely still is, if he kept practicing.

Mavis and Velvet Oswald are married, and they were dating when they went into the games, two years apart. Velvet was Mavis' mentor, and the Hallow ate up their love story, which is no surprise. Sponsors got them to the end, just so they could make it home to each other. And now they're going back in, together. It puts a lump in Regulus' throat just thinking about it, because it's genuinely that fucked up.

Marlene… Well, Regulus is startled by watching her highlights, because he's met her, and she's a little rough around the edges at times. In her games, though, she was just—scared. Quiet. Timid, even. She ran from fights and didn't take opportunities to kill when they passed her by. It wasn't until she was cold, thirsty, and starving that her survival switch seemed to flip, and watching it is like seeing the birth of the woman she is now. After that switch flipped, she was ruthless, and wholly unexpected. Even *knowing* she won, her progression through the video is shocking, but maybe it shouldn't be. After all, he knows just how the arena affects someone.

Eli, her mentor, was a glowing young man when he went into his games. Bright and charming. Beloved by sponsors. He's older now, and according to Sirius, he's a drunk. Pandora says he was quite literally wasted at the reaping, and Regulus can't help but feel a deep sadness for that man, who changed after his games. It reminds him vividly of his Uncle Alphard.

The last two from twelve—Coen and Camilla—are very different. Coen won his games just by surviving the elements, while the other tributes failed to, but he's clearly smart when it

comes to anything environmental. Camilla, on the other hand, was ridiculously smart by joining the death eaters and then murdering them all in their sleep on the very first night. She outlasted all the rest and killed the last on day six.

"So, what do we know?" Pandora asks, once the screen is off.

"Bellatrix and Narcissa are going to be an issue," Sirius announces immediately.

Pandora grimaces. "Right. Is there any chance that family loyalty will come into play here, or…?"

Sirius snorts. "For each other, yeah, but not us." He gestures between himself and Regulus. "They're probably going to be working together, and I don't doubt Bella will want to team up with the death eaters, so Cissa will probably go along with her. Chances are, I'll be a target again, just because I have the highest kill count from my games, and also I'm so adored by the Hallow. They'll want to get me out of the way early, and Regulus as well, probably."

"The Hallows love them, too, though," Pandora points out.

"Yeah, but the other death eaters will want to use that to their advantage. The Hallows love *all* the members from the Black family. We're their favorites. The most entertaining," Sirius explains, wrinkling his nose. "It's because we're all fucking mental. Makes for a good show. They love the drama, no doubt, and there's no family more dramatic than ours."

"They should be careful with that," Pandora mutters, her face dropping into a scowl. "Insanity isn't a contained event. It can reach them, too. I hope it does."

"Too right," Sirius agrees, nodding righteously. "Yaxley, Rowle, and Carrow will be death eaters, I'm sure, but they were never really favorites. Lestrange was, though, and he'll also be a death eater, that I'm certain of."

"That's six already," James mumbles, lips tipping down.

"Maybe seven, if Dixon joins up again," Sirius says, "and I don't see why he wouldn't. Being a death eater in an arena full of people this dangerous? Well, it's smart. It's a clear line right to the end, if it's done right, because that's access to the best fighters beside them *and* sponsors who will support them."

"Coen and Camilla *hate* each other," Remus announces, and he coughs when everyone stares at him. "They're, um…from my district, so I—I know this. Trust me, they're going right for each other as soon as the games start."

James' eyebrows fly up. "What happened?"

"Camilla killed Coen's boyfriend in her games, and they've been feuding ever since. I mean, *bad* feuding," Remus tells them. "Like, there were times that people had to tear them apart before they killed each other. I can guarantee you that the urge hasn't passed in the last six years."

"Right. Um, let's see…" Sirius hesitates, then blows out a deep breath. "Augusta's weakness is Frank, and so is Alice's, I think. Marlene—"

"Dorcas," James says quietly. He closes his eyes when everyone looks at him. "Dorcas, for sure. They have—a thing. From what I know, it's pretty complicated, but the way Marlene talked about her… Yeah, Dorcas is a weakness for her."

Pandora makes a small sound, glancing over at Sirius, who looks like he's about to throw up. "Okay, no, let's not—we're not doing this. Are they—I mean, will they even be a threat?"

"Well, they're not just going to lay down and die if we ask them nicely enough," Regulus snaps.

"No, I just meant—" Pandora huffs, crossing her arms. "Obviously they'll be an issue, but won't they be allies, at least in the beginning? Some of them?"

"I think so, yes," Sirius croaks. "To start with, I'm sure we'll all be allies, just the same as the death eaters. It'll be me, Reggie, Marlene, Emmeline, Augusta, and Alice. Mavis and Velvet will be together. Dixon and Eli are wild cards. Coen and Camilla will be fighting each other, apparently, but they'll be wild cards outside of that. Majesty, Asher, Lester, Henri, Alowyn, and Warwick will be wild cards, too, but I suspect they'll all try to get through alone. The rest will be death eaters."

"What about the mentors?" James asks.

Pandora blows out a deep breath. "Well, Lucius for Bellatrix and Narcissa, obviously. He's good with sponsors, and it'll help that Narcissa is his wife. He'll use that angle, possibly even neglect Bellatrix to do it."

"Yaxley was the last mentor for two, but he's back in, so who is it this year?" Sirius muses.

"Rodolphus Lestrange," Pandora announces, and she nods when everyone stares at her in surprise. "Yeah, he's Rabastan's older brother, so Yaxley will likely be neglected, too."

Regulus can't stop himself from grimacing, unable to halt his brain in drawing the similarities into the previous year, when *his* older brother was his mentor. Sirius worked himself to the bone for him, and James, so if Rodolphus cares about his little brother even *half* as much as Sirius did… Well.

Regulus shuts that thought down immediately. Cuts it at the quick and shoves it somewhere he can keep it under lock and key. Sirius doesn't care about him anymore, not the way Regulus thought he did, not the way Regulus needed him to.

"Dolohov for three?" Sirius continues, none the wiser.

"Mhm," Pandora confirms. "He's not the best with sponsors, honestly, but Alecto was more favored over Thorfinn, if I remember correctly, so if he's smart, that's who he'll focus on."

"What about four?" James asks.

Pandora sighs. "Donica."

"Ah." Sirius sighs, too. "She's…a mess, honestly. Usually high the whole way through the games."

"Frank," James says, and that's all he says. Regulus doesn't mean to grind his teeth, but it happens anyway. James doesn't notice, or care, because he's still acting like Regulus doesn't exist.

Sirius clears his throat. "Yeah, Frank. He's—he'll be one to watch, James. He's a damn good mentor with people he's not close with, but for his mum and Alice? I suspect he'll be working harder than he ever has. He'll also probably be a fucking mess, because not only are they in the arena, but so are the rest of his friends. Just…check on him if you get the chance, okay? Lean on him. Let him lean on you."

"Right," James says softly. "Okay."

"You're new," Pandora tells him gently. "They'll—well, that will be an advantage. No one's ever had access to you as a mentor before, so you'll catch their interest. You'll also…"

James presses his lips into a thin line. "What, Pandora?"

"It'll be a balancing act," Pandora whispers. "It's your best friend and your—and as far as they know, your…lover. You will need to lean into that, James."

"By lean into that, you mean…"

"I mean, if Sirius needs something in the arena, then expressing how much he means to you as your best friend, as well as how much he means to the Hallows, will help you get donations to use for him. And—and for Regulus, if he needs something, then expressing how much you…love him—"

"Right, got it," James cuts in sharply, the muscle in his jaw twitching. "Faking a love story. Nothing new there. Hey, I even have practice."

As soon as the words leave James' mouth, Regulus stands up and leaves without a word, heading right to his room. He shuts the door gently, locks it, and goes to start a bath. At least there, when he cries, he can lie to himself about why.

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Horace's least favorite state of the Phoenix is after a mission has taken place, because it's always a bit chaotic when those who left have finally returned. A lot of people running, a lot of people rushing around to pitch in and help, a lot of people coming in fresh with no knowledge of what's going on.

He doesn't like the reminder that he was once clueless, too. It feels like a stain of shame he can never quite wash clean. It's true that ignorance is bliss, and Horace has spent most of his life blissful, but that's no more.

Coming to the Phoenix was the equivalent to being beaten over the head with a harsh, hideous reality he never once was aware of. A reality where people are suffering. A reality where war is boiling beneath the surface, rising higher every day. A reality where there are true problems in this world—his part of the world, specifically—and he helped perpetuate them.

A reality where he's had a hand in murdering people.

Children.

It never seemed that way before, which feels ridiculous and stupid in retrospect. His way of life in the Hallow was—well, it was normal. He was surrounded by people who felt just as he did, an echo chamber of praise and agreement, no one ever stepping outside of the context they grew up with to look at what was happening with clear eyes.

He didn't know. He truly did not know. A part of him still wishes he didn't, because sometimes he doesn't know how to handle knowing what he does now.

Being in the Phoenix has opened his eyes to all the things he couldn't see before. The things Dorcas talked about, and more. A lot of people here are from districts, and they're not shy about telling him what they suffered, things he has never once had to deal with. For a long time, facing head on what they've dealt with made him uncomfortable, made him want to turn away and ignore it, and it took time before he could set aside his own guilt and shame and discomfort to actually learn the problems, as well as realize he wanted to help fix them.

Minerva helped with that. Horace is ashamed to admit that he didn't recognize her the day she held her gun to his head before he boarded the train that took him here. He knew of Minerva, of course, though he'd never spoken to her, and since she wasn't someone he could form a useful connection with, he didn't care to take note of her at all. She always made her moves quietly, not one to be flashy or boastful, rarely relying on networking to get her where she wanted to be. Even in the Hallow, they were living in two different worlds.

That makes sense now, knowing that she's in the Order.

In any case, Minerva had a few meetings with him about the head gamemaker position, getting advice from him for what to expect. He was admittedly frightened of her to start with, seeing as she did hold a gun to his head, but she also taught him a lot about what it is to be a Hallow on the other side of things. If not for her, he doubts he would have ever come forward to offer help to Albus.

But he did. He took that step on his own, going right to Albus and telling him everything he knew about Tom, about the Hallow, about the government officials and how the games worked. It was startling to realize that Albus was the man who assassinated Gellert, because he *remembers* that. He and the rest of the Hallow were told that the Victor who killed Gellert was captured and executed for the crime. Apparently not.

The thing is, Horace wants to help—he does—but he doesn't want to *fight.* He doesn't want to risk his life. Maybe that's shameful and despicable after all that he's done and not done in equal measure, but it's true. He's happy to be a consultant, answering questions and giving vital information, selling out the secrets of his home with an eagerness that grows by the day. He just feels—inadequate in a way he never did in the Hallow, like he could be doing more, like he *should* be.

He thinks, if he finds the chance, he *will* do more.

And then, of course, the chance finds him.

The Phoenix is bustling with activity at the moment, and all Horace knows is that someone very important was ushered into surgery, while someone else also important was escorted directly to Albus' office. There's not a clear count on how many arrived, but Horace would bet over twenty, which is the most he's ever seen come in at one time.

Either way, he decides it's best to stay firmly out of the way, which leads him right to his room, where he slips in, shuts the door, and turns around to find Dorcas Meadowes sitting on the edge of his bed, gun in hand.

Horace freezes instantly.

"Ms. Meadowes," Horace blurts out, incapable of removing the squeaky quality to his voice. He can't help it. Dorcas frightens him more than Tom Riddle ever managed to. It's different when someone will kill you *just because* than when someone *wants* to kill you. She does. He sees it every time he looks into her eyes.

"Hey, gamemaker," Dorcas greets coldly, clicking the safety off her gun, "I think it's time we had a little talk."

"Ah, now is a really bad time," Horace tries, then just gives in and starts to dive for the door.

Dorcas is on her feet with her gun pointed to his head before he makes it, hissing, "Don't even *think* about it." Horace wisely stops and swallows thickly. Dorcas hums. "Good. Now, I have a few questions, and you're going to answer all of them."

"Questions?" Horace rasps.

"Yes, *questions,"* Dorcas confirms sharply. "Questions only a head gamemaker can answer, starting with where the arena is and how someone would go about stealing those inside it."

Horace blinks. "You… What?"

"The tributes," Dorcas snaps. "I need to get them out. Some of them. All of them. I don't care. Just—more than one."

"Ms. Meadowes, that's impossible," Horace says slowly.

Dorcas' eyes flash. "Nothing is impossible."

"I—well, yes, but it's—it's quite difficult," Horace stutters out, and Dorcas narrows her eyes. "There's no way you could pull off all that it will take to manage it."

"Oh, I'll find a way," Dorcas informs him, and the glint in her eyes makes him believe her. "Start talking, Mr. Slughorn."

Horace takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "You don't have to point the gun at me. I'll tell you all that I know. If this is something you plan to do, though I doubt you can, I'd like to at least contribute by my own choice."

"Is that so?" Dorcas murmurs, studying him. There's a long pause, and then she lowers her gun. "Go on. I'm listening."

"Right." Horace clears his throat, standing straighter from the surge of self-pride that shoots through him for actually being *useful* for once. "So, first thing you need to know, the arena is surrounded by very advanced protection…"

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"How is she?" Lily asks as Poppy steps back and lets her slide off the bed, pulling her pants back up with a little hop and grimace, her leg now doctored and cleared to go.

"Recovering. She did well in surgery," Poppy tells her. "If she made it here even an hour later, she would have been in critical condition, but she's going to live."

Lily nods and rolls her shoulders. "That's good. The others… There were a few on the train I had to take care of. Were there any losses, other than…?"

"No, no other losses," Poppy murmurs. "You did good. We have a couple of broken bones, more than a few bullet wounds, but otherwise we got incredibly lucky."

"Right," Lily says quietly, her heart clenching when she thinks about all those people that never made it out of the district. All those that died, Ted among them. Everyone that did make it got lucky; Euphemia made it through surgery, Andromeda reunited with her daughter, and there *were* survivors. Funny how luck works, though. You can be lucky enough to live, yet be saddled with so much loss that it doesn't feel like a blessing; it feels like a curse. She forces herself not to think about Remus. "Thanks. I should clear out, let someone else who needs the bed more have it."

"Lily," Poppy cuts in, reaching out to grab her arm, holding her gaze. "It was your first mission. Those are always the hardest. How are you holding up?"

"Oh, it was just a graze, Poppy. I've had worse than being shot by a very attractive woman, trust me," Lily tells her, amused, though it's not like Poppy wouldn't know. Poppy was the one who got the bullet out when she was shot in the shoulder.

Poppy's lips twitch faintly. "Yes, there are worse things, I can't argue that, but that…isn't what I meant. How are you doing *here?"* She lifts her hand and gently taps Lily's temple. "If you need to talk to someone, I will—"

"I'm fine," Lily cuts in, stepping back and clearing her throat, giving her a tight smile. "Yeah, I'm fine, Poppy. Really."

"It's okay to not be fine, Lily. You know that, don't you? I wasn't after my first mission," Poppy assures her.

Lily hums. "Sorry, can't relate. Anyway, I have to go."

Poppy heaves a sigh, but Lily quickly takes her leave, getting as far away from that conversation as possible. She'd really rather not think about it, honestly. All she wants to do now is slip into her room, grab her cigarettes, and find her way to the surface so she can chainsmoke her problems away.

Not that she has problems. She's doing just fine.

Lily has to swallow a groan when she enters her room and catches sight of a form on her bed out of the corner of her eye, thinking at first that it's Ember, still here and waiting for Lily to finish what she started. As much as Lily would love to make the earlier interruption up to her, she is dead on her feet and really just wants a smoke. Or five.

"Listen, I'm really tired, so—" Lily shuts up the moment she fully turns and sees that it's not Ember. "Oh. Dorcas! Wait, Dorcas? Aren't you supposed to be—"

"Yeah," Dorcas interrupts dryly, "I'm supposed to be doing my job, I know, but I have more than one occupation, as you know, and now I've gone and added a third to the list."

Lily blinks. "Oh? What's that?"

"Stylist, rebel, and now a thief," Dorcas says.

"Oh, well, good for you," Lily replies supportively. "What have you stolen, then? Bring anything to me? You know I love when you bring me gifts."

"Lily, I love you," Dorcas announces without any warning whatsoever, and Lily gives a violent twitch, freezing in place as her eyes bulge and the urge to run for her fucking life grips her *immediately.* Dorcas snorts. "Oh, for fuck's sake, calm down, would you? You didn't even let me *finish.* I was *going* to say, I love you, I really do, but we have to stop having sex, because I'm quite in love with Marlene McKinnon."

"Oh, shit," Lily wheezes, reaching up to press her hand over her racing heart. "Fuck, Dorcas, don't *do* that. You can't just *say* shit like that to me! Are you mental? I nearly had a fucking heart attack."

"I wish I could have fixed you," Dorcas muses, lips curling up sadly, and there's an echoed sadness in her gaze. "You have so many issues, you know that?"

"I'm fine," Lily rattles off, clearing her throat, and she ignores the faint pulse in her chest that feels like…regret. There's a thought in the back of her mind taking shape no matter how much she fights it that's sure she could have loved Dorcas. Really loved her. Properly. She forces the thought down and exhales slowly. "So, Marlene, huh? Love?"

Dorcas' face softens. "Yeah."

"That's—oh, that's… She's a tribute," Lily whispers, and the pulse in her chest this time is much louder. "Oh, Dorcas…"

"Yeah," Dorcas repeats, standing up straighter. "So, about me being a thief…"

Lily stares at her. "Did you—have you stolen *Marlene?"*

"No," Dorcas assures her, then, "not yet anyway."

"Not yet," Lily repeats.

Dorcas smiles. "Exactly. I'm going to need a little help. So, Lily, how do you feel about a little abduction? All in the name of love, of course. Oh, and justice. That, too."

Lily stares at her again in silence for a beat, then heaves a sigh and says, "Can I smoke on the way?"

Dorcas starts laughing, and Lily grins at her sheepishly, feeling a rush of fondness for Dorcas as she tugs Lily over to the bed and lays out everything she knows, as well as her plan.

As it turns out, Lily will have *plenty* of time to smoke, so really, she's on board with no questions asked. She tells herself it's about the justice part of it.

But, in reality, love motivates her the most.

Chapter End Notes

(just a quick note to address my note last chapter. thank you all for the kind words and support. i didn't particularly mean for anyone to feel the need defend/reassure me, that was just me addressing something i really needed to, but thank you all the same. im not the best with compliments/praise, so i generally get overwhelmed by it and don't know how to respond. not that i don't appreciate it, because i do, and i can't thank all of you enough, im just an awkward, anxious dude with a heavy dose of imposter syndrome, probably. but, again, i really do appreciate all the love and support, and that note wasn't to make anyone feel bad about the way they comment or anything; literally most of everyone has been kind and honestly a lot of comments are so funny, i love them. i do

read them all, even if i can't respond to them, so i just. i guess i wanted to say thank you, so thank you <3)

okay! starting from the top!

the hallows are protesting!!! bet no one saw that coming. remember when we were all shitting on the hallows for being vapid, soulless beings. aw, they DO care <3 they're a little misguided, considering they didn't care BEFORE it was their favorites in the line of fire, but...growth, maybe??? hm. to be seen...

remus and regulus just chilling and watching the protest with relish bc it probably pisses riddle off. i love how salty they are together 😭 just a couple of friends who love to get together and bitch about things and swap gossip. love that for them.

but also, regulus telling remus he'll have his back on hating him ☹☹☹ noooo, stop that. and that horrible, human moment where remus looked at regulus and realized that he's the reason sirius is going back in... the fact that they were hiding together!!! just. sorry, remus and regulus as friends mean a lot to me. we will see a bit more of them before the arena, i promise.

then on the flip side, we've got james and sirius, who are not handling things well. james is having a rough go of it, still, which is fair. lmaoooo sirius being like: okay you don't wanna talk about it, got it, noted, we'll put a pin in it 😭 HELP HE WAS TRYING SO HARD. it will indeed be revisted later. sirius has plenty to say, and say it he will.

and then pandora my beloved <3 she genuinely just wanted five minutes to chill, and she's so valid for that. regulus still trying to be a good friend to her 😭

remus and sirius... OH HOW THEY MAKE ME ACHE. i love them dearly. they'll be like a breath of fresh air in all this other mess, BUT rest assured, they will actually have a Talk about sirius going back in and how they feel about it etc. just give it some time.

NOT THE SPINE REALIGNMENT. i swear im never letting that go 😭 sirius being excited about trying new intimate things!!! and remus literally just being like: i will genuinely never say no to you STOP I LOVE THEM

sirius being a badass 😩 11 years of doing nothing MY ASS. he's dangerous, im warning all of you now, this is NOT a joke. remus liked it, though. he was into it. sirius really put him flat on his back, and remus was like: oh, hi, hello, Do That Again 😭 HE'S SO REAL

the backstory on all the tributes... hm. inch resting. im not going to do a deep dive into all of them, because like, you WILL be seeing more of them and also see them in the arena, so...

james being like "faking a love story, nothing new there, hey i even have practice" was FOUL. he's being so mean 😭 stop it james stop you're being mean!!! it's like he's being mean to ME. but also, he is valid for being angry, and he's human, and these things will be resolved at some point, I PROMISE. should note: he can and will get Meaner.

ah, yes, another slughorn pov. a necessary one, believe it or not. I TOLD YOU HIM LIVING WAS IMPORTANT TO THE PLOT!!! without him, dorcas would have no information she needs to make a plan. i promise i did not spare him lightly. also we got to see her scare the hell out of him again <3

lily, my beloved! im sorry but she is just SO funny to me. "sorry, can't relate, anyway bye" LIKE??? HELLO??? IM BEGGING LILY JUST ONE CHANCE. she's a mess, but a hot mess, and we love her for it. ALSO HER FREAKING OUT WHEN DORCAS SAID I LOVE YOU IM WHEEZING 😭 she's so relatable.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-james refusing to say regulus' name bc he's being THAT stubborn (this is so funny to me pls)
-sirius asking james to take care of regulus 😭
-pandora hiding with remus and regulus
-sirius cracking jokes and remus finding them funny
-lily just wanting a damn smoke 😭

Bad Decisions

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-brief depiction of violence (you'll probably like it, bc it's james being sexy)
-references to past violence
-references to past death/possible future deaths
-very brief depiction of alcoholism/alcohol abuse (not marlene)
-sexual content (nothing really explicit, but you know what's happening)
-references to sirius being seen as a sex symbol to the hallows, and also just an object
full-stop

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James has to go to this stupid mentor function where he's meant to do social networking with sponsors and various gamemakers while other mentors do the same all around him.

Sirius has done it many times, and he's given James a very thorough rundown of how it'll go, as well as a strangely meticulous list of every sponsor by name. He knows things about these sponsors that honestly surprises James—their parents' names, or children, or spouses; their favorite drinks; what they want out of life, and how to make them feel very good about themselves. James knew Sirius was good with people, good with finding what makes them tick and how to use that to his advantage, but even James is blown away by the groundwork he's put in and how he essentially knows every angle to best manipulate these people with, like puppets on his strings. It's incredible. And unsettling.

Either way, James listens dutifully and does his best, because it's Sirius and the other one who need him to pull through for them. To help, he has to make an effort to do this, and that means enduring the people fawning all over him for being put in such a horrible position, or even the less tasteful people who want to know which person he'd rather make it out.

It's a two hour event.

James lasts thirty-seven minutes and forty-four seconds exactly, just long enough for Lucius to make his way over and say, mockingly, "I'm surprised you showed up, James. I rather thought you'd be too busy fucking Regulus while you still had the chance. Running out of time now, aren't you?"

He is smirking when he says it, blunt and shameless right there in front of a crowd of sponsors, and it's clear they're living for the drama. James doesn't care. He just slips his hand down to grab his cane, grips it tight, and swings out to collide the handle across Lucius' face so hard that he goes crashing into the chairs behind him. A collective gasp echoes through the room as Lucius clutches at his face and spits out blood.

Frank is there in what seems like seconds, hastily grabbing James by his arm and tugging him away as Lucius flings himself to his feet, nostrils flared, blood staining his teeth. James flips him off, but Frank quickly shoves his hand down.

A low murmur starts up in the room, and Frank has to stop by to talk to Aurors who were making their way steadily towards the commotion. He dissolves the tension and de-escalates the situation by promising to escort James back to his suite.

"You can't *do* that, James," Frank hisses as he's walking him quickly away from the room. "There is a certain way you have to conduct yourself as a mentor, not only for the sake of your tributes, but also for *you.* As much as you might wish to, you can't go around beating the shit out of people with your cane when they piss you off. It runs the risk of costing Sirius and Regulus sponsors, if not getting into trouble yourself."

"I just—" James clenches his jaw and comes to a halt, squeezing his eyes shut. "Frank."

"Yeah?" Frank murmurs.

"I'm really fucking angry," James whispers, "and I don't know how to make it stop."

"I heard about Regulus volunteering for you," Frank says softly, and James grits his teeth. "I —I get it. My mum… I asked her not to beforehand, and she did it anyway. It's—I get how enraging it is to have someone you love do that, especially when your best friend is in the

mix, just another person you love. I get the anger, James, I really do. That being said, this is as much of an arena for us as it is for them. We are fighting for their lives and our own, and anger? It doesn't save anyone."

James looks down and doesn't respond. Frank sighs and reaches out to squeeze his shoulder, gently guiding him all the way back to the suite, where James waits for Frank to walk away before he slips back inside.

~•~

Sirius groans and tightens his hand in Remus' hair, tilting his head down to see the latest mark blooming on his chest, which makes him immediately squeeze his eyes shut and tug on Remus' hair to ask for another.

"If only you could spell out *mine* in marks," Sirius says dreamily, then hisses sharply and gives a violent twitch because Remus has gotten teeth involved, scraping against the skin over his ribs. Oh, Sirius loves when he gets teeth involved.

"I think the marks get the message across well enough," Remus murmurs into his chest, soothing the now-bruised skin with his tongue. Sirius shudders. "Not that anyone would see it, since I doubt you'll be walking around shirtless, but this is definitely a…statement. You are —" He draws back and flicks his gaze over Sirius' torso, then arches an eyebrow at Sirius, who grins at him. "Frankly, you look like you got into a fight with a vacuum and are ridiculously pleased about it. Does this actually feel good for you? Genuinely?"

"Yes," Sirius assures him, a little embarrassingly earnest as he essentially smooshes Remus' face back down to wordlessly encourage him to continue.

Remus does.

He's still doing just that when the sound of raised voices reaches them and makes them both freeze. Slowly, at the same time, they raise their heads to stare at the door, then look at each other. In the next second, they're scrambling for their shirts and rushing right out of the room.

The thing is, Regulus is out. He went to the training room, so he's not here. James isn't *supposed* to be here, but that's most certainly his voice, drowned out by Pandora, who is yelling at him. The fact that Pandora and James are arguing is—not good. Very not good. And bewildering.

When they make it into the main room, Pandora is standing right in front of James, pointing a finger in his face, her eyes flashing like she's not afraid of him in the least. "Are you out of your fucking *mind?!"*

"Yeah, maybe I am," James snaps, his eyes flashing, too.

"Woah, what's going on?" Sirius blurts out as he rushes forward to physically ease Pandora back, because she's rattling in rage in a way he's legitimately never seen before.

"James assaulted Lucius!" Pandora hisses. "Smacked him in the face with his cane."

"Oh, nice," Sirius says reflexively, then shrinks back when Pandora turns a withering glare on him. He coughs. "Sorry, no, I mean—oh no, James, how could you?"

Remus snorts, then immediately smooths his expression of amusement out when Pandora shoots him a glare, too.

"Do you have *any* idea what you've just done?" Pandora asks sharply, focusing on James, who doesn't flinch under her glare at all. "You think you're the first mentor that wants to attack other mentors, James? No, you're not, but they *don't.* Do you want to know why? Because if you do, it puts you in danger. You could be punished for that. Not only you, but Sirius and Regulus. And, if by some miracle, you all scrape by, Lucius could still find ways to make everyone's lives a lot harder. He only needs to bribe the right gamemaker to make Sirius and Regulus suffer more than they already will, and if he wasn't going to get his tributes and the other death eater mentors to focus on Regulus and Sirius before, you can bet he is now."

And that—that makes James flinch.

"Stop it, Pandora," Sirius mutters, heaving a sigh as he glances at James, who has horror blooming in his eyes. "Don't—James, it's fine. I mean, definitely don't do it again, because she's right, you *could* be punished. Likely won't be, if you weren't the moment it happened, but still. What happened?"

James swallows and rasps, "I was just—I was talking to sponsors, and—and Lucius came over… He said—just right in front of everyone, he said something about…your brother. I didn't—I was just so angry, and I—I—"

"Did the Aurors get involved?" Sirius asks.

"Started to, but Frank handled it," James whispers.

Sirius chews on the inside of his bottom lip for a moment, and then he nods. "You're too beloved by the Hallows to get punished in the middle of all this, especially if a fight didn't properly break out. And you were defending Regulus, I take it, which the Hallows will like. They'll eat it up, really, so it's not going to cost you sponsors. Just—most of the time, they like their mentors to be more put together, yeah? Calmer. Not violent. Not traumatized. They don't like having to face what the arena actually does to a person, so keeping it together is *vital,* James. Doing it in the defense of Regulus is—well, that's fine. So, lean into that, alright?"

"Alright," James says, his gaze downcast.

"See? It's fine. Pandora, it's *fine,"* Sirius tells her, because she still looks furious. "Lay off. I mean it. He's doing his best."

Pandora softens, slowly. It takes a few minutes, and then she sighs as her shoulders slump. "James, I'm—I know that this is hard for you. I'm sorry I yelled. I'm just…really stressed."

"I'm sorry," James mumbles, his voice scratchy and thick. He lifts his gaze to look at Sirius. "Did I—have I put you and…him in danger? Sirius, tell me."

"It's—not that simple," Sirius murmurs. "Look, Lucius can't make Bella and Cissa do anything they don't want to do. If they decide they're coming for me and Regulus, that's what they'll do, regardless of what he says. If they decide not to, then they won't, and that's that. The rest of the death eaters will be coming right for us if they're smart anyway. Lucius *could* bribe a gamemaker, sure, but the one with the most power is Minerva McGonagall, and she does not strike me as a woman easily bribed by anything. Regulus and I are in danger in the arena, no matter what, and we'll—handle that when the time comes. You just keep doing your best. That's enough."

"I told you," James chokes out. "I told you I couldn't do this, and I'm—I'm fucking it up. I'm going to get you *killed.* I'm—"

"Okay, hey, stop that, you're not," Sirius says gently, moving over quickly to get his arm around James, hastily escorting him from the room the moment he breaks down crying.

Remus and Pandora don't follow.

Sirius' heart clenches as he gets James safely in his room and into his bed. He climbs into James' bed right beside him, watching sadly and helplessly as James lays there and fucking sobs. Sirius gets it. He sobbed a lot, too, his first year as a mentor. And many years after that. All the years, really.

That's the thing. No one but mentors actually know how hard it is to *be* a mentor. It's fucking hell on one's nerves, for one thing, because you're quite literally holding lives in your hands, and it rides on you to do everything you can to save those lives. Every move you make, every word you say, it impacts your tributes. You can make mistakes and bring more danger to your tributes; you can make mistakes and cost your tributes life-saving support that might have helped them win.

Worse than all that, you can do everything absolutely right and still watch your tributes die anyway.

It's a heavy thing to hold. It's a hard burden to bear. It's just a different arena, and not one you can fight your way out of. For James, who feels a deep need to help, to save Regulus and Sirius in particular, the pressure is crushing him.

Sirius can do nothing but comfort him, reassure him, soothe him—so that's what he does. He doesn't stop until James falls asleep, exhausted and drained, likely needing the rest. Sirius sighs and gets up to gently tug James' shoes off, then drag his blanket up to cover him. For a moment, he just stands and stares at him with this horrible, harsh pain in his chest, hardly able to breathe when thinking about how, very soon, James won't have him around to be there for him at all.

Swallowing thickly, Sirius slips out of James' room and heads to his own, shaking as he lets himself in. Remus is there, waiting on him with sorrow in his eyes.

"You—you have to—I need you to take care of him," Sirius gasps out, his shoulders heaving. "Remus, please, I—"

"Hey, shh, sweetheart, come here," Remus whispers, leaning forward to grab his hand and reel him in. Sirius slots in between his spread legs where he's sitting on the edge of the bed, and he slides his arms around Remus' shoulders, leaning into him as he pushes shaky fingers into his hair. Remus tilts his head back, resting his chin on Sirius' stomach, his eyes gentle. "Of course I will. It's not even a question."

"He'll—he'll take care of you, too," Sirius croaks. "That's his first instinct—take care of everyone else. It's not to take care of himself, so you—will you just—"

"Yes, Sirius, I promise," Remus murmurs.

"Like you took care of me?" Sirius checks, slipping his hand down to trace the arc of Remus' eyebrow, the one with the scar running through it.

Remus gives him a small smile, like a tiny bit of treasure, just for him. "Well, not *exactly* the same, but…"

"I—yeah, maybe skip the kissing and stuff," Sirius agrees with a huff of laughter, his voice all wobbly.

"I don't know… I bet he's a brilliant kisser."

"Oh, shut up."

Remus laughs softly, and Sirius finds it within himself to smile in response, something in him settling down with the reassurance that Remus will have James, and James will have Remus. Through this, they'll have each other.

It's not much, but it's the only comfort Sirius has.

~•~

Regulus exhales and releases the dagger, watching as it sails through the air and lands with a loud *thunk* into the target's chest, dead center. Behind him, someone slow-claps.

Shit.

The training room was empty.

Regulus glances over his shoulder, lowering his arm and going stiff as a very large group comes in. The death eaters, traveling in a pack like they all met up. Bellatrix and Narcissa are among them. So is Dixon.

Bellatrix, Narcissa, Yaxley, Rabastan, Thorfinn, Alecto, and Dixon—they go right to the center where the weapons are, talking casually amongst themselves. They look unbothered,

aloof, completely at ease while making it very clear that they're a group, that they're this year's death eaters, and that they all saw him when coming in. He wonders who clapped.

Regulus feels his heart drop when he sees Bellatrix pluck up a few daggers of her own, swiveling them through her fingers with the same ease and practice that he does. He'd hoped…

See, Bellatrix was his favorite when he was young, and she was good with daggers *first.* That's why he liked them so much, because she did. A part of him sort of just—suppressed that, honestly, or refused to think about it. He'd secretly hoped that she found a love for some other weapon, or maybe just got rusty with them over the years, but seeing the way she handles them now—yeah, she's still an expert. Fuck.

Narcissa goes for the bow and arrows, and she knows them well. Willa was good with a bow. Narcissa? She's *better.*

Thorfinn and Rabastan go to the mats to do hand-to-hand, it seems like, while Dixon and Yaxley split off to go around the stations. Alecto and Narcissa remain at the weapons. Bella makes her way right for Regulus, presumably to make use of the stalls, but he doubts that's all it is. Of course not.

"Hey, munchkin," Bellatrix greets as she sidles up to the stall next to him.

"Bella," Regulus replies, his shoulders tense.

"Can't help but notice Sirius isn't here," Bellatrix muses, and he doesn't bother replying. She leans up against his stall and flicks her hand without looking, sending one of her daggers twirling through the air. It lands in the center of the target's head, which makes his stomach churn. "Yet, here you are."

Regulus exhales and turns to face her. "What do you want?"

"What, I can't talk to my favorite cousin?"

"After I stabbed you with a fork, I'm still the favorite?"

Bellatrix chuckles. "Oh, bygones and all that. Honestly, you could *actually* kill me, and I'd still like you better than Sirius. He's such an ungrateful, mouthy little shit. Besides, you were protecting your boyfriend. Sweet of you, really. It's cute."

Regulus doesn't say anything. He doesn't—he can't figure out what it is that she *wants*. He knows she's after something, because she's got that glint in her eye, that slightly mad gleam that everyone in their family gets when they're plotting. Even him. It's a family trait they all share.

"Shame about that, by the way," Bellatrix says, turning her head to stare at the target. There's actually a note of bitterness in her voice. "Having to go back in, I mean. Must be especially hard for you. I heard you were upset when Sirius tried to take your place, and here you are anyway, not knowing if you'll make it back to Potter."

"What. Do. You. *Want?"* Regulus grits out.

"It's hard for Potter, too, clearly," Bellatrix continues lightly, still just staring at her dagger. "He smacked the shit out of Lucius with his cane earlier, you know. Have you heard yet?"

Regulus blinks. "He—what? When? *Why?"*

"Guess you haven't heard. You must have been here." Bellatrix shakes her head, snorting. "Lucius showed up back in the suite, raging about Potter. Apparently he said something about how you and Potter have so little time together, and Potter whacked him in the face. He's got a lovely little bruise now, his lip all swollen. It's hilarious."

"Hilarious," Regulus repeats, eyes narrowing.

Bellatrix hums. "Yes, absolutely. He gets all red in the face when he's raging, like a grape. You just want to *pop him,* you know?" She looks at him with a grin. "In any case, he wants you and Sirius to pay for it."

"Bet you love that," Regulus mutters.

"I love that for Sirius. Less so for you." Bellatrix swivels her dagger between her fingers, holding his gaze. "Why isn't Sirius here, munchkin? He just left you all alone?"

"So?" Regulus snaps.

"So," Bellatrix says with a huff, "it's clear you two aren't handling this as well as Cissy and I are."

Regulus arches an eyebrow at her. "And how exactly are you two handling it?"

"Get each other to the end, then see who moves faster," Bellatrix announces with a grin. She leans forward and winks at him. "Between you and me, I think it'll be me. She has to grab an arrow. I'll have a dagger already in hand."

"Glad you two found a solution," Regulus says, his voice sharp and unforgiving. "I still don't know why you're pestering me."

"You're in danger, munchkin," Bellatrix tells him, "and it sounds to me like Sirius doesn't care about that. He's a selfish little creature, always has been, and you hate him—I can see it all over you. Trust me, I know what it looks like."

Regulus presses his lips into a thin line.

"It could be us, you know," Bellatrix continues softly, not looking away from him. "A proper family at the end. Me, you, and Narcissa. You'd be safer with us, Regulus. No one who wants to target you would dare to, if you were with us."

"You're—asking me to be a death eater?" Regulus says.

Bellatrix grips her dagger, going still. "I'm telling you, if you want to survive, you'll listen to me when I explain why the best thing for you to do is join us."

Regulus stares at her, his heart thumping hard in his chest, the very tips of his fingers tingling. Slowly, he looks at the target with the dagger sticking out from the head, and then he looks at Bellatrix and whispers, "I'm listening."

A triumphant smile breaks out on Bellatrix's face.

~•~

Sirius doesn't take long in the training room. He's at the fire-starting station, just to lazily brush up on the skill, but it's not one he's forgotten. He gets it on the very first try, then spends a long time thinking wistfully of Regulus, who left the moment he came in. Sirius really wishes—

"Oh, rubbing two sticks together because you don't have two brain cells to rub together, I see."

"Piss off, Marlene," Sirius says.

Alice laughs. "No, really, it's *so* impressive. Do it again."

Sirius sighs and ignores them as he pushes to his feet. He has something of a crowd at the moment, basically all watching him just for the sole purpose of mocking him. Marlene has

gotten more than a few jabs in, Emmeline keeps laughing at him, and Augusta didn't even have to say anything to make it clear she wasn't impressed or intimidated by him in the least.

"Oh, teach *me* how to start a fire, Sirius, *please,"* Marlene says breathlessly, clasping her hands together and staring at him with faux pleading in her eyes. The growing grin on her face sort of ruins that effect, not that she cares.

"You're *so* talented," Alice simpers, fluttering their eyelashes at him and twirling a strand of their short hair around a finger.

"What would it take for you to protect me, a damsel, who will soon be in distress?" Emmeline asks. "Burn fires for *me,* Sirius. Just me. Choose me. Pick me. Protect *me."*

"You're all going to gang up on me and kill me the moment we're the last ones standing, aren't you?" Sirius asks flatly.

"Yes."

"Absolutely yes."

"Without a doubt."

"And quickly, too," Augusta adds, once everyone else has responded. She doesn't even look ashamed.

Sirius rolls his eyes and turns away from them, snuffing the fire with his boot as they coo and laugh in the background. He's glad he can be a source of entertainment for them, because this is all very fucking boring otherwise.

The training room is fairly empty, and it has been since he arrived and Regulus left. Augusta and Alice were the next to come in, and Augusta didn't hesitate to come right up to him and

ask, rather bluntly, if he and Regulus were going to be allies or not. When he said yes, Augusta nodded sharply and promised not to kill him or Regulus before it came time, which was…nice of her, he supposes. Sort of.

When Marlene, Eli, and Emmeline showed up, Augusta did the same thing to them and gave the same response when they all agreed. Eli, who is very drunk, has since gone to a corner to pass out in after he secured his allies. No one bothers him.

Augusta asked about Dixon, and Emmeline's lips had pressed into a thin line before she admitted that she doubted he'd be an ally. She thinks he'll side with the death eaters.

Velvet, Mavis, Lester, and Henri have not shown up. Alowyn and Warwick *had* shown up briefly, but they quite literally went in the opposite direction any time someone tried to approach them. Coen and Camilla also showed up for a short amount of time, only to get into a brawl and have to get dragged out by Aurors. No death eaters have arrived.

Sirius figures it could be worse. He has, in so many words, secured allies for him and Regulus, though he knows that their allies were already sort of known, in a way. In an arena full of very dangerous people who already have experience…well, having allies is the smart choice. The more, the better, especially when there's a big group of death eaters.

And there will be plenty of those, Sirius doesn't doubt that. It helps that he already knows who to be prepared for. Know thy enemy, or however that saying goes.

At least he won't be blindsided.

~•~

James wakes up slowly, drowsily, his eyes gritty and his jaw cracking with a yawn. His whole body shudders as he stretches out, and oh fuck, he really needed that nap. He can't remember the last time he slept so hard, and with no nightmares, which may have something to do with what he suspects was a quick little rest. A couple of hours, at most. Those are the best sort of naps for him. They get him through when he's exhausted.

He's exhausted a lot these days.

Blowing out a deep breath, James turns over and blinks at the sight of Regulus sitting in a chair next to his bed. Reflexively, James smiles at him, lopsided and warm, because, for just a moment, he's living in a world where seeing Regulus fills him with joy, with delight, with love. It takes a second for reality to catch up to him, for him to remember, for his smile to fade.

Regulus' lips are pressed into a thin line, and his elbows are sitting on his knees where he's leaning forward, his hands threaded together and his gaze sharp.

Oh, he's here for a fight.

Alright. Yeah, James is happy to oblige.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" James snaps as he pushes himself up, glaring at him. "Get out. I don't want—"

"Shut up," Regulus interrupts coldly. "You attacked Lucius?"

James feels a sharp twist in his chest, a burning sensation, and he can't breathe for a second. He—that was—it wasn't what he meant to do. He never meant to endanger them further; he's just so fucking *angry,* feeling like he's going to explode at all times, and Lucius never seems to know when to watch his fucking mouth. Maybe next time he'll think twice.

It makes James want to scream. Sirius assured him that he could spin it to his advantage, and James will. He'll do what it takes, whatever it takes for both of them, but the anger is still festering away. Hitting Lucius didn't help.

Nothing helps.

"Let me make something very clear to you, James," Regulus says, his voice sharp like a blade. "You hate me? Fine. Hate me, then. But the *moment* it starts affecting you, it's a problem. You could have gotten into trouble. Whatever you have to do to get your shit together, you're going to do it. Understood?"

"I don't need you to tell me that," James hisses, flinging himself around so he can sit on the edge of his bed, facing Regulus. "I know, alright? I fucking *know."*

"Really? Because if you knew, you wouldn't be assaulting people just because you're pissed off. Get it *together."*

"I'm working on it!"

"Work harder."

"Don't you think I'm trying, you insensitive prick?! How dare you? As if you know what this is like. I'd like to see you in my position, handling it well. Oh, wait, it *would've* been you if __"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Regulus explodes, launching out of his chair to bolt straight to his feet, scowling. "Let it *go,* James! You're revisiting something we already know. *Yes,* I lied to you. *Yes,* I volunteered for you. It's done! You can't change it, you can't do a damn thing about it __"

"Because of *you!"* James shouts. "This is on *you!* All of this could have been avoided if you __"

"Avoided? *Avoided?!* Grow up, you idiot!" Regulus shouts back, his eyes flashing, face flushed. "There was no avoiding this! No matter how it went, no matter what happened, we still would have ended up *right here."*

"No. No, there *is* a difference! You *lied* to me!" James roars, shoving to his feet and flinging his arms out as his chest heaves. He steps forward and jabs a finger at Regulus. "You did this to me! *You.* You're so fucking selfish, and a liar, and I *hate* you. I—I hate you. I—"

James falters, shaking from head to toe, his blood pumping and his ears ringing. Their gazes don't catch, because they've been staring at one another this entire time, glaring into each other's eyes without wavering or breaking. The room is so hot, so *stifling,* thick with tension that feels so close to burning out of control. One wrong move. One mistake.

That's all it'll take.

A part of James wishes he could disappear. If he could, he would just turn on the spot and evaporate to go somewhere else, to get away from this, because he knows what's coming. He can feel it in the tremble of his fingers. He can feel it in the heat of his skin. He can feel it in the air between them, a fragile distance that will be so easy to close.

The worst part is, James is *still* angry. Even with all this want whipping through him like a storm, the rage hasn't faded in the least. He's rattling like he's about to fly apart, and he is, and he wants, he wants, he wants—

"I hate you so fucking much," James chokes out, because that's the only explanation, that's all this can be. The words barely spill out of his mouth before he's catching Regulus' face in his hands and kissing him desperately, furiously, pathetically.

Regulus' hands fly up to clutch at him, to drag him closer, and the space between them burns down to nothing until they're pressed together. The kiss is biting, ruthless, harsh with all the emotions they can't articulate or accept. There's tongue and teeth and the low vibration of a moan, though James doesn't know who it comes from, himself or Regulus. Maybe both.

James isn't thinking, just acting, and he's shoving frantically at Regulus' shirt, trying so fucking hard to get it off, to get it away. He hates it. He hates everything. It's a button-up, so James doesn't bother wasting time, quite literally gripping it and yanking it open so vigorously that buttons pop off and scatter all over the floor. Regulus makes a muffled choking noise into the kiss, and James kisses him harder as he pushes Regulus' stupid fucking shirt off.

The moment there's skin to touch, James can't stop himself, his hands running over Regulus' shoulders, down his chest, gripping at his waist as he goes stumbling back. He drags Regulus along with him, who is more than happy to follow, even eager about it. They go crashing into the bed, James wobbling in place before losing his balance and plopping down on it, the kiss breaking for the very first time.

Regulus doesn't waste time. He just reaches down to snatch at James' shirt, making a sound of frustration until James finally lifts his arms and lets Regulus whip it off of him. His glasses get tangled up in his collar, leaving them lopsided on his face, but when he starts to lift his hand to carelessly toss them aside, Regulus catches his wrist to stop him before promptly climbing right into his lap and kissing him again.

James shudders as Regulus' fingers slide into his hair, clenching and *pulling,* and for a second, James allows it. James sinks into it, letting it happen as he slides his hands up Regulus' back, fingers draping over his shoulders, clamping down tight like he can keep him here, just like this, forever.

But he can't.

The reminder is a sour one, and it only serves to infuriate him more, until all he can do is fall back and push Regulus to the side. James follows the motion, pressing Regulus down into the bed and catching his wrists, tugging Regulus' hands from his hair and slamming them down to the pillows.

"James," Regulus gasps out, his fingers flexing like he wants to reach out and touch. He's flushed, unable to be still, his pupils blown and his mouth slick and swollen. He's a masterpiece, so heartbreakingly beautiful that James wants to take a fucking picture. James wants—he wants a lot of things.

"No. Keep them there," James tells him, his voice rough and hoarse, low and harsh in his throat. He squeezes Regulus' wrists to indicate what he means, then lets go. Regulus doesn't lift his hands. "Good. Don't touch. If you do, I'll stop."

Regulus shifts, restless, his chest heaving. A truly obscene groan spills out of his mouth with what sounds like a mixture of approval and frustration. His hands fist in the sheets, clinging, and that's enough for James. It satisfies him, a clear sign that Regulus is going to do what he's told.

With that, James lifts up to latch on the underside of his jaw and slowly, leisurely, works his way down at his own pace. It's not the first time he's done this, kissing Regulus all over, but he'll never get enough of it. He'll *never* have enough of Regulus under his mouth, under his hands, splayed out, willing and wanting. Eternity wouldn't be enough time.

The scars don't bother him. They never did, not from the very first sight of them. Are they heartbreaking? Absolutely. Does it make Regulus any less enticing? No, not at all. James is still sure he's never seen someone as beautiful as Regulus Black.

There's one spot where there's no scars at all. Regulus' right hip, the very arc of his hip bone, a place James has sucked loving bruises into. This time, he bites it. He remembers wanting to, once, in the arena. He was angry then, too.

Regulus sucks in a sharp breath between his teeth, his hips bucking, and James plants his hands against his thighs to hold him still. A long string of curses leaves Regulus' mouth, all breathless, and it coalesces into broken pleas very quickly.

They've done this…a lot. As much as two people can in two days, really. In their defense, they had a lot of built up tension to work through—over a decade of it, in fact—and two days were *not* enough. Two days didn't even make a *dent.*

Regardless, they've had sex many times in many different positions, and they still didn't get to do everything. They didn't have enough time. But they have done *this,* James going for Regulus' belt and putting his mouth to use. Regulus is usually a bit more involved, hands in his hair, fingers curling over his shoulders and his nails digging in. He doesn't mean to, but he has left scratches on James' shoulders and back. James didn't mind. He liked the burn of them. The reminder and the proof. It had left him smug.

This time, Regulus yanks at the sheets and chants James' name like a prayer, like an oath, like a promise. He did then, too, and he broke his promise anyway. James hates him. James needs him so bad he can't fucking stand it.

It's frantic and desperate from start to finish, until Regulus' breath audibly catches, and then he's arching, moaning, but never once letting go of those sheets. He doesn't let go, even after he slumps back against the bed, while James lifts his head and crawls up the length of Regulus' body to stare down at him. Regulus gazes up at him, starry-eyed and dazed, his gaze hazy and his mouth slack as he pants.

He's looking for something. Forgiveness, James thinks. He's not going to find that, but he's still gripping the sheets, never once letting go or lifting his hands, and that deserves a reward, doesn't it? So, James dips down and kisses him, gently.

Regulus sighs into it, soft and sweet, finally settling down as he calms. James sinks into the kiss, pushing everything to the side for a moment, granting himself just one kiss where he lets himself pretend. Just one kiss where he ignores his anger, as much as he can. It works all the way up until he slowly pulls away. Regulus' eyes flutter open, and for a beat, they just gaze at each other in silence, everything rushing right back in.

James shakes his head and rolls to the side, reaching out for his cane as he pushes to his feet, his leg stiff from being in one position for too long. He ignores the arousal demanding his attention, clamoring for priority within him, and makes his way to the bathroom without glancing back.

"James?" Regulus calls, his voice cracking.

"Get out," James says, staring at the bathroom door.

"James," Regulus whispers.

James does look back then, pausing at the bathroom door as he meets Regulus' gaze. All he says is, "Well? Don't you recognize a parting gift when you see one?"

Regulus' eyes sink shut, and James leaves him there like that, shutting the door on his pained expression. Yeah, parting gifts aren't quite the gifts they're meant to be, are they?

~•~

Sirius glances up as Regulus comes sweeping out of the door, a very specific gleam in his eyes that makes Sirius' heart sink.

Sirius had returned after his own brief visit to the training room and went straight to Remus, no waiting. Remus was brushing his hair for him, the both of them murmuring back and forth when Pandora slipped inside and nervously said that Regulus had gone into James' room before Sirius came back, and she was worried, unsure if they should intervene or not.

As tempted as Sirius was to get involved, he made a promise to stay out of it, and so he kept it. Made Pandora do the same. Remus had made the comment that it wasn't going to end well, and he's never really wrong, is he? Pandora had settled in the room with them, and they *all* heard it when James and Regulus started yelling at each other.

They heard it when the yelling stopped. They couldn't hear anything else, but some part of Sirius had dared to hope they were just—working through things, being there for each other, maybe having a nap or something. It was optimistic of him, he knew that, but he'd *really* hoped they'd be alright.

They are not alright, which became apparent when Regulus spent all his time locked in his room, refusing to open the door for anyone, even Remus. James didn't try; he was the only one who didn't, and that spoke volumes. When Sirius tentatively asked what happened, James had explained, flatly, that they had ill-advised hate-sex, which had honestly made Sirius *really* want to smack them both upside the head for being fucking idiots apparently determined to hurt each other.

Sirius is especially frustrated because Regulus won't even let him be there for him. Won't have anything to do with him. He is just as angry at Sirius as James is at him, and if he sees the hypocrisy in that, he clearly doesn't care. It's different anyway. Different between them as brothers and James and Regulus as lovers, or something close to it. Would have been. Could have been. It's all lost to them now, all of them. That's not different at all. Everything is fucking ruined.

In the end, Regulus wouldn't see anyone before the evaluations, and he never resurfaced *until* it was time to go to the evaluations. Regulus has been stone-faced and silent this entire time, not saying a word, not acknowledging Sirius at all. And now, seeing the look in Regulus' eyes after his evaluation… It's wild. Fierce. *Defiant.*

"Sirius Black," is announced over the intercom, and Sirius heaves a sigh as his shoulders slump.

All of this is so messy.

Complicated.

Shaking his head, Sirius goes to do what he has to. Entering the evaluation room, the first thing he does is look up to see the various gamemakers, government officials, and whatever high-roller sponsors could work their way in—all watching him, fixed and eager.

Except McGonagall. She's just watching, calmly, focused but not like a vulture. Waiting. Sirius flicks his gaze away from her, to everyone else, and the differences are so obvious when compared to her. They're all practically frothing at the mouth, desperate for whatever show he's going to give them, like he's theirs, like he belongs to them and always has.

He knows they believe that, truly. He has let them believe that for a long time, and he's suddenly struck with the realization and the overwhelming freedom in the fact that he no longer has to. They're wrong. He's not theirs.

Slowly, Sirius turns his head to run his gaze over his options. There are weapons he could show off with, and for a second, he's tempted to go pick up a spear. No, not yet. There are so many things he could do to show just how competent he is, everything from fighting to his aptitude in survival depending on the environment. It's been years since people have seen him in this context; they must be eager to see what he can do.

As Sirius turns his head, he feels his breath freeze in his lungs, his heart giving a harsh kick in his chest. Regulus' evaluation hadn't taken too long, and now Sirius knows why.

The mats are embedded into the ground, blue and thick, not moving. They stretch from one side of the room all the way to the other, taking up half the room. In big, jagged letters, carved from a dagger, a message has been left that reads:

HALLOW

IS

HOLLOW

There are Aurors trying their best to rip the mats up, but currently failing to. Sirius stares at it, his heart clenching and swelling at the same time as he thinks, *oh, Reggie.*

It's not like Sirius hasn't noticed it, the underlying rage that's sweeping through the Hallow, but not only them. The Victors who are now tributes again, too. Even the death eaters. Sirius took note of it while waiting for his evaluation, gazing around at everyone, studying them. *No one* is happy to be here, to be going back in, not one damn person, not even those that thrived on their games the first time.

Because they all know. They all *know* what it is to do this, and to come out of it. They weren't supposed to have to do it again. It's almost this sort of—unifying thing? Just a quiet, unspoken understanding between all of them that honestly makes something in Sirius wilt with sadness, because he knows it won't last. It can't. As soon as that starting cannon in the arena sounds, they'll all be ready to slaughter each other.

Fuck the Hallow for this. Fuck Riddle, and the gamemakers, and the sponsors, and every single fucking person involved. They think they have control? Really?

No.

No, not yet. Maybe when the platforms raise and the countdown reaches zero and the cannon sounds, but not a second before. Not now.

Sirius swivels his head to stare at the people watching him, their demanding eyes, possessiveness in their gazes. They really do look at him as if he is theirs, as if they own him, as if he is a puppet on *their* strings. Fools. They're all fools.

It's not necessarily just sexual in nature. There are plenty of people who feel they have a claim to him just because he is him, and not because they want his body. They want his mind, too. His performance. His presence. His compliance. They want him just to say that they have him.

The only person who has him, truly, is Remus.

Without a word, Sirius reaches up and begins unbuttoning his shirt, slowly, one button at a time so his shirt falls open in little slivers. The people—excluding McGonagall—all lean forward eagerly, pleased, enthralled by what they believe is a strip-tease. Murmurs break out. Soft laughter. Gleaming eyes of encouragement and praise, like they didn't expect this, but they're delighted by it anyway.

All of that stops the moment he eases his shirt off, revealing skin littered in marks that Remus left behind, still quite fresh even now. Sirius holds his arms out and does a slow spin, letting them look, letting them wonder.

There's a mounting frustration from them that Sirius can feel from here, their curiosity running rampant, their envy twisting into bitterness. They believe he is theirs, and these marks say differently. They may think it was a Hallow who left them, but it wasn't *them,* and they know that; they *don't* know who, and they're aware they'll never get to find out.

It's like a toy in your sandbox that you haven't gotten to play with, and you find out that someone else has come into your sandbox to play with it before you could, without your permission. That's how these people think. That's how they see him. And now they see these marks that say, quite clearly, that he belongs to someone else. He's not their toy, and the sandbox is on fire, so they can't even get in to get to him.

Look at me, Sirius thinks. *Look at me and see who I belong to. Not you. Never you. I belong to me, and I've given myself to him, and there's nothing you can do about it.*

With that, Sirius scoops his shirt back up, puts it back on, and gives them all a bright, defiant grin. He bows, slightly, letting his smile soften into a smirk as he runs his gaze over everyone, and then he stands up and walks out.

When the evaluation scores come out, Sirius gets the lowest out of everyone, the lowest possible score *to* get, a score that no other tribute in history has ever gotten before him, and when he sees it, amongst everyone else's dismay, he laughs.

~•~

Regulus waits for two hours after the evaluation scores are out before he leaves his room. He got a fairly high score, only one below the year prior. Sirius got the lowest ever in *history.*

Sirius had thought it was hilarious for some reason, while Pandora despaired, Remus went pale, and James rubbed his temples like he had a headache. Regulus didn't react at all, didn't even acknowledge him. No matter how much the others asked, Sirius wouldn't say what he did in his evaluation.

He didn't have a problem telling anyone what *Regulus* did, though. It was like he was tattling on him, fussing to James and Pandora, while Regulus scowled as Pandora lectured him, and James…

Well, he just looked at Regulus. First time he looked at him since he left him in his bed with the cold remnants of a parting gift settling heavy in Regulus' bones. His jaw had been clenched, nostrils flared, eyes full of heat and anger. Regulus' heart had started beating hard and fast, because he knew James wanted to fuck him stupid, which is—yeah, Regulus is okay with that, actually. The parting gifts are *not* great, as it turns out. They hurt quite a bit, emotionally speaking. Regulus is greedy for more anyway.

In the end, James had only said, quick and sharp, "Stop being stupid," and looked away, his fingers flexing. Regulus wanted to go crawl into James' lap and let those fingers flex around his throat. He thinks that maybe, just maybe, he's going insane.

James is driving him insane.

It's getting close to night now, but not quite, and he has somewhere to be. Leaving seems simple at first, but then he is caught by Sirius and Remus, who just so happen to be folding laundry together in the main room, talking and laughing like a scene out of a domestic homemade film.

"Where are you off to?" Remus asks as he attempts to casually slip by, unnoticed. Sirius seems to know better than to speak, which is for the best. To him, Regulus wouldn't respond anyway. Remus is… Well, Remus gets a pass.

"Just going for a walk," Regulus mutters. "I'm tired of looking at the same four walls."

"You can come help us fold laundry," Remus offers.

"Thanks," Regulus says flatly, "but I think I'll pass."

Sirius clicks his tongue, reaching out to run his fingers through Remus' hair. "You tried, my love, don't worry about it. *I'll* fold laundry with you as much as you like."

Regulus could gag, honestly.

"You really shouldn't be out wandering around," Remus murmurs, glancing over at him. "You have a busy day tomorrow with the interview. You should get some rest."

"Right, I won't take long. Just felt like going to the roof," is all Regulus says, vaguely, and then he continues on without saying anything else.

He enters the lift.

It goes down, not up.

Down, down, down. All the way to the first floor. Not the basement level, or the ground floor, but the very first floor with a suite for those from district one.

The lift dings, doors sliding open, and Regulus exhales all at once as he sets his shoulders and sweeps down the hall. He reaches the suite, firms his jaw, and knocks on the door.

Regulus is glad he prepared himself, because the sight of Lucius when he opens the door nearly makes Regulus break out into a grin. The side of his jaw is swollen and purple, a terrible bruise on display, stark against pale skin. Regulus very nearly starts giggling. James smacked the *shit* out of him.

"Regulus," Lucius greets, a tad bitterly.

"Lucius," Regulus replies, his mouth turning up in one corner as he pointedly eyes the bruise before flicking his gaze up again to see Lucius glare at him. "Rough day?"

Lucius looks like he's tasting something sour, but Narcissa must have gotten ahold of him at some point, because he's behaving. He steps back wordlessly and lets Regulus in.

"Ah, there he is," Bellatrix calls, and the room falls silent as she raises her arms, grinning at him. "I always knew you were the smarter brother, munchkin!"

"It's hardly a revelation. Sirius has always been, and will always be, a fucking idiot," Regulus drawls, leisurely dragging his gaze over everyone in the room.

The death eaters, all of them and some of their mentors. Bella is standing with Rodolphus Lestrange, pressed right up against him rather provocatively, honestly, which he seems quite happy about. The little brother—Rabastan—is close by, leaning against the wall as he flicks his gaze over Regulus with visible curiosity. Narcissa is by the window, smoking, even as she eyes him with a small, sad smile. The others all have drinks, clearly in the middle of mingling before he popped in.

"Well, come in, come in," Bella says, waving him into the room and blowing curls out of her face. "Grab a drink, settle in, mingle a bit. Might as well get used to everyone. We'll talk more when the food is ready."

Regulus, perhaps childishly, makes a beeline right for Narcissa because he knows her better than anyone else, other than Bellatrix, who is probably about eight seconds from dragging the eldest Lestrange off to her room, by the looks of things. And she calls *him* the cock-slobbering slag.

"She's determined to go out with a bang," Narcissa says dryly as she flicks ash and gives him an exasperated look that he fully understands as a younger sibling who also has an older sibling that's basically the embodiment of a walking headache.

"Clearly," Regulus mutters.

"Want one?" Narcissa offers, scooping up a pack of open cigarettes off the windowsill, holding it out to him with her eyebrows raised.

Regulus shakes his head. "No thanks. I don't smoke."

"Mm, Sirius never roped you into that, did he?" Narcissa muses, sitting the pack down again.

"He didn't start until after his games, and we weren't really… Well, we weren't on good terms then," Regulus mumbles.

Narcissa inhales, letting little tendrils of smoke escape her mouth as she studies him. In the end, she just offers him a small smile and murmurs, "You know, every Black who has gone into the arena always made it back out. This will be the first time that doesn't happen."

"I know," Regulus says quietly.

"It's a shame, isn't it?" Narcissa whispers, her eyes drifting shut, expression strained. Just like everyone else, she's rightfully upset about the predicament they're all in.

Regulus swallows, hesitating, then he admits, "Andromeda came to see me off on the train." Her eyes snap open, fixing on him immediately, and his heart clenches. "She didn't know about you and Bellatrix going back in at the time, I don't think, but she said something I think applies to all of us. Something that I think she'd like you to know, too."

"What?" Narcissa demands, searching his gaze, her fingers twitching around her cigarette.

"When I pointed out that only one of us could win, she said, *make them pay for it,"* Regulus tells her.

Narcissa doesn't react for a moment, and then she huffs out a weak laugh as her face softens. She looks away, her eyelashes fluttering. "Of course she did."

"I'm going to," Regulus confesses, holding her gaze steadily when she looks at him again. "Are you?"

"Yes," Narcissa says softly. Her gaze once again trails across the room, snagging on Bellatrix for a moment, and then she looks back at him, something sharp in her gaze. Sharp like shattered glass that was supposed to be tucked away, never meant to be touched—not because it was fragile, but because it would cut deeper than anything else if it was broken—and now it has been dropped. "Yes, I believe we all are."

"Good," Regulus announces firmly.

They don't say anything else after that, and Bellatrix doesn't have enough time to drag Rodolphus away, because the meal is ready before she ever gets the chance. The suite isn't meant to hold this amount of people—twelve altogether—so they have to pack in around a table that could comfortably hold only half of that, at best. Regulus is tucked in between

Bellatrix and Rabastan, feeling *very* crowded, and Narcissa sits across from him with visible amusement on her face.

For the most part, no one bothers him. Rabastan talks to him a bit, and he's…nice? Oddly enough, he is fairly nice and has a warm, charming disposition. Attentive and observant, but not in an overbearing way. He's handsome in a peach-colored shirt with a dip in his collar revealing a silver necklace with a tear-drop ruby nestled against brown skin at the dip of his chest. He has a nice voice, smooth and deep, so deep that doing a double-take is absolutely necessary. The sort of voice that sounds like it's probably vibrating in his chest every time he speaks, like you could actually feel it if you were to reach out and touch. He has a nice smile, too.

Regulus understands why the Hallows like him. He's easy to talk to, easy to listen to, easily funny and rather laid-back, honestly. Put together and poise, Regulus doesn't doubt that the Hallows admired him before and likely will again. Personally, other than Bellatrix and Narcissa, Regulus suspects he'll gravitate towards Rabastan as well, especially as a person who understands what it is to be a little brother.

For a second, Regulus watches Rabastan laugh when he makes a dry quip about needing more wine to deal with all of these idiots, and he feels his stomach drop out from underneath him when he's hit with a horrible wash of deja-vu just thinking about Evan. Last time, Regulus made a friend—a best friend, no matter how hard he fought it—and then he got him killed. Suddenly, Regulus isn't sure he wants to have anything to do with Rabastan in the arena at all.

Regulus looks at him, and looks around at everyone, and he realizes that they're likely all going to be dead in a matter of days. Here they are, eating and chatting like that reality is out of reach, as if it's not a set of walls closing in around them all. It turns his fucking stomach.

For the most part after that, Regulus just sits and listens, remaining quiet and observant. Narcissa does, too. The others, though… They talk about what's coming. They speculate about the arena, discuss other tributes and their weaknesses, and carry on quite a bit about the people they feel the need to target most. Predictably, Sirius is a high priority target that they feel is important to get rid of early while they still have the numbers to overtake him, because these people may be fucking awful, but they're not stupid. They know Sirius is a threat. They know it will take effort to kill him.

Emmeline is another one they're sure needs to be targeted quickly, as is Marlene, and also Asher and Majesty. They don't know very much about Alice, don't view Augusta as a threat, and find Eli absolutely laughable. The rest are those they're sure they'll handle along the way.

Sirius is the main target, the one they're all going for the moment they get the chance, preferably as a group. Multiple times, as people talk about Sirius, they look at Regulus like they have something to say, but Bellatrix and Narcissa apparently frighten them enough that they keep their mouths shut. Well, most of them. One is not as wise as the rest.

"So, what, you have no comment about us planning to kill your brother, Regulus?" Yaxley asks, curling his lip in distaste.

"Oh, *awkward,"* Rabastan mutters under his breath.

Regulus reaches down to pick up his napkin, wipes his mouth, then sits it down and sighs. "Corban, what is it, exactly, that you expect me to say?"

"I'd mind your tongue if I were you," Bellatrix warns, her gaze fixed on Yaxley. "He's a terror with a fork, and so am I, and there are plenty on this table. Tread carefully."

"You can't honestly expect us to sit here and act as if he's someone we can trust," Yaxley hisses.

"You can't trust anyone in the hunger games," Alecto says, arching an eyebrow at him. "None of us can trust each other. At some point, Corban, we will all turn on each other."

"Yes, *obviously,"* Yaxley grits out. "But that will happen when it is necessary, and not a moment before. How can we be sure that he's not planning to turn before then? It's his brother. That sense of loyalty, it's a *concern.* If it was yours, Alecto, would you so easily abandon him? Kill him? And you, Rabastan? Even you, Bella, Narcissa—you're here *together.* Am I just meant to believe that Regulus has turned his back on Sirius and will be an asset to us?"

"Oh, I'd snap Rodolphus' neck the first chance I got," Rabastan says lightly, sharing a grin with his older brother, who flips him off and rolls his eyes.

"I think the concern is valid," Dolohov mumbles, staring down at his glass with a frown.

"Trust me, the fact that Regulus is here is proof enough," Bellatrix snaps. "He wouldn't be here if he wasn't willing to do what it takes *to* be here. You forget, he has other family here as well. He has me and Narcissa. You don't know him the way we do, and you can't see it, but it's so clear that he *hates* Sirius. He is here because he wants to be."

"Excuse me if I find it a little hard to believe that you two are more important to him than his *brother*. Besides, hasn't it been years since you all saw each other?" Yaxley challenges.

"Stop," Regulus says, his voice firm, and Yaxley's eyes fixate on him. A lot of eyes do. "You want to doubt me? Be my guest. I have no interest in appeasing your insecurities. You're afraid of me. You've just made that clear to everyone at this table, and what do you think that means for you?"

Yaxley's nostrils flare. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Then you have nothing to worry about, do you?" Regulus tilts his head at him. "After all, how much threat could I pose to you if you're not as weak as you're presenting yourself now? Are you worried I'm better than you, Corban?"

"No," Yaxley says sharply.

Regulus holds his gaze. "You should be."

"You're not better than me," Yaxley declares, his voice harsh.

"I am," Regulus informs him simply. "And so is Sirius. He's better than you and everyone else at this table. He will kill all of you easily, effortlessly, and without faltering for a second. No one at this table would be able to win against him. The *only* weakness Sirius has in the arena is me. If you were smart, you'd realize that you *need* me."

"Oh, is that right?" Yaxley sneers at him. "So, you're just going to stand there and let us kill him?"

"No," Regulus says, and everyone stares at him. He never looks away from Yaxley as he announces, without even the tiniest waver in his tone, "The only person who can kill Sirius is *me."*

To that, no one has a reply. Regulus picks up his fork and resumes eating, and—after a few beats—everyone else follows suit. Bellatrix looks pleased. Narcissa looks at him, looks at him, looks at him and then she looks away.

Regulus doesn't say another word. He doesn't have to.

He said enough.

Chapter End Notes

well. That Happened.

giggling and twirling my hair at james smacking the fuck out of lucius with his cane. that man is on a WAR PATH, and he is Very Sexy To Me. you may not think james is/can be/will be dangerous, but you are Very Wrong.

pandora and james fighting ☹ but it does show just how basically none of them are handling this well. they're stressed, they're at the end of their ropes, their nerves are frayed.

also james breaking down because he's trying SO HARD and he's under so much pressure and just. god, he's dealing with so much. it's day two. it's literally been two days since the reaping, and things have only gotten worse.

then there's sirius, who is trying just as hard to help him, and help them all. also him asking remus to take care of james 😭 he WILL be asking james to take care of remus, too. (even though he knows james will, just like he knew remus would take care of james, but like, sometimes these are things you've just Gotta Say, ya know?)

and then regulus meeting the death eaters. STOP GLARING AT ME. i can feel all of you glaring at me rn. listen, listen, listeeeeen. trust the process, okay? there is a Reason for this, I PROMISE!!!

but god, the juxtaposition between regulus talking to bellatrix and hearing her out vs sirius being teased by his friends and saying he AND regulus will be allies. oof. the dramatic irony....

and then the Jegulus Fight 1.0. yes, i say 1.0, because they will indeed hash things out soon (quite soon, believe it or not), but they've just gotta get past this rough patch, and in the midst of getting to that point, they have. um. Encounters...

look, can you blame them? they're angry and crazy about each other, leave them be 😭 they only had TWO DAYS to, ah, work through some sexual tension, and that was not nearly enough. i mean, they still want each other really, reallyyyy bad, so it's like. well, it's genuinely driving them both a bit mad, because they're mad for each other and doing their best with that in the worst situation they could possibly ever be in.

james giving regulus a "parting gift" 😟 you know the wild thing? it never seemed fucked up when regulus did it, and yet, when james does...

i think we have this idea of james as like this happy character who doesn't do cruel things like this, especially to those he loves. and like, that's a fair assessment, but trust me, please. this DOES get expanded more on later—like his reasoning behind why it hurts so much, and why he labels his feelings as hatred, etc. his part in all of this—along with regulus'—is addressed later, i assure you.

moving on, learning more about the death eater side of things! just a reminder: the death eaters in this fic are not meant to be representatives of death eaters in canon; it's a reference/parallel, yes, but this is an au in which none of these characters have done anything they did in canon, excluding murder—which, in the context of this fic, is a slightly different topic. my feelings on characters in canon vs aus/fanon aren't automatically the same.

EDIT: i had a note here (that i had to delete to not go over the word limit to explain this), and it was about me (and many others) believing the lestranges were canonically black. as it turns out, they were not, and the reason for that is because jkr is a sick individual who perpetuates mistreatment of characters of color, as well as various other marginalized groups. leta lestrange in fantastic beasts had a black mother and a white father, and she was the only poc in the family—as ive been updated on. there's a horrible background to all of that that jkr created, which is very disgusting and can be triggering to read about. you can research it if you're curious, but please be aware that it only further shows just how horrible jkr is. i was unaware and have depicted them as black

and will continue to do so, because fuck jkr, and i still stand by what i said before—representation matters.

okay, HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-frank coming in a clutch and saving james from getting into trouble
-sirius finding out james hit lucius and just being like: oh, nice! lmaooo he's so funny. just that whole moment where remus snorted and everything
-james LITERALLY ripping regulus' shirt off
-regulus wanting to giggle when he saw lucius' bruise (he's just like me)
-sirius "i belong to remus" black showing off hickies Very Proudly, GOODBYE
-regulus' little "Hallow is Hollow" message, go ahead king, never let that one go!
-another threat of fork-related violence
-the evan mention
-narcissa agreeing to "make them pay for it"
-alice, marlene, emmeline, augusta my beloveds <3

Making Them Pay

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-implied sexual content (fade-to-black)
-brief depictions of alcoholism/alcohol abuse (not marlene)
-references to past death/future possible deaths
-discussion of trauma (not in detail and as a broad subject)
-references to violence
-references to murder
-very brief mention of guns/gun violence
-death (technically, but it's background and no one we actually know)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hey," Sirius says, "where were you last night?"

Regulus pauses, his hands stilling in the middle of spreading cream cheese on bagels, because he's taken it upon himself to make breakfast. Sirius doesn't know if bagels count as breakfast, but he also doesn't have the heart to question it. For some reason, Regulus seems to really want bagels right now.

As always, Regulus doesn't respond. Doesn't look at him. Doesn't have anything to do with him.

Sirius feels his heart sink a bit, and he can't really figure out why. He knew this would happen. Regulus *told him* that Sirius would lose him. It's just that Sirius never wanted to.

Regulus wasn't on the roof last night. Not all night, at least. Sirius knows this because, after Remus left to go back to his cell, he went up to the roof with the idea that he'd go up there and spend a little time with Regulus, maybe chainsmoke a bit, maybe try to talk to him. He misses him. It's this horrible ache right where his heart is that throbs with every beat.

But Regulus wasn't there, and he didn't show up. He came back to the suite late in the evening, after Sirius had given up and came back down to wait on him, and he once again didn't acknowledge Sirius before going to bed.

Sirius assumes that Regulus went somewhere else to be alone, somewhere no one could find him, like he'd occasionally do back home. He gets that Regulus finds comfort in isolation sometimes, especially when he's having a hard time, and things are very fucking hard right now. Sirius just wishes Regulus would still find comfort in him.

Sirius heaves a sigh and turns away from Regulus, glancing around the kitchen. James isn't up yet, but Pandora and Remus are setting the table, chatting together.

They have their interviews soon. Regulus doesn't seem nervous or scared this time, like he was last time, but Sirius thinks he wouldn't show it if he was. Especially not to Sirius. As for Sirius, he's not really nervous or scared either. He has a way with the Hallows, always has, and some part of him is relishing in another chance to be defiant again.

Regulus' hands briefly pause on the bagels once more when the sound of James' cane hitting the floor announces his approach. Everyone focuses on him as he enters with a yawn, knuckling at one eye under his glasses, looking exhausted. When he drops his hand and blinks open his eyes, he looks at the bagels, and his face seems to turn to stone.

"Hungry, James?" Sirius asks, hoping to snap him out of whatever furious state he's gone into now.

"No, I've just lost my appetite. Fucking hate bagels," James mutters, then turns around and walks right back out.

Sirius stares after him for a bit, feeling wrong-footed in a way he never has before when it comes to James. He looks over at Pandora and Remus, as if they have the answers, but they look just as lost as he does. Finally, Sirius looks to Regulus, who has his eyes squeezed shut as he strangles the edge of the counter with both hands, and he's so visibly *not alright* that Sirius aches, aches, aches to comfort him. He can't anymore.

He lost that, too.

~•~

Regulus isn't sure how it happens exactly. Just one of those odd coincidences that no one sees coming, one that leads to a very awkward, tense moment for everyone involved.

There was no preparation for the interviews this time, seeing as there's really no point. Sirius and Regulus have done this before. They know what to expect. Really, they all just sat down and discussed what Rita would likely bring up, but there is one aspect of this that's unknown. The interviews are different this year, in that all the tributes will be on stage together at one time, sitting towards the back and taking turns to come up to the chairs. It's a Quarterly Memorial thing, apparently, but that's not the uncharted territory. No, it's the fact that all the tributes are already Victors, and none of them are happy about being here. It could lead to trouble.

Regulus hopes it does. He hopes that each and every interview is used to twist the knife deeper into the Hallows. He hopes it fans their flames and invites in more rage. He hopes Riddle watches and feels his power tremble in his hands. Though he may never lose it, Regulus relishes in the thought that, even for a moment, he might feel the fear of that possibility.

Dorcas has gotten him and Sirius ready, and this time, she's made them *both* look equally dangerous. Like walking weapons again, dual blades ready to cut. They're in some sort of lightweight, shimmering armor that glimmers and glints with stars. They are stars, in name, and as beautiful as stars are, they could envelope the world and set it ablaze.

They look like they're going to.

Regulus likes the way he looks, even more so because James clenches his fists, leans against the wall like he wishes he had brought his cane to brace against, and inhales sharply the moment he sees him, though he doesn't say one word.

It's an altogether silent walk to the lift to get to where they're going for the interview, Dorcas and Pandora coming along. It's *in* the lift where things get dicey. See, the lift is spacious enough that no one is really too close, but not spacious enough for that to remain the case when, at the next floor, the doors open to reveal a rather large group waiting to get on.

By large, Regulus means Frank, Alice, Augusta, Marlene, and Eli. Five more on top of the five that's already inside. They all shuffle inside with low murmurs of apologies and chuckles, shifting around to make room. Somehow, in all the quick movement and arranging, Regulus ends up pressed right up against James in the corner, rather against his will.

Regulus really doesn't mean to. It just sort of happens, and then there's not really any room to do anything about it. Frank ends up smoosed close to Alice, which makes Augusta squint suspiciously at both of them. Dorcas and Marlene seem to go to desperate lengths to avoid each other, which means Dorcas practically stitches herself to Pandora's side, who gets visibly flustered when she accidentally gets a face full of Dorcas' chest as she tries to duck out of the way. This makes Marlene glare at her from where she's sort of just holding Eli up, because he is, as always, very drunk. He may or may not be sleeping.

Sirius, the fucking bastard, seems to be the most comfortable right in the middle of it all, bumping elbows with Marlene and chatting cheerfully with Frank. James, on the other hand, is stiff and audibly grinding his teeth.

"Could you back up?" James whispers heatedly, his nostrils flaring as he pins a harsh look on Regulus.

"Sorry," Regulus mumbles, feeling his face get hot as he tries, and fails, to invite space between them. His arm has somehow gotten trapped behind James' back, and he braces his other one against James' hip, because he honestly doesn't have anywhere else to put it as he tries to shift away.

James' free hand flies down to grab Regulus' wrist, and their eyes meet, and that's it. They both stop moving. They don't speak, don't even breathe, just simply stare at each other. The lift dings. The doors open. Everyone files out.

Regulus and James do not.

The lift empties, and Regulus swallows thickly as he darts his gaze out the doors currently sliding shut to see the others continuing on, none the wiser that they're missing two. At the last second, Pandora glances around, then back, locating them. She blinks, and then the doors close all the way.

The moment they do, the lift starts moving again, and Regulus turns his gaze back to James. His heart is racing. He feels a bit mad, honestly, standing here and shaking and struggling to breathe, because he knows—he *knows* what's about to happen.

Sure enough, James reaches out to smack the stop button, the lift coming to a halt, and then he's backing Regulus up against the wall and kissing him like his life depends on it.

Regulus meets him halfway, or maybe he tugs him in, he isn't sure. All he knows is that he has James under his hands again, and he doesn't care about his makeup or his clothes or anything at all other than this, this, this.

James, despite his anger and the hatred he claims to feel, touches and kisses Regulus desperately, with reverence, groaning in defeat, utterly pitiful. Regulus would feel sorry for him if he wasn't in the same exact predicament. It's difficult staying away from someone you want this badly, and Regulus can feel James' want matching his own, tangling with it, harsh and burning with simple, unspeakable *need.*

Regulus knows that James is a complicated, complex tangle of emotions in regards to him at the moment, hardly able to make sense of it all, or balance it. There's nothing to be done about it, not when it feels this fucking good.

James' love has grown thorns, and Regulus is happy to bleed.

"I'm going to *kill* Dorcas. You look so fucking—" James cuts himself off and practically whines into Regulus' throat, his hands gripping Regulus all over. A helpless, choked noise falls out of his mouth, and then he's bringing his head up to kiss him again, deeply, passionately.

Regulus clutches at him, giving as good as he gets, and then he's pushing James back, his chest heaving. James looks at him, gaze hooded as he studies Regulus, the very tip of his tongue touching his shiny-bitten bottom lip.

That look sizzles between them for a beat, and then Regulus is frantically walking James back against the opposite wall of the lift. James lets him, moving like a lure to draw Regulus in, and he braces his hands against the rail once he has gone as far as he can go, waiting, his eyelids hanging heavy, hooded, a sensual look that beckons at Regulus, hooks into his navel, crooks a finger and makes him want to kneel.

So he does.

Regulus proceeds to sink to his knees. James groans at the sight, and then his head hits the wall with a *thunk.* If anyone's waiting for the lift, well, they'll just have to take the stairs.

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"What did you *do?"* Dorcas blurts out in despair, looking completely and utterly horrified in a way Sirius has honestly never seen before. The shock—the drama of it all—is such a Hallow thing that he's reminded in a way he often *isn't* that Dorcas is a Hallow, too. Just one of the better ones.

Sirius swivels his head to see what she's looking at and is faced with the sight of James and Regulus approaching them quickly. Regulus no longer looks as put together as he did before, his hair a mess and quite a bit of his makeup smeared. He fails to meet Dorcas' eyes, his cheeks bright red.

"Um," Regulus croaks, then clears his throat rather violently, giving James a furtive side-eye, obviously asking for help with a look that tells everyone why he's in this state to start with.

James offers no help at all. He's not even flustered.

"Oh, oh, you are *so* lucky I am prepared at all times," Dorcas hisses, reaching out to grab Regulus' arm and march him off to the side with a scowl, digging in her purse. Pandora, as always, moves over to do damage control, soothing over Dorcas' frayed nerves while Regulus stands like a scolded child and holds still for Dorcas to get him presentable again.

Sirius turns to James and flatly says, "Really?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"So, you hate him, but you just can't keep your hands off him, is that it?"

"Sirius, I *said* I don't want to talk about it," James snaps, his voice low and sharp. "Besides, you're meant to be staying out of it, aren't you? So, stay out of it."

"He won't *talk to me,* James," Sirius chokes out, and James looks at him, swallowing. "He won't look at me, or have anything to do with me, or let me be there for him. He won't let me comfort him. Don't you get it? I'm *dead* to him."

James' face twitches, then softens. "Sirius…"

"He said it, and he meant it, and I just—I have to make my peace with that," Sirius continues, his voice thick. "But it's *especially* difficult when I'm just stuck watching you two hurt each other, and I can't even comfort either of you about it. He's—it's breaking his heart, James. You're breaking his heart. And I know, I *know* he has broken yours in every way possible, but he goes into the arena *tomorrow,* we both do, and this—it's only going to make it worse. You have so little time left—"

"Okay, that's—just don't. Please don't," James rasps, squeezing his eyes shut. He shakes his head, breathing in and out, his features twisted. Sirius can see him actively fighting the reminder. The truth.

"James," Sirius whispers.

"Please," James chokes out, flinching so hard that Sirius wants to reach out and pull him into his arms.

Sirius is planning to do just that, but they're interrupted by Pandora, who rushes over to say, "Sirius, they're about to bring the tributes on. You and Regulus have to go."

"You'll be watching from here?" Sirius checks, glancing between her and James.

"We'll be right here," Pandora assures him. "Dorcas will be out in the crowd, though, if you need a familiar face."

Sirius nods and reaches out to squeeze James' shoulder before pulling away, because that's really his only choice. He follows Regulus and Dorcas out of the room and down the hall. Dorcas is still fussing over Regulus as they walk, and he just puts up with it in silence, less chastised and more resigned now.

There is a large group waiting in the space off to the side of the stage, all the tributes dressed up and looking pretty, lingering in silence. Dorcas does one last thing to Regulus' hair, steals a quick glance at Marlene, who quickly looks away as soon as she does, and then she's rushing to go find her place in the crowd. After that, it's just waiting.

Sirius stands next to Regulus, wanting to say something, wanting to offer advice or words of comfort, but feeling so cold. Regulus is freezing him out, a thick wall of ice that won't melt or crack. Sirius can't get through to him, not anymore, so he knows trying would be fruitless.

It's not very long before someone is stepping out to usher them into motion, waving them through to the stage in order of district. Sirius and Regulus file in behind Augusta and Alice, and the muffled sounds of the crowd break through as soon as he starts climbing the stairs.

They're going *ballistic,* absolutely caught up in the sight of their favorites walking out in glitz and glam, trophies melted down in rivers of gold for them to fawn over. Rita is laughing, loud

and delighted, announcing each pair as they come in and take their seats. It takes a while for the crowd to calm down.

"Well, well, well, what an invigorating welcome to the 85th Quarterly Memorial!" Rita calls, raising her hands to silence the crowd before they can start up again. "Why don't we get into it, shall we? Let's start with the Hallow's darling Narcissa Black, from district one!"

"Thank you, Rita," Narcissa says softly once she reaches the seat at the front of the stage, her hands folded gently in her lap, a very small hunch to her shoulders. There's just the slightest wobble to her voice that depicts fear, but only a little, like she's doing her very best to cover it up.

Sirius listens as Rita talks to Narcissa about the fact that she's originally from district six and that she's here with three relatives, one who is her older sister. They also revisit her first games, touching on the fact that she was deadly with a bow and arrows and played a lot of people for fools, which likely won't be possible again this year, now that people are prepared for her. Narcissa takes this in stride, bluntly stating that she's *still* very good with a bow, but she wouldn't think for a second that this group of people are those she can outsmart the same way she did the first time around.

She's very…diplomatic, Sirius would say. She's good with her words, picking and choosing wisely what to say, leading the conversation without Rita even realizing that she has lost control of it. Sirius doesn't remember a lot about Narcissa, but watching her highlight reels, thinking about what family she comes from, what life she chose with Lucius, and how she's handling this interview—well, she's on Sirius' level when it comes to manipulation. Oh, she's *good.*

Throughout the interview, there are little moments where Narcissa's words catch, where she has to clear her throat and blink harshly, seeming to need a moment to get herself together. It doesn't take very long before Rita can't resist pointing it out, focusing on it like a vulture.

"My dear Narcissa, you seem quite emotional about something," Rita says gently, reaching out to cover Narcissa's arm as she gazes at her sadly. She clicks her tongue. *Tut, tut, tut.* Oh, she's awful, truly. "I understand being upset, especially since you're inside the arena with three family members."

"Three would be upsetting, but what's really too much to bear is…" Narcissa trails off, tears building in her eyes as she lifts her hand and places it on her stomach, resting it there carefully. "Well, actually, it's four."

Rita goes pale so fast that it's almost comical. The entire room is filled with immediate gasps, and Rita snatches her hand back from Narcissa's arm like she was just burned. Her eyes are very wide. "Four? You—you're pr—you're—"

"Pregnant?" Narcissa fills in sadly. She looks down at her stomach, her tears falling. "Yes, just so. I was going to name them Draco."

Instantly, the crowd loses their fucking minds. To Sirius' right, he hears a soft, punched-out laugh escape Regulus, and Sirius can't stop himself from echoing it. Fucking hell. Oh, *shit.*

"You can't send a pregnant person into the arena!"

"Stop the games! Stop the games!"

"She was going to name them *Draco!"*

"Keep her out! Keep them all out!"

The room is a mixture of people shouting or people sobbing hysterically, a cacophony of pure chaos as Narcissa sniffles and strokes her stomach, while Rita looks about five seconds away from a fucking panic attack. It takes *everything* in Sirius not to fold over in his chair and just —bust out laughing.

Oh, fucking shit, this is—it's *brilliant.* Narcissa likely isn't even pregnant—Sirius is almost one hundred percent certain she's not, considering their last conversation—but the Hallows don't know that, and they're *pissed.* They're absolutely rioting in outrage on her behalf, and it's fucking glorious to witness. Helplessly, for just a moment, Sirius is so fucking proud to be

related to her that he can almost recall the feeling he had long ago, like a wisp of a dream, back when she was his favorite.

"O-Okay! Okay, that's—that'll be all!" Rita calls loudly, stuttering over her words. She quickly ushers Narcissa up and gestures her to go back to the seat.

It takes *ages* for the room to fall silent again. A particularly furious group towards the back have to be escorted out by a few Aurors, shrieking the whole way out. Towards the middle, Dorcas is sitting with her fist pressed against her mouth, but it does very little to hide her grin.

Sirius is practically *vibrating,* because as much as he might not like her, Bellatrix is next, and she's fucking *insane.* There's no way Rita is equipped to handle her; no one is, really.

Sure enough, Bellatrix's interview goes a bit wonky, too. At first, it seems fine. Rita does not mention that Bellatrix is apparently an aunt in the making. Instead, she focuses on Bellatrix's last games, asking if she's going to be a death eater again—the answer is yes, and it's delivered with no shame whatsoever, which makes Sirius wrinkle his nose. Rita also asks what Bellatrix has been up to since her games, how she likes living in district one, and if she has a lover.

Bellatrix answers everything with an aloof, bored sort of indifference, like none of it interests her. What *does* seem to interest her is the threats she keeps sneakily slipping in to Rita, slowly at first, barely even noticeable, but then they get more obvious, and Bellatrix watches with delight as Rita squirms.

Bellatrix's promise to be a good show is what everyone loves about her. The drama. The maniacal energy that just *radiates* off of her, unapologetically. She's looking forward to killing; she wants to get started right away.

"It'd be an honor, wouldn't it, to die by my hand? Bloody and brutal. Your life, taken by me. I'll own it. I'll own *you,"* Bellatrix says, and she's speaking right to Rita, but the whole crowd seems tuned in, *drawn* in by morbid fascination from her promise of malevolence and violence.

Even Rita isn't immune, it seems. Bellatrix leans forward in her chair, going to Rita in a way no tributes ever do, lifting her hand and crooking her finger. Rita sways in like a worm on a hook, looking absolutely terrified, but completely unable to get free anyway. A snake caught in the trap of deadlier snake that bobs and weaves, charmed by it, mirroring it helplessly.

"Wouldn't you like that, Rita?" Bellatrix asks, her voice soft and sweet as she curls her finger under Rita's chin, stroking her cheek with her thumb. "Hm? Wouldn't it feel so very good to bleed out in my hands? There's something everlasting between the dead and their murderer. You'd be with me always. Don't you want that?"

"Yes," Rita chokes out, the answer wrenched out of her like she's never been so afraid in her life.

Bellatrix smiles at her, wide and bright, then lifts her hand and boops Rita on the nose. Rita flinches, jolting in place, and despite that, she's flushed and flustered. Laughing, Bellatrix leans back, relaxing into her seat with a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes. What a mad, mad woman.

In this context, Sirius can respect it. He even finds a sick, twisted sense of vindictive amusement in it.

After Bellatrix, there's Yaxley, who admittedly had two very tough acts to follow. He doesn't manage so well, not a favorite of the Hallows, and not someone Rita seems afraid of enough to refrain from verbally abusing. Yaxley takes it all with a plastic smile on his face, his eyes blazing with anger.

After Yaxley is Lestrange, who does *much* better. He was beloved by the Hallows the last time, and he still is. Very charming, that one. He leans into the fact that his older brother is his mentor, talking quite a bit about the fact that he'd be missed terribly by him if something were to happen, shameless in how unfair it is for him and his brother to be put in this position, particularly by the Hallow, a home to people he states he's also considered family as well. Whether it's true or just something to stir up the crowd, it does indeed cause *a lot* of people to be upset. Like Rabastan is their brother, too.

Sirius feels a sharp sensation in the center of his chest that he can't make sense of, really. It's a burning feeling that spreads and makes him—well, he doesn't even *know,* but it upsets him

as he sits there and listens to Rabastan Lestrange talk. It's not until Sirius steals a glance over at Regulus, who is blank-faced, that he realizes the feeling is *jealousy.*

There has never, not once, been a time in Sirius' life where he was jealous or envious of someone else in regards to Regulus. He's never been put in a position where he's *had* to feel that way, because every time he and Regulus became distant, it was a mutual thing. They always lost each other, by choice, a broken bond they *both* walked away from.

This time, it's just Regulus, so Sirius listens to Rabastan talk about how much he loves his brother, and he feels—jealous. The harsh, brittle pressure of envy. He doesn't regret making the decision to do everything to get Regulus home, but he wishes that, until he's actually dead, he could still be alive to Regulus. Still here, still his big brother, always his big brother. He wants that. He wants them to be okay. He wants to be told that, no matter what, Regulus does love him.

He's going to die never hearing Regulus say he loves him, because even if he said it years ago, or even as a child, Sirius can't remember. Sirius doesn't know if he does, not anymore. Maybe he never actually did.

Following Lestrange is Rowle, who—like Yaxley—is a bit verbally abused by Rita at first, until he starts talking about *his* willingness to kill, and then she seems to be afraid of him, too. Carrow is after, and like Lestrange, she talks about her brother, and she talks about how upset he was when he found out that there was a chance she could be going back in. She skips *no* details on how awful the Quarterly Memorial announcement was for her and her family, and it only further angers the crowd.

Majesty is next, who is commended for their last games, and they admit that they're just going to do what they do best and survive however they have to. After that is Asher, who is very good with poisons and isn't shy about owning up to this fact. She dodges most of Rita's questions and laughs when asked, wryly, if she expects the games to end so soon this time, like it did last time for her.

Alice is first from five, and Sirius feels his heart jump as he looks out at them. He can't help but think about how close Frank is to them, his best friend, and Sirius might have to…

They're good through their interview, for the most part. They seem to stutter over the topic of their parents, which does intrigue Sirius, admittedly. As far as he knows, Alice gave their parents the house they got as a Victor and moved in with Frank, but they have a good relationship with their family, unlike Frank's strained relationship with his mum. Rita clearly sees Alice's difficulties with talking about it, pressing on it like a bruise, but Alice shuts her down, coldly.

Augusta… Oh, she's—she is a sight to behold, honestly. She gets into the seat and *immediately* starts tearing Rita apart one sharp, derisive word at a time. She looks down her nose at Rita and no doubt makes her feel small. It's a mother's talent, that ability to make you feel absolutely worthless, and Sirius would know. Augusta weaponizes it against Rita, and if Rita didn't have mother-related issues *before,* she certainly does now.

Sirius is after Augusta, and he is so thoroughly entertained by all that's happened so far that it's not that hard at all to flash a knee-melting grin at the camera as he heads towards the seat at the front of the stage. He knows Remus is currently watching from the suite, and it makes him feel warm.

"Here he is, Sirius Black, as I live and breathe," Rita greets him with twinkling eyes, looking absolutely delighted to be speaking to him. "I must admit, I'm *very* excited about having the chance to talk to you, Sirius."

"As you should be, Rita," Sirius tells her, leaning back in his chair with his hands lazily resting on the arms in a sign of easy confidence. He spreads his legs a little, like he's comfortable, like he's splaying out for their eyes to feast on him.

"Why don't we start with your reaping then?" Rita asks.

"Which one?" Sirius replies, arching an eyebrow.

It's a testament to everyone's displeasure with the Quarterly Memorial rule this year when, with one simple question, the crowd starts muttering in distaste and anger. Rita looks massively uncomfortable, out of sorts, and to further put her out, Sirius looks out at the crowd gently and lifts his finger to his lips, saying *I know, I know* in a soothing tone that has each and every one of them settling down. Completely at his mercy. If he snapped his fingers, they'd be out of their seats in seconds. It's a power that he knows exactly how to use.

Rita *visibly* doesn't like the fact that he has more control than her on her own show, but there's very little she can actually do about it. She can be a fucking prick, though, and that's exactly what she does. "Well, I suppose they're both very similar, aren't they? At both reapings, you volunteered for your baby brother, and both times, he still ended up going in anyway."

What Rita doesn't know is that Sirius anticipated this, and he knows exactly how to use it to his advantage. She's a fucking idiot too blinded by the power she *thinks* she has to even realize the magnitude of the power he *knows* he has.

"Yes, it's—" Sirius swallows harshly and sweeps his gaze over the crowd, beseeching. "It's tragic. The worst thing I could possibly think of. You know, I—I would give anything, *do* anything, if only it wasn't this way. Does it have to be this way, truly? After all the love and warmth we've invited into your lives, all of you, this just feels as if it's being thrown back into our faces. All of us up here on this stage had and still have so much to offer, and you don't want it?"

This, predictably, riles the crowd up quite a bit. There are outcries of people arguing, promising they *do* want it, they want *him;* there are countless people making the fact that they *don't* agree with this, any of it, very clear; there are more than a few people shouting demands for the rule to be changed, for the Quarterly Memorial to be abolished.

This time, Sirius doesn't stop it.

At one point, someone front the front row literally throws themselves out of their seat towards the stage, sobbing, shouting about how much they love him. They try to climb up, but Aurors come rushing in to drag them out while they thrash and scream that this isn't fair, that it's *wrong.*

"Okay! *Okay,* let's just—hey! Let's hear what else Sirius has to say!" Rita shouts, waving her hands frantically until at least a few people calm down so she can speak over them as she turns to address Sirius. "You—yes, you spoke of love, didn't you? Let's talk about your *love,* Sirius. You sure have a lot of that to go around, from what I hear."

"Is that so?" Sirius asks, and the moment he speaks, the entire room falls quiet to listen again. He chuckles and glances at the camera, *feeling* his face soften. "Funny you'd say that, Rita, when my love is truly for one person. Just one."

"Oh?" Rita asks, now sounding gleeful. "Really? So, there's someone out there that has your heart?"

"Yes," Sirius murmurs, and the room fills with low hisses and quiet gasps. "Yes, there is."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Rita says. "Tell us about them. When did you meet them? Are they waiting for you back home, or is it someone from the Hallow?"

Sirius bites down on a smile, feeling his face get hot, knowing he's blushing and not caring one bit. "They're here, in the Hallow. I found them shining like the moon in the sky. My moon. I love them more than I could ever explain."

"Who is it?" Rita continues eagerly. "A sponsor? A fellow mentor? Someone here tonight?"

"Oh, they know who they are," Sirius says, smiling as he looks at the camera again, and when he looks away, looks at the crowd, he lets his smile fade. "It's a shame. What I would not give to remain a glowing star in the sky with my moon, but I fear I'm a star on the cusp of going out."

Someone out in the crowd bursts into tears again, and Sirius gives a sad smile, looking down and shifting in his seat to close himself off, shrink into himself, small like a star already dying right before their very eyes. *No one* is happy about it.

Rita coughs. "Ah, that's—yes, just a shame, but—"

"You know," Sirius interrupts, his voice gentle, "I've never been so loved by anyone as I am by my moon, and if I had the choice, I would not leave them. I wouldn't leave any of you, if it was in my hands to decide. But it's not. It's in Master Riddle's hands, and I have to ask…

Why should we have to pay for the crimes of someone else that came before us? Our bonds with the Hallow is true. I don't believe any of us have ever, or will ever, give room to doubt that, so why does Master Riddle? Is it not true that, since it was in his hands to make this rule, it's also in his hands to unmake it?"

"Okay! Interview over! Back to your seat, Sirius, thank you for joining us!" Rita calls out over yet another outpouring of demands and fury from the crowd.

Sirius stands amongst all the rage, all the tears, all the pleas for his life, and he ducks his head the same way he's seen Remus do, puts his hands behind his back just the same way Remus has, and goes to sit back in his seat.

After all, he's a servant to the Hallow, too. They all are.

Here he is, demanding their freedom.

~•~

You could not pry the words from Regulus with a fucking crowbar, but he is genuinely so pleased with what Sirius just did. It's actually difficult not to turn and beam at him for this, just for a second, so simply *proud* of him that he nearly does it, only to stop all at once when the same feelings come rushing back in. The pain. The anger. The betrayal.

It's such a horrible thing, because only days ago, everything in Regulus was at ease with Sirius. Comfortable with him, comforted by him. Safe. Trusting. Even admiring.

He should know by now how quickly things can change.

The room is practically *shaking* with the people that are throwing fits on their behalf, and Rita is struggling to get everyone to calm down again. It takes a while, and it doesn't seem to help that Sirius remains hunched in his seat like a shadow, unobtrusive, unreachable. They all want to keep him, and they can't. It's causing quite a bit of trouble.

If Rita thinks that the tides will change with Regulus' interview, she is very fucking wrong. He intends to keep the momentum going, whatever it takes.

This time, when Regulus sits down in the seat, he doesn't do it under a veneer of innocence. He remains stoic, blank, very sharp and very cold. He holds Rita's gaze and can practically see her hope for this going better die in her eyes. Good.

"Regulus," Rita greets weakly, swallowing. "I—well, if I'm honest, I…genuinely hoped I wouldn't be speaking to you again so soon, especially not like this."

"Me and you both," Regulus says.

Rita grimaces slightly, and the crowd is already so pissed off that his response only seems to make it worse. "Yes, well, I do think there's some honor in it, though. You *chose* this. Surely you have no regrets about taking your love's place."

"No," Regulus admits. "I have none. What I do regret is that it had to happen at all. Did you know, Rita, that a mere five minutes before the Quarterly Memorial announcement, James and I stood together in a kitchen and shared hot cocoa? He held me. We laughed. We were happy." He glances out at the crowd, seeing multiple stricken expressions, and he just keeps going, fucking *ruthless* about it. "I think that was the last time we got to be truly happy together. After all that we went through, all that we fought for, and we still ended up nothing more than a great, big tragedy."

"Oh, that's messed up! It isn't fair!"

"Stop the fucking games!"

"He was just here last year! Don't make him go back!"

"What if James loses him?! Oh, fuck, what if—"

Rita shouts over the crowd again. It takes a few minutes, and then she's whipping towards him, face strained. "Yes, that's just—oh, it's quite terrible, but surely you're planning to do everything you can to get back to him, right?"

"But how could it ever be the same, if I managed to?" Regulus counters bluntly. "Of course, there's the fact that I might *not* manage to. After all, there are twenty-three other people who are skilled and much farther away from past trauma than I am. You know, the trauma from the arena I was in only just last year. Have you ever thought about that, hm? The trauma one has to deal with in the aftermath of their games? It does impact our lives, believe it or not, and it surely has impacted mine and James'. That's not even to mention *James'* grief when he looks at me, looks into my eyes, so like my brother's, and sees his dead best friend, if I were to make it out. Tell me, Rita, what plan could I have that would save us from all of that?"

Rita opens and closes her mouth, staring at him in shock. She says nothing. No one makes a sound.

"Go on," Regulus insists, flicking his gaze over the crowd, then staring right at Rita. "Surely *you* have the answers on how to make sure my love story has a happy ending. I'd love to hear it, because I just don't know. So? Go on, then. I'm waiting."

"It's—it's not impossible, I don't think," Rita croaks. "If you fight, you could—"

"I shouldn't *have* to fight," Regulus snaps. "I already fought, didn't I? We all have. And here we are, forced to fight again. What's a love story without conflict, right? That's this. That's all of this, I hope you realize. All of *you* are the conflict, and the worst part—the absolute *worst* part—is that we were so close to our happy ending. So close, but never close enough."

"You—you have so much motivation, though," Rita tries, having to raise her voice over the people sobbing out in the crowd. "It's—ah, well, I believe in you. We all do, don't we?"

This does not get the response she seems so desperate for. The Hallows are absolutely *furious.* Rita has never looked so powerless, so worried, as she does right now.

"It's a shame…" Regulus sighs and shakes his head. "You know, I could almost find it in myself to—to just be grateful for what James and I did get to have, if it wasn't for the promise of the future we were so close to. And we'll never have that future together. It's gone."

"No, you mustn't think that way, Regulus."

"But it's true. Our plan—well, that can never happen. If it wasn't for that, then I think I wouldn't be so upset."

"If it wasn't for…what?"

Regulus once again glances around at everyone, taking in the tear-soaked faces and pure rage, and he lets himself think about how much it fucking hurts that James is lost to him, and will only slip further away when he speaks next. He lets it show on his face as he says, "If it wasn't for the wedding."

"The—" Rita chokes, staring at him with bulging eyes, the entire room ringing with stunned, horrified silence. "The wedding? You and James were—"

"Getting married? Yes. We planned to, anyway. We even hoped to have the wedding here in the Hallow," Regulus declares, a boldfaced lie that makes him ache and makes him feel sick and makes him want to rip the fucking world apart. "He was going to be my husband. But we lost that chance, too. I suppose that's something we only get to have in some other life."

The silence only lasts for a few seconds longer, and then everyone erupts all at once, people shouting and crying and once again making demands.

Rita doesn't even have to dismiss him.

He gets up and walks back to his seat, glancing at the camera where he knows James is watching. He hopes James will understand, even while he knows James will be upset.

Regulus promised himself he was going to make them pay, and he meant it. That's the promise he's chosen to keep.

Maybe, one day, James will forgive him for it.

~•~

Dorcas scrubs her hand over her mouth, her heart racing in her chest as she watches a group of Aurors have to pull out yet more Hallows causing a scene. Her mouth is so dry, and her hands are shaking. She's never seen anything like this before.

At first, it had been good. Dorcas had *relished* in it. She couldn't help it, because she can only imagine how Riddle is feeling right now, safe inside his castle, watching everything spiral out of control. The consequences of his actions, his choices; even he isn't safe from them.

It had felt good to realize that, to start with. But now, Dorcas is scared. She's scared for Sirius and Regulus in particular, who caused trouble no one has ever dared to. Trouble that will no doubt get *them* into trouble. They're pushing it, showing too much defiance, invigorating rebellion right here in the Hallow—and Riddle surely won't stand for it.

If they push too far, she doesn't know what could happen. There's a time crunch they're all on, whether or not they know it, and Dorcas still has so much to do. Lily has so much to do. This isn't something they can have done so soon, and with Sirius and Regulus stirring up trouble, it feels like the clock is only ticking faster. Her plan is very delicate, and what Sirius and Regulus have just done is—bold.

What's the saying about tables that turn?

The worst part is learning that Minerva—and Dumbledore, infuriatingly enough—was right. The world is on the brink of a war, and this… Just like Minerva said, the rule is doing what it's supposed to. Dorcas hates that Dumbledore's plan is actually working, and she hates even more that, if she had let the war be a priority as she meant to, then she would be in full support of this. But, as Minerva put it, Dorcas is leading with her heart, and she'll go to desperate lengths for it.

For Marlene.

For her friends here that she cares about.

For those who never deserved to go through this again.

The interviews continue, and the momentum is not lost, not even once. Those from seven and eight are quiet and fairly mild-mannered, but they take it upon themselves to express their discomfort with the rule that forces them to go back in, commenting that it would be nice if they didn't have to, which keeps the fires of anger throughout the crowd still blazing, if not growing out of control again.

District nine is, first, Dixon. He talks about being a mentor. He talks about how restricting it is, how there are rules to follow, like not falling in love with fellow mentors, which could split loyalties, and he also talks about how much money goes into the games that could be used for starving districts instead. He talks about how the Hallow is known for rejecting people when they get tired of them, how that's what happened to him, forced out of his mentoring position and now forced back into the arena. The insinuation that the Hallow is now rejecting each and every previous Victor on that stage, those that all these Hallows hold dear, is *not* handled well at all.

Following Dixon is Emmeline, who keeps the momentum as well. Dorcas—despite her previously jealousy—finds that she has a lot of respect for Emmeline who gets right up there and bluntly questions the morality in the Quarterly Memorial, after the blatant promise that Victors could live safely after they won their games. A promise broken by Riddle himself. She states it outright, asking how anyone can trust the Master of the Hallow when he can't even be taken at his word, when he won't uphold traditions that have never once been broken before. It's a very, *very* dangerous thing for her to do, and she doesn't even fucking flinch when she does it.

After Emmeline is Mavis, who drags Velvet up to join in on the interview, too. They both claim they want to spend as much time together as they can, and their blatant love for each other sends the crowd into hysterics yet again. Velvet and Mavis do something that no one—other than James—has ever done before. They lay down an ultimatum of sorts, promising that, if they're forced into that arena together, they will kill each other and die together rather than have to lose one another or be without the other.

Predictably, this does not go over well, not one bit. The Hallows are fucking *devastated* by this, and no matter how much Rita tries to change their mind, they refuse. They say it, and they swear they mean it. Dorcas believes they do.

After them, it's Eli, Marlene's fellow tribute. He's…drunk. It makes Dorcas so incredibly sad when she watches him get up and stumble to his seat, flopping down gracelessly and missing his mouth when he swipes at it a little sloppily. Rita's nose crinkles in visible distaste, so Dorcas is assuming that he's sweating copious amounts of alcohol right now.

"Right, Eli," Rita mutters. "It's been some years since you've been back in the Hallow, hasn't it? At least five now."

"Long time," Eli slurs, bobbing his head. He hiccups and looks out over the crowd. "Kept looking for Alphard, but I—I couldn' find 'im. Been looking for a long, long time."

"Alphard…" Rita's eyebrows fly up. "Do you mean Alphard Black, Eli?"

"That's the one."

"Who was he to you?"

"Everything," Eli responds simply, blinking almost sleepily at Rita, not seeming to realize that everyone is staring at him in disbelief, including the entire Black family currently present.

"Do you—by *everything,* do you mean that with…romantic connotations?" Rita asks, visibly baffled. Eli squints at her, seeming to struggle with parsing those words out, and then he just nods. "He was your lover?"

"Yeah," Eli breathes out, his weathered face sagging as his eyes flutter shut. "Yeah, he was. Couldn't—we couldn't be together, you know, once the Hallow found out. Kept us apart, made him stop being a Mentor. They said he found his way into a bottle and never found his way back out. Suppose I did the same when he found his way into a grave."

"Oh," Rita says softly, then she clears her throat and darts her gaze towards the other tributes. "Eli, did you—are you aware that Alphard's nieces and nephews are here?"

"I miss him," Eli whispers. "Still miss him."

"Eli?" Rita mutters.

It seems Eli has fallen asleep. Just—slumped over, cheek braced on his loose fist, mouth slack. He's even snoring. The room is silent, heavy, thick with upset for just one more thing. Even fucking *Eli* has managed to keep the momentum going.

No matter how much Rita tries to wake Eli up, he remains passed out. In the end, Marlene has to get up since she's next and help him out of the chair and back to his original seat. He wakes up, confused by being in motion, but falls asleep again once he's settled in. Marlene pats his shoulder before swiveling and marching to sit across from Rita.

Dorcas feels her breath freeze in her lungs just looking at her, just as it has all night. Marlene's stylist isn't Dorcas, but there is genuinely nothing Marlene wouldn't look good in, Dorcas is sure. She does look uncomfortable, though, in a dress. Maybe if it wasn't as short as it is, she wouldn't, but Dorcas can tell that she's not a fan of it, just by how she tugs at it and how awkward she reacts to it, like she can't be herself in it, with so much skin showing to all these people she doesn't trust.

It's making her tense, and Dorcas hates it, because as gorgeous as she is, always, Dorcas would never have put her in clothes that made her feel so exposed. Yes, fashion can be about expression, but it can also be about protection, too. Marlene feels better in clothes she has room to move in, clothes that she doesn't have to accommodate, but rather those that will accommodate *her.* She likes clothes that she can use as just another shield, and why shouldn't she? What's wrong with that? She deserves to be comfortable.

Marlene deserves to be safe.

Dorcas is going to do what she has to so Marlene will *be* safe, or she'll fucking die trying, dammit. All she needs is for Marlene to get through this without putting herself in even more danger than she's already in. Is that too much to ask for?

Apparently it is, because Marlene is *not* hiding the fact that she's fucking furious about being back here. Even sitting there in heels she has already kicked off and a dress she keeps tugging down repeatedly, obviously frustrated by it, Marlene breaks through her own visible discomfort and doesn't hesitate to make it very clear that she's *pissed.*

Rita seems to sense this, and like an idiot, she thinks that addressing it would be a good idea. "You seem quite worked up, Marlene. Is it your outfit? You look really nice, shockingly. I don't think you had a stylist that really enhanced your beauty the last time you were a tribute."

"Well, the clothes surely aren't fucking helping, but no, Rita, if you'd believe it, that's not my primary source of frustration at the moment."

"Oh? Is it perhaps your family, or a lover, or—"

"You know what it is?" Marlene cuts in sharply, her shoulders one tense line as her eyes flash with that same anger, that same resentment, that Dorcas first saw in her the day Vanity and Hodge died. "I'll tell you what it is, Rita."

"Actually," Rita starts, because *now* she can sense the danger, but it's a bit late for that, at this point.

"No, shut the fuck up," Marlene spits out, and Rita's mouth drops open as she rears back, absolutely *appalled.* Marlene obviously doesn't give a shit. She turns to address the crowd, who all seem restless, just waiting for one more thing to get pissed off about. "The reaping—you know what it was always meant to be, a simple game of odds, yeah? *May the odds be ever in your favor,* you all say. Where the fuck were my odds when I was one of the only two tributes on my stage? This isn't a fucking *game.* Call it what it is. It's—"

"Alright, that's—yes, I think we're done here," Rita cuts in sharply, because the crowd is getting worked up again.

"Oh, no, we've just gotten started," Marlene retorts. "What it really is, what it's *always* been, is an execution with extra steps you're all too blind to see properly because they dress us up and parade us in front of cameras and tell you our deaths don't mean anything just because we can't do anything about it. How many *children* have been executed to this? Who's to say yours aren't next? Who's to say *you're* not next?"

"That's *enough!"* Rita bursts out, gripping her chair as the crowd starts responding, growing in volume, a ripple effect of fear sweeping across them as Marlene lays it all out and makes them fucking *look at it.*

"Your beloved fucking Master can go back on the promise to keep Victors out of the arena, clearly, and who's to say he won't go back on his promise that you, *all* of you, are safe from this fate?" Marlene demands. She launches out of her chair, kicking her heels aside carelessly, face flushed. "And when it's you, your lovers, your friends, your family, your kids—what will you do? Will you stand up then? You would, wouldn't you? So stand up *now!* Stand the fuck up! *Get up!"*

The first person out of their chair is Sirius, followed very swiftly by Emmeline, and then Regulus, and then all the tributes on the stage are standing up all at once, and the crowd follows suit. It's *immediately* chaos *,* a riot breaking out that has the Aurors flooding the room in waves, people yelling and protesting. All the tributes are standing at full height, even Eli, who is being held up by Emmeline and seems very confused about all the commotion, but is supportive nonetheless.

"Cut the cameras! Cut the—" Rita's voice is drowned out, but the cameras all immediately dip, except reality isn't just a daydream or a nightmare reeling on a screen; it keeps going even when the cameras are off.

Dorcas is a bit caught up in the whole thing, seeing as everyone around her got to her feet, and it was either do the same or get trampled. Not that she doesn't want to participate, obviously, but she *really* can't have her position for what comes next compromised in any capacity.

She stays long enough to see Hallows fighting Aurors for possibly the first time in their lives, utterly enraged; she stays long enough to see the tributes on stage being escorted swiftly away, walking tall and proud; she stays long enough to be sure that Marlene is safe, at least for the moment, and then she gets as far away as fucking possible, as quickly as possible.

She makes it out just before the gunshots start.

~•~

"I want them dead."

There's a beat of silence, patient, calm. Riddle means that. He is absolutely, unequivocally *not* joking. Not that he's the type of man to joke in the first place, nor the type of man to not have people killed when he wants them dead, unless—on the rare chance—he can be convinced otherwise. Severus has known him for years, at this point, and the only person who *has* ever managed to change his mind is Minerva McGonagall, who he just so happens to be speaking to now.

Severus dares to believe she will manage it a second time. It's absolutely vital that she does, because there are twenty-four soon to be tributes (again) being held at an undisclosed location within the building, quite literally one order away from execution.

"Yes, well, tomorrow will be the beginning of seeing to that," Minerva says simply. She's sitting on the other side of Riddle's desk, her back to Severus, seemingly relaxed. She has

every reason to be afraid, and yet, the horcrux hornet in a jar on the desk remains settled down. No signs of fear from anyone.

Riddle is… Well, Severus has seen the man in various states before—angry, focused, calm, bored, displeased—but he has never once seen him in agitated distress.

It's oddly satisfying.

"I want them to *suffer,"* Riddle hisses, eyes flashing as he leans forward to pin a sharp look on Minerva. "This cannot simply go unpunished. This blatant defiance demands a response that will prove the futility in even *attempting* anything further."

Minerva gives it a pause, then calmly says, "I do believe that the arena will serve as adequate punishment. Sir, the…uprising that just took place resulted in the loss of Hallow lives; our people; *your* people. A response would only prompt a further outcry. Your silence on the matter—unless you're actually willing to change the rule entirely—will speak volumes. The games will commence just as they always do, and that will prove the futility in defiance on its own, just as it always has."

"That's not enough," Riddle insists.

"Would you see them marched out and killed, then?" Minerva asks bluntly. "Perhaps we could televise it and infuriate the people even more? Shall we kill all the tributes and start over? Throw another reaping?" She waits, and when he says nothing, only balling one hand into a fist on the desktop, she gives a terse nod. "This is one occasion that I believe simply *seeing it through,* as it were, is the best and only option. In any case, I can assure you, they will indeed suffer in the arena."

Riddle is silent for a long time, his expression smoothing out as he relaxes his hand and slowly starts tapping one finger to the desk. After a beat, he says, "There will be one winner. I do not care what it takes, but you will not allow it to be Sirius or Regulus Black, am I understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that McKinnon girl, I want to see her suffer before she dies. Make her *know* it. Bottleneck any and all support from any sponsors and do not give her a moment of peace."

"Yes, sir."

"Severus."

"Yes, sir?" Severus asks instantly, stepping forward with his hands shaped around his gun.

"The McKinnon girl—does she have family?" Riddle asks.

Severus doesn't hesitate. "Parents, as well as extended family. An aunt, uncle, and a cousin with a husband and infant child."

"Kill them all."

"Yes, sir."

"I want her parents brought here in her final moments before being lifted out into the arena; have them executed in front of her," Riddle informs him. No different than the Prewetts. Well, Severus can't say he isn't consistent. "The extended family can be killed within the district. Have there been riots?"

"Only one so far."

"When?"

"Today, within the last hour," Severus admits, because he just got the report from the head Auror in district eleven. It was, predictably, in response to McKinnon's demand to *get up* during her interview. Her district did not take the words lightly and rioted on such a mass scale that he's going to have to send in new Aurors to replace the dead ones.

Riddle's lip curls in visible anger. "Dispatch someone to have the Aurors there immunized, just in case. In fact, I want every Auror in the districts and within the Hallow immunized."

"Yes, sir," Severus agrees, dipping his head. He's not too terribly fond of the memory of being immunized.

While it does protect him from any form of horcrux hornet venom, it wasn't a pleasant experience. The injection had burned enough that he had to grit his teeth and fight through the pain of it, and it had taken days for the itchy discomfort of heat to fully leave him. His body had adjusted, after a period of being quite ill—a belated effect of the immunization that took place days after he got it—but once the rash cleared from the injection site, he healed well enough.

Severus unfortunately knows very little about it, so he didn't have much information to give Albus. He isn't sure how the formula for the immunity to horcrux hornet venom came to be, or what ingredients it took to make it. All he *does* know is that it took months of trial and error before someone managed to survive, and even then, the effects of the horcrux hornet venom still persisted. It took more time and more trial and error before they were able to eradicate the effects enough that an immunization could be cleared, conveniently in just enough time for district six to be completely decimated.

As one of Riddle's closest consultants, Severus was chosen first out of all the Aurors to receive the immunization. Being the chief of all Aurors is not a light undertaking, and not one he takes lightly. He was given the position rather young, six years ago, because Riddle doesn't believe age impedes one's ability to properly prove themselves. He wouldn't, seeing as he came into his position as Master of the Hallow at a young age himself.

Severus worked hard to get where he is today. With him being from district two, this isn't much of a surprise. It's where Aurors are trained, and *being* an Auror is hailed as a high honor and a goal everyone should meet. A militaristic district cupped in the palm of the Hallow's hand. Severus never wanted to be an Auror; he only ever wanted to take care of his mother. Very little good that did him, in the end.

Sometimes, Severus wonders if Riddle even remembers her name. He knows the answer to that. Of course he doesn't. Riddle doesn't care to remember the names of the people he is responsible for the death of. He doesn't care about anything.

"The tributes," Riddle grits out, "are they still being held?"

"Yes, sir."

"Release them. They have one final night, then collect them in the morning before the sun has even risen. Don't allow them to say goodbye. Don't allow them breakfast or showers. Don't allow them to be escorted by their mentors."

"Yes, sir," Severus says, once again dipping his head.

"You're dismissed," Riddle replies, flicking his fingers.

Severus dips his head again and turns to leave. He has a lot of orders to follow, and a lot of orders to give. There are a lot of people to have killed in a short amount of time, while also balancing the rise in rebellion throughout the districts, and now the Hallow. There's people to dispatch to inform the families of the deceased Hallows a proper cover story that likely won't be fully believed, tributes to release after they've been left to stew and kept on edge, and people to get in contact with about immunizing every Auror beneath him, a sure sign that war is not just coming; it's already here.

He also has to get in contact with the Order as Albus' secret informant to keep him updated, and also in the hopes that Albus will at least manage to save McKinnon's extended family before Severus and his Aurors can reach them.

The fate of her parents, however, is sealed.

Chapter End Notes

starting from the top!

i TOLD YOU there'd be bagel angst. it's okay, we'll see non-angst related bagel content as well, i promise. rcw, this is for you <3

NOT JEGULUS GETTING FRISKY IN THE LIFT 💀 dorcas was so mad HELP. im sorry, just picturing regulus standing there, chastised, like: sorry i got caught up with my ex-boyfriend/love of my life and ruined my outfit 😔 LMAOOOO THIS IS SO FUNNY TO ME PLS. meanwhile, james: im not sorry at all, i had a GREAT time! they're so messy, i love them 😭

the interviews!!!! pure insanity. narcissa "i was going to name them draco" black, ohhhhh i love her. to be clear, she is NOT pregnant. and yes, i knew she would be pulling the whole "fake baby" card ever since the chapter she and sirius talked about how lucius wanted a kid. and bellatrix being a menace, she gets a pass JUST this once bc it was to rita. the enemy of my enemy is my friend and all that.

i just think it's hilarious that the each member from the black family got up there on that stage and caused nothing but chaos, and alphard black joined in from the grave through eli. no one is doing it like them!!!

sirius being a master manipulator—king shit! an icon! he is everything to me. i love him so much. regulus going up there and being miserable and hot—king shit! an icon! you tell them, babe! create a fake wedding just to piss everyone off! regulus "if it wasn't for the wedding" black—okay, very peeta of you. james is Not going to be pleased 😭

regulus: i don't want to hurt james
also regulus: im going to do this thing that will likely hurt james just out of spite because i hate the hallows and riddle THAT much. surely james will understand

(james will understand, i promise. he's just gonna be fussy about it first, which is fair)

then marleneeeee!!! oh, marlene, my beloved <3 she is so 😩 I NEED HER!!! i think it's hilarious that dorcas "bold" meadowes is like: can u all pls just chill? and they all literally just went: No, Let's Not. marlene really said get the fuck up!!! i, too, would shoot to my feet if marlene shouted at me to stand up. i love her.

also yes, the interviews were cut short. coen and camilla didn't even get to their interviews. marlene is just THAT powerful. 😌

then the snape POV. listen, i know a lot of people don't like him, and frankly, i don't care. like, my personal feelings on him as a character is not reflected on him in this as an au. just like with the other characters, this is a whole other world with cheeky references to canon but no actual basis from canon, really. snape being a secret informant is a cheeky reference to canon, yes, but his pov is actually necessary to show the other side of things.

like, the things we just learned from his pov were IMPORTANT. the bit of information on the horcrux hornet venom and how immunity works—that immunity was achieved when someone survived (*cough* you know who it is *cough*) but the EFFECTS of the venom still persisted, so the formula had to be created to neutralize those effects, which it eventually was. we also just learned how dumbledore got his information on the venom in the first place. and we learned how dumbledore learns which districts need support from riots and such. if you notice, severus got his position around the same time that remus was captured and lily was saved—if you ever wondered how the order knew to send out people to try and save them, that would be severus (he wasn't there, but he got information about greyback being murdered and called the order). just the same, if you're wondering who has people killed or participates in killing people (like gideon and fabian for example), that's severus, too. he's playing both sides—another cheeky reference to canon, BUT he is ultimately on the order's side. so, love him, hate him, do whatever you want, that's up to you. just know his pov was necessary.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-james "petty" potter hating bagels (he doesn't)
-james still being a very weak man when it comes to regulus black
-special mentions to emmeline, augusta, and eli's interviews (i adore them)
-sirius missing regulus and wanting to comfort him ☹ (if you think im ignoring the brothers and their whole story, you are dead wrong, i just can't say anything bc of spoilers, but pls know they're so important to me)
-the tributes banding together to ruin riddle's night!
-riddle's "i want them dead" — im sorry this line always cracks me up in the movies 😭
-minerva manipulating riddle, an icon!
-marlene marlene marlene marLENE!!!!
-sirius talking about his moon 🥺 PLEASE HE LOVES REMUS SO MUCH IM GONNA DIE

Clinging

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death/past death/possible future death
-references to past child death
-references to past murder
-quite a bit of mentions of blood (basically all metaphors, but still)
-james' issues with time (brief)
-panic attacks (not explicitly stated or described in too much detail, but still)
-references to past use of biological warfare
-implied sexual content (not very detailed, and most just fade-to-black)

i...think that's it. this is a longer chapter, over 16k i think, so i tried my best not to miss anything! don't hesitate to let me know if i did!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Sirius does as soon as he makes it back to the suite is throw himself into a tight hug with Remus, exhaling in relief as he holds onto him, eyes drifting shut. He tucks his face down against Remus' shoulder, breathing him in, the tension draining out of him slowly, in increments.

It had been awful, just waiting, not knowing if the last time he saw Remus would be the last time he ever got to see him. Not knowing if he'd ever see James again. Not knowing if he, along with his brother and all the tributes he was waiting with, were about to be killed for their blatant act of rebellion.

None of them had spoken. There had been a heavy silence in the room, but there remained an unspoken agreement not to simply take whatever was coming lying down. They'd all braced themselves, tense and at the ready, the moment that a group of Aurors had come sweeping into the room.

In the end, they had simply been…let go.

Just like that.

Maybe it shouldn't have surprised Sirius. After all, why waste the ammunition to kill them now, when all but one will be dead soon enough anyway? And in such a way that it'll be profitable, too. Yet, it *did* surprise Sirius. For a moment there, he genuinely believed that was it.

The relief of still having more time is overwhelming, and all he wants to do is be with Remus. They have so little time overall, especially since Remus will have no choice but to go back to his cell soon. Sirius just wants to hold onto him forever.

"Hi," Sirius whispers.

"Hi," Remus replies, gently. His warm hands cup Sirius' sides, the blunt tips of his fingers curving around Sirius' ribs. For a moment, Sirius wants Remus to crack him open and fold himself inside; just live there, stay there, in him.

"I thought—" Sirius stops, then swallows past the lump in his throat, squeezing his eyes shut even harder. He exhales and tightens his grip. "I love you. I really fucking do."

"I was worried. I mean, I was—well, at first I was…ah, rather delighted," Remus admits, sounding sheepish, "but that was just because of what you said in your interview, and then things escalated, and I—I—"

Sirius clears his throat and pulls back to give Remus a trembling smile. "Liked that, did you?"

"You were right," Remus murmurs. "No one loves you as I do. No one ever will, Sirius, I can promise you that."

"I believe that, actually," Sirius admits with a weak chuckle, slowly easing back, as much as he hates to. "James?"

"In his room. He's been panicking. I was—well, actually I was getting him a glass of water," Remus tells him. He flicks his gaze over Sirius' shoulder, towards where Pandora is with Regulus off to the side, murmuring to him. "You should—I, ah, think you should go see James."

"Alright, but—but wait for me in my room?" Sirius asks hopefully, holding his gaze.

Remus nods. "Yeah, of course I will."

"Check on Reggie first, though, would you?" Sirius mumbles, because even through all of that, Regulus still wouldn't talk to him. Still won't, even now. What is he going to do, just ignore Sirius in the arena, too? He's so fucking *stubborn.*

"Okay," Remus agrees, then sways in to kiss him quickly, right at the corner of his mouth, pulling away swiftly like if he doesn't, he never will. Sirius gets it. He feels the same.

They break apart and go in separate directions, Remus heading for Regulus and Sirius heading for James. When Sirius reaches the door, he doesn't bother to knock, just turns the handle and steps inside. James' head lifts. He's sitting on the edge of the bed, and the moment he sees Sirius, he shoves to his feet and rushes forward to snatch Sirius into his arms.

"I thought—oh, fuck, Sirius, I was so—they wouldn't tell us where they were keeping you, and I didn't know if you were okay, if I'd see you again before—" James chokes off, his fists pressing harder against Sirius' back, trying fitfully to keep him locked in the unrelenting safety of his arms.

"It's alright, James, we're alright," Sirius murmurs, holding him just as tight. "They just kept us for a bit, probably just wanted to put us on edge while they decided what to do with us. It's okay, yeah? Hey, breathe, it's okay."

"I was so scared," James rasps, his voice thick.

"Me too," Sirius admits in a whisper. He wouldn't usually admit it, but this is *James*. If he can't tell James about it, then who can he tell? Besides, James knows already. He knows Sirius too well *not* to know that.

For a long time, they stand there in complete silence, just holding onto each other, breathing in sync. Sirius' chest feels tight with this horrible, unshakeable grief for James, and for himself. There's fear in this, too. What is James going to do when Sirius does die? He's going to be a fucking *wreck,* and Sirius won't be here to help him pick up the pieces.

Yet again, Sirius feels the tragedy and unfairness of this entire situation bear down on him, a heavy weight he feels far too weak to carry. He's going to collapse. Maybe he already is. Maybe they all are. Maybe they've all been collapsing in slow motion since the very first tremor that caused them to topple. The foundation of them all has been crumbling since Sirius was sixteen years old, and there's nowhere to stand anymore.

"You were—so brave," James croaks, pulling back slowly to peer at him, eyes shiny. "What you did was so brave, Sirius, and I—I am immeasurably proud of you."

"Some would call it reckless."

"Well, I'm calling it justice."

Sirius quirks a small smile. "You're only saying that because the consequences haven't caught up to us yet."

"No matter the consequences, what happened today during those interviews *was* brave. Nothing can change that."

"Do you feel that way about Regulus?"

Predictably, James' expression shutters. There's more to it as well. There's pain. So much pain. "That's different."

"How?" Sirius asks softly.

"He lied," James chokes out. "A fucking *wedding,* Sirius? He knew that would—he knew it would hurt, and he did it anyway. He didn't care."

"You really need to talk to him, James," Sirius tells him, and then he shakes his head when James opens his mouth in visible protest. "No. Look, I love you, and I understand your anger—it's more than justified—but this isn't something you have *time* to work through. Do you understand what I'm telling you? There's no *time.* I will—I am going to do *everything* I can to get him home, and die trying, but anything could happen. I could fail him. I have before."

"Sirius," James breathes out, eyes wide.

"Don't make the same mistake I did. Don't waste time; don't be too late," Sirius murmurs. "I got lucky by getting you both back and having more time. You won't. Whether it's me or him or both of us, James, you *won't."*

James releases a horrible noise like he's aching, like he's just cracking right in half. It's a terrible, cruel reality, and Sirius hates to be the one to force him to look at it, but *not* looking at it doesn't mean it's not there. James is fighting it so hard, with everything in him, and he's going to wish he didn't.

Even now, James is fighting it. He shakes his head and drapes his fingers over Sirius' shoulders, *squeezing.* He says, "No," and then, "I can't," and right after, "I'll—I'll be with you. Can I just be here with you?"

"James, listen to me," Sirius cuts in. "What you *need* to do is make things alright with him again, because when I *don't* make it back, you will need each other to help make it through. If

you two don't resolve this now, I'm worried you never will after—after I'm gone, and knowing that you two have each other is something *I* need."

"Stop it. Stop it, stop it, stop," James chants, his eyes sinking shut as his face twists. He's shaking.

"James—"

"Please. Please stop. I can't—I don't—where are we? Sirius, when—what's happening? What's—"

Sirius' heart clenches violently in his chest. It's been a while since James has gone in and out of time like this, especially so severely. "We're in the Hallow, James. It's the Quarterly Memorial, the day of the interviews. You're not a tribute; you're a mentor, and you're safe. You're not in the arena. You're here with me, and I've got you."

"Where's my cane?" James gasps out, his chest heaving as he grips Sirius' shoulders, clearly trying to ground himself.

"It's propped up by the bed. I presume you didn't need it before I came in. Do you need it now?"

"No. No, I'm—I'm just—"

"It's alright," Sirius says soothingly, breathing in and out slowly, deeply, letting James match him and calm.

James' eyes flutter open after a few minutes, and he gentles his grip on Sirius' shoulders. "I just want to stay with you."

"I know. Because you're scared," Sirius mumbles, and that's what it is, really. When they're scared, they go right to each other. "But me and you? James, there's…nothing to settle between us. No matter where we go, or what happens to us, we'll always be with each other, yeah?" He raises his hand and taps James in the center of his chest, right in the middle of his lungs. "Every breath, in and out, that's me and you."

"If you stop, I stop," James whispers.

"No, none of that," Sirius chides gently, despite the fact that he felt the same, when it was him in James' position. "You'll carry on anyway, because I'm telling you to, and you can be angry with me all you like for it as long as you do it. Because Effie and Monty shouldn't have to lose us both. Regulus shouldn't have to lose us both. So, you'll breathe. You will. I'll be the fucking air in your lungs, even when I'm gone."

James just ducks his head forward and sort of slumps against Sirius with a small, hurt sound, like a wounded animal. They go right back to holding onto each other; they don't have time to waste not doing it. The clock continues to tick.

"There's something I need you to promise me," Sirius murmurs, still holding onto James. "I need you to promise me you'll look after Remus through this. He's not—he isn't one to really share when he's struggling, but he's—he'll need support. He'll need someone to take care of him, and it can't be me, so I need you to do it for me. And I need you to promise you'll keep doing it, year after year, every time you come back as a mentor. Because I know it'll be you. And I know you can make it to where he gets assigned here again—Pandora will help. So, just please promise me you'll do that, James."

"I promise," James replies instantly, not missing a beat, because of course he doesn't. Sirius sags with relief and swallows down a choked sound of grief, muffling it as he tightens his arms around him.

Tick, tick, tock. Time is circling the drain. They're not ready. None of them are ready, James especially. There's still something he has to do first, and he needs the push, so Sirius doesn't hesitate to give it to him.

"It's not me you truly need to find peace with right now," Sirius says sadly, even if there is a terrible, tiny part of him that selfishly wants to have all the time with James that he can, even

if he's stealing it from someone else. From Regulus. But Sirius won't; of course he won't. He's always volunteering to take the brunt of pain for Regulus, so why should this be any different? "Talk to Regulus, James."

James just grunts. It's an unhappy noise, full of complaint, a bit petulant with a heavy dose of reluctance. Sirius takes it for what it is and slowly pulls away.

"In the meantime," Sirius teases, "I'm going to go get my spine realigned, so you can't stay with me anyway."

"Okay, to be fair, I'm—I'm very supportive of that for you," James mumbles with another sniffle. "I'm a good best friend. I've been a good best friend to you, haven't I?"

"The best," Sirius says softly.

"Alright. Good. I'm—" James voice catches, and he's clearly trying so very hard to keep it together. "I'm glad that I was."

"You still are, James. You always will be, until the very end."

"Sirius—"

James doesn't get much further than that, and Sirius sighs sadly as he watches James' face crumble again. He reaches out and tugs James back into his arms, holding onto him for just a little longer as he whispers, "I know, James. I know."

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Regulus can't really explain the peace that Remus brings him, just by being present. Perhaps it's just that it's Remus. Perhaps that's just who Remus *is,* some sort of magic that exists in him wherever he goes, so effortlessly comforting to all those near him and completely

oblivious to this fact. Perhaps it's just because Remus helped him with one of his greatest fears when no one else could, or because Remus is still his friend, or because—despite everything—Remus doesn't ever look at him as if Regulus is responsible for his pain.

"We haven't talked about it," Remus murmurs. "Your plans for the arena, I mean."

"I know," Regulus says, and he doesn't elaborate further. They'll all find out soon enough.

"It just seemed like…" Remus hesitates for a beat, then turns his head, staring out over the balcony edge. "Well, the way you were in your interview, it just seemed like—like you're planning to fight. Really, properly fight."

"Yes," Regulus agrees softly. "That's exactly what I'm going to do. I'm going to fight harder than I ever have before."

Remus is silent for a beat, and then he exhales shakily, his head ducking forward as he croaks, "As I'm sure you know, Sirius—he's going to—he'll be fighting for you. To get you home. And I—I think that he's—well, I've never been so sure that one person can do anything they decide to, no matter the odds, until him. So, you—all of this anger you feel for him, you have to—Regulus, you need to let all of that go before it's too late, before he—before—"

"Do you think it was in vain?" Regulus cuts in absently, very gently tracing the seam of his trousers as he stares out over the Hallow, not even seeing it.

"Regulus? Hey, are you even listening to me?"

"Hm?"

"I'm—" Remus heaves a sigh. "Look, I know you're—"

"Do you think it was in vain?" Regulus repeats, tilting his head up to look at the sky. It's not dark out yet, but even if it was, the stars aren't visible here in the city. It's just another thing Regulus hates about this place. "Him volunteering for me, I mean? I'm here, aren't I? What did he achieve?"

"He's your brother," Remus whispers. "He did what anyone would do for someone they love. He did what I did for my best friend. He did what you did for James. Sacrifice is—it's just a byproduct of love; genuine, unshakeable love that grips us like grief. It's cruel. It pushes us to do the unthinkable."

Regulus hums thoughtfully. "I'm aware that this casts me in the light of a hypocrite, but it is different."

"Why? How?"

"When I lied to James and made a promise I knew I wouldn't keep, I did it because I know better than him what will hurt him the most. I've spent most of the years we've known each other just hurting him, learning the shape of his pain, trying to mold it in the beginning and then trying to eradicate it by the end. I know James' pain inside and out. When I decided to do what I did, it was *for* him. It did achieve something."

"What did it achieve?"

"It kept his mother safe, for one thing. But Sirius? He didn't do what he did for me. He did it for him."

"He didn't know you would be volunteering," Remus tells him quietly. "He—when he took your place, he had no way of knowing that you would… Regulus, he did that in the mind that he was keeping you from the arena."

"Didn't do him much good, in the end. Didn't do him much good the first time either," Regulus mutters. "That's not the point anyway. My point is, he did it for *him.* I told him, Remus, I *told him* to choose me, and I told him exactly how. And he didn't. You know what he chose?"

Remus audibly swallows. "What?"

"He chose to leave me behind. Again." Regulus turns to look at Remus, who watches him with his eyebrows drawn together, expression pained. "He chose to abandon me. Again. He chose to break something we worked so hard for, the only thing I needed from him, the only thing I have *ever* needed from him; all I ever wanted was for him to choose to keep me, and he didn't. *Again.* And this time—this time, I didn't just stand back and watch. I didn't just accept it. I fucking made him look at it, and I'm going to make him regret it. He will regret it this time, Remus. He's going to."

"Did you…?" Remus stares at him, his eyes widening as his breath catches. "Regulus, did you—did you volunteer for James just to *get back at Sirius?"*

Regulus pauses, then says, "The plan was always to take James' place, but I'd be lying if I said the words didn't leave my lips a little easier knowing that Sirius would choke on them."

"That's so—you're so—" Remus groans, his eyes sinking shut. He lifts his hands and scrubs them over his face before he drops them heavily, looking weary. "You are one the most unbelievably fucked up people I've ever met, you know that?"

"Takes one to know one, I suppose," Regulus replies wryly, arching an eyebrow at him.

Remus huffs out a weak laugh. "Yeah, can't argue that."

"Go on, then. What's the worst thing you've ever done?" Regulus asks, inclining his head towards him.

"I killed someone," Remus says softly.

Regulus did not know that, until now. If Sirius knows, he hasn't said. Maybe he doesn't. Regulus doesn't care either way; he isn't going to tell him, obviously. Remus' secret—if it is a secret Sirius doesn't know—is safe with him. And, frankly, it's not a secret Regulus cares very much about, in the sense that it doesn't bother him in the least.

He holds Remus' gaze steadily and replies, "Yes, well, I've killed five."

"Five?" Remus repeats, blinking. "I—sorry, have you killed two people since—I mean, I know about Avery, Quinn, and Irene, though she *really* doesn't count as—"

"You're forgetting Evan," Regulus cuts in.

"What?" Remus looks stricken. "Regulus, you—you didn't—"

"And Sirius," Regulus continues, watching Remus give a violent blink, lips parting in disbelief. "I killed him at the reaping the moment he volunteered for me."

Remus stares at him, something shifting in his eyes that looks a lot like pity. The worst part is, Regulus can see the question drifting through Remus' head, a very valid question that twists itself into something sharp, made for carving, an intrusive thought. That very simple question. *Which one?*

That is the question, isn't it? After all, it happened twice. So, which one? Regulus knows it's both. It shouldn't even be possible for it to occur twice, for him to watch Sirius turn cold and lifeless, to have him slip through his fingers, to slip the dagger in and *twist.* How do you kill what's already dead?

You revive it just to watch it rot.

Without a word, Regulus pushes to his feet and sweeps into his room, grabbing clothes and heading into the bathroom. He shuts the door and starts running a bath, gaze vacant as he stares at the water. It doesn't make him cry as often anymore. He thought it was a good sign,

but now he's quite sure it's because he's no different than the dead he associates with water. Just another pair of cold hands that death clings to.

Six.

He was wrong before. Not five. Six. He has killed six people, and he's staring at the last in the reflection of the water.

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Dorcas paces furiously in her suite, glaring down at her cell. Even just the sound of Dumbledore's voice infuriates her these days, though she is pleased to know that he's fully distracted by all the current activity that's going on to really notice what's happening right underneath his nose.

Nonetheless, she has been given orders, those that she has known already—further recruitment. Frank. Huey. *James.*

If not for James, Dorcas would disregard the orders entirely, but—frustratingly enough—Dumbledore has just reminded her of one oversight she may have been too busy to really think about. It's hard playing so many sides of one thing, especially when you're in such a prominent position that you can't even brush one side off for another.

The thing is, getting tributes out of the arena is going to be hard enough. Adding additional people from inside the Hallow is just going to make it more difficult, but she—well, she can't just leave James behind. Not him, and preferably not Pandora, so maybe Frank can come along as well. He's nice enough, and it'll be good to have someone else capable of fighting when they all no doubt have to make their daring escape. She may as well grab Huey along the way, even just as a sign of good will to Dumbledore. Like a child getting in trouble at school but trying to show off a good report to take some of the heat off of them because they know damn well their parents are going to be *pissed.* Dorcas doesn't care, but it can't hurt to appease the man, seeing as she's about to cause *quite* the mess.

Dorcas halts on the spot when her cell starts buzzing in her hand, and her breath catches as she answers it, waiting in heavy silence as her heart races.

"Patronus?" Lily whispers.

"Starfish," Dorcas replies, exhaling all at once. "How are you even talking to me right now, Lily? What the fuck?"

"Poppy has a phone in her locked office drawer, so I picked it open and nicked it while she's out on a mission."

"What mission?"

"Recon. She's out in a small separate team back to district six to see what came of the place after… Well, I—um, I'm not actually supposed to tell you, but—"

"Is it in any way vital to the *other* plan?"

Lily pauses, then she mumbles, "Euphemia and Fleamont Potter are here. That's what all the chaos was about when you were here the other day."

"Wait, *what?"* Dorcas inhales sharply, her eyes growing wide with disbelief. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Fuck's sake, Dorcas, we were busy dealing with other madness, and you didn't stick around very long, did you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I can't help it I have to fucking *work,* Lily."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Lily mutters, and Dorcas would bet a lot on the chance that Lily is rolling her eyes right now. "Long story short, we swooped in and stole James' parents—really lovely people, by the way—and managed to save…a bit of the district residents, but most? Well, it wasn't good. Not good at all, if I'm honest. There's this whole fucking green fog shit—"

"Biological warfare," Dorcas whispers.

"Yeah, pretty much," Lily says. "Anyway, Poppy's going to look into it and see what she can make of it; had to go dressed in a weird rubber suit, but she was with a small team. A whole other team has to go into district eleven on new orders."

Dorcas swallows. "Eleven? For what?"

"That, I don't know. I wasn't chosen for this mission, which works out, because I have time to work on the *other* things."

"Right, and how is that going?"

Lily snorts. "Oh, I'm making progress. Might be able to move everything up a day, at least. Or at least the night prior than we originally planned." Dorcas can't stop herself from making a muffled sound of pure hope, and Lily laughs. "Soon, Dorcas, really soon. You do your part, and don't worry, I'll do mine."

"You're a marvel, Lily. I love you dearly."

"I *will* hang up."

"You love me, too."

"Or throw up. That's an option as well."

Dorcas closes her eyes, feeling some tension drain out of her shoulders, her heart fluttering. "Really, Lily, thank you."

"Mhm, no pr—oh. Ah, shit. Just a minute!" Lily calls, coughing loudly. "I'm—I'm using the stapler, Molly! Give me a second." Her voice drops to a low hiss. "Okay, I have to go. If I can call again, I will. 'Kay, bye."

"B—" Dorcas doesn't even get to finish before the line goes dead. She huffs a weak laugh and pulls her phone away from her ear, blowing out a deep breath.

The stapler. Lily fucking Evans, everyone.

Shaking her head, Dorcas drops her phone off on the counter and swivels to survey her suite. It's not very similar to the suite that the tributes get with their mentors, and she doesn't get a servant. She could technically pay an extra fee to have one, but she never does. The suite itself is all one open floorplan, the kitchen and sitting room and bedroom all in one place with no doors anywhere. The bathroom and laundry room, at least, do branch off in a separate, small hallway. It's very compact.

This means it's easy for Dorcas to pace from the kitchen to the bedroom, back and forth, as she crosses her arms and lifts one hand to run a finger idly over her lips again and again, her mind racing a mile a minute. Oh, she has so much to do.

Well, she knows precisely how to recruit James, at least. She wasn't too worried about that anyway, if she's honest. Perhaps it's naivety, but she truly believes he considers her a friend enough to trust her about this. However, the backup plan is now his parents; of course he'll be especially willing if he knows that they—and whatever remains of his district—are all in the Phoenix already. Plus, he'd likely just go wherever Sirius and Regulus went, and Dorcas is going to do everything she can to make sure they end up safe with the Order.

What about Frank? Hm. His mother is a big factor, surely. If Augusta is saved, then Frank is no doubt following. But he's also close with Alice and Emmeline…

Ah, fuck, *Emmeline.* Dorcas clicks her tongue and fights a grimace. That would be indescribably tactless and cruel of her to not try and save Emmeline simply because she's been with Marlene. Dorcas swats away the mere thought with a scoff. Yes, she's not a good person, because there are no good people in war, but that's a low even she refuses to reach. So, there's another person added to the list. Six already—Marlene, Sirius, Regulus, Augusta, Alice, and Emmeline.

From a strategic standpoint, Asher would be *incredibly* helpful for the war efforts, considering her knowledge of poisons. It would be remiss of Dorcas to not at least try to scoop her as well. Ah, not that she's going to be doing any of the scooping, but she *will* be giving directions, as much as she can.

Dorcas' stomach suddenly flips over as she comes to a halt and realizes all at once that she's —she's just doing the same exact thing that she was furious at Dumbledore for doing.

Choosing lives.

After a long beat where Dorcas fears that she's going to be sick, she exhales shakily and sets her shoulders. No. No, she will *not* fall prey to a power like this and lose herself in the process. Marlene first, sure, because she isn't afraid to be selfish in that regard, but after that? All of them. *Any* of them. Whether they'd be a help or a hindrance to the war, regardless of what they can offer her or what they can't, she will see to it that she saves any and all that she can.

She fears she may not be able to save as many as she would hope to. Twenty-four is the goal, really, as impossible as that sounds, but that would require all of them to survive long enough to *be* saved. She doubts that will happen.

Marlene, though… Dorcas needs Marlene to survive that long. All of this is happening because it *needs* to, because it's what's right, but Dorcas' heart is practically keening with the truth of it all. Dorcas' priorities have shifted, have been shifting for some time, and Marlene? Marlene is the top priority.

Whatever happens to her in that arena… Dorcas closes her eyes, breathing in and out. She knows that Minerva can't simply allow it to be—easy. It has to be brutal. It *has* to be the worst fucking thing anyone and everyone will ever see, just to incite further rage and

defiance, encouraging a revolt. It has to be sickening, vomit-inducing, nail-bitingly *awful* to the point that it's painful to watch; a flashing, neon sign to everyone looking on that they *should* hate it, that it's wrong.

Dorcas knows Minerva. She knows just what that woman is capable of, and to win this war, that woman will do what needs to be done. It's something Dorcas has always respected and still likely would if it weren't directly affecting the woman she loves and the friends she's made along the way. If *anything* happens to Marlene, Dorcas isn't sure she's ever going to be able to forgive Minerva, knowing that she's behind it all.

How will she feel, looking at Minerva? The same way she feels looking at Slughorn? The thought terrifies her.

Dorcas can't fret about that, though, because she needs to focus on what has to be done. Her plan. Also her orders. Yeah, lovely, she still has to do *that.* Recruit. Right, so James will be easy, she can likely convince Frank, and if she has to pick Pandora up and carry her out herself, then she will. Huey… Well, Dorcas doesn't know him, really, but Minerva said the best angle would be to guilt him. He wants to help, feels that he's obligated to, and she can work with that. She's done more with less, honestly.

A knock on the door yanks Dorcas right out of her spiraling thoughts, and she swivels to blink at it. After a pause, she moves over to the door to open it with a small frown of confusion as to why someone would stop by. The frown slips away, and Dorcas' breath catches when she sees who it is.

"Marlene," Dorcas breathes out. "What are you doing here?"

"It's my last night," Marlene murmurs. "I'm not waiting around for you to be too late this time."

With that, Marlene's hands raise—she's still wearing the ring on her thumb—and they catch Dorcas' face as she surges forward to kiss her with enough force that they both go stumbling back a few steps. The moment Marlene is officially inside, she's kicking the door shut with her foot and steadily pushing Dorcas back against the closest wall.

Dorcas is—so okay with this, actually. Oh, she *really* should be spending her time doing something productive, but nothing seems to matter as much as Marlene's mouth on hers, and Marlene's hands on her skin, and Marlene just being here, alive, warm and solid under Dorcas' fingertips.

"Bed?" Dorcas chokes out.

"Mmm," Marlene hums against her jaw, her lips curling up in a pleased fashion, and then they go stumbling away.

It's nice, really, that the bed isn't even that far.

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Regulus wonders if James still thinks he's beautiful.

Well, no, he *knows* that James is attracted to him, that's not something he doubts, really, but that's not what's weighing on his mind. He stares at himself in the mirror and wonders if James still finds him beautiful on the inside. A person worthy of kindness. A person worthy of love.

James has never been this cruel. Regulus doesn't know what to do with it. He *knows* James has every right to be upset, but he doesn't know how much longer he can do this. Perhaps that makes him weak. Perhaps he's pathetic for being pushed to the brink and still so willing for whatever James will give him. He gets it now, what James meant when he said Regulus could do anything to him and he'd thank him for it. James *breathes,* and Regulus wants to thank him.

Swallowing, Regulus drags the towel away from his damp hair and hangs it up, then trails his fingers over his chest, lightly pressing in on the raised scar over his heart. It's a strange thing to have a favorite scar, but this one is his. This one is a reminder that something tried to take his heart away and failed. No one or nothing can have it, because it belongs only to James; somehow, after all the times James has kissed it, Regulus feels like the scar is just proof of that.

Dropping his hand, Regulus plucks up his shirt and slips it on, then turns to leave the bathroom. When he steps back into his room and looks up, he freezes.

James is perched on the edge of the bed.

For a beat, they just stare at each other. Regulus' heart is already racing, because he doesn't know what's about to happen. He isn't sure what's coming. Is this—is James about to give him another parting gift? It *is* Regulus' last night, so it would be fitting. Regulus will take it. He'll be all that more hurt for it, but he'll take it anyway, gladly.

"We—" James' voice dies in his mouth, momentarily, a loud click in his throat as he swallows. His voice is gruff and low when he speaks again. "We need to talk."

Regulus doesn't think it's fair that those words scare him. It's not like things can get *worse.* "Those dreaded words. You're aware you can't break up with me again, yes?"

"I didn't break up with you," James snaps. "I didn't exactly get the chance, seeing as we weren't together in the first place."

"Yes, we were," Regulus whispers. In his head, they were. In his heart, they still are.

James clenches his jaw, making the bolt of down past his ear visibly pulse, the muscle twitching. Regulus finds this incredibly attractive. He would like to lick it. "No, we really weren't. The two days we spent—well, those don't count."

"No, but they do, though," Regulus counters, flicking his gaze over James slowly, trying to get a read on him. He can't, which is frustrating. Regulus can't tell if James wants to fuck or fight, and frankly, if it's not the former, he'd much prefer James to just leave; he's in no mood to do the latter.

"Look, I'm not arguing with you about this. You're wrong."

"I'm not, actually."

"What did I *just* say?" James asks, staring at him incredulously.

Regulus sighs and takes a step forward, stopping the moment James tenses up even more. There's a pause, both of them sizing each other up, reevaluating the atmosphere and trying to figure out what comes next. Finally, in the end, Regulus doesn't bother beating around the bush. "So, are you here to fuck me, or do you want to be a prick some more?"

James stares at him for a beat, then narrows his eyes and scoffs. "Maybe a bit of both. Can't I do both?"

"You can do whatever you want, James," Regulus informs him rather honestly, holding his gaze. *"Especially* to me."

"I can't protect you," James counters, and he doesn't say it softly. It falls from his mouth *harshly,* an accusation, escaping him with sharp edges that cut them both.

Yeah, Regulus isn't doing this. When James said they needed to talk, he didn't think James actually meant they would *talk.* Like, properly. About the things they haven't truly dared to talk about yet. Regulus doesn't want to do this. He's going to fucking cry; he knows he will, and just—no. Fuck that.

"Look, are we fucking or not?" Regulus asks, his voice clipped, his stomach curdling with rising nerves. "Because if not, you can just do us both a favor and get the fuck out."

"I said we need to talk, so—"

"Not happening. No thanks."

"No, come on, we've got to have this out," James insists, pushing to his feet from the bed, his eyes flashing. "You can't just outrun this. You did it, now fucking *face* it."

"Oh, you mean about the wedding?" Regulus says, arching an eyebrow at him. "I take it this is you refusing my proposal?"

"You absolute bastard."

"So, it is a no, then?"

"You shouldn't have done that," James whispers. "How the *fuck* could you do that? You knew —you *knew* it would—that I would be upset, and you just—you—"

"Believe it or not," Regulus cuts in, "this actually wasn't about you. I understand your confusion, considering your necessary involvement, but it was about hurting *them.* Infuriating *them.* It wasn't…" He swallows. "I didn't have anything else, alright? I only matter to them because of you. It was the only thing I had, and I used it. I didn't do it to hurt *you,* James."

"But you did," James rasps. "You always do."

"Yes, I know," Regulus murmurs, fighting the lump in his throat as he clenches his jaw and looks away. "Was that all you wanted to talk about? Are we done here?"

"Done? *Done?"* James repeats, his voice rising in pitch, looking absolutely *furious.* "We've barely even gotten started! You got right up there on that stage, *again,* and felt the need to tell everyone that you'd marry me, which is yet *another* lie—"

"No, it's not," Regulus retorts sharply, and James huffs out a harsh breath, face twisting in a scowl.

"Don't lie to me. Why are you *always* lying?"

"I'm *not* lying, James. Not about this."

James stares at him, his body strung tight as he glares right into his eyes, and then he makes a furious, frustrated noise and takes the three strides he needs to reach Regulus. It's easy, meeting him halfway with an open-mouthed, teeth-clacking kiss that they both moan into the moment it connects. James hooks a hand behind his neck and *holds him there.* Regulus never wants him to let go.

But, inevitably, James does. He breaks the kiss to gasp out a shaky, "Fucking liar. You're a fucking—"

"M'not," Regulus mumbles, pressing closer, sliding his hands up James' chest and feeling the awareness of his own twisted temptation, because oh, oh, James still wants him so badly. The thing is, Regulus gets it. He knows exactly how different desire feels when you're fighting it; the heady draw of forbidden fruit. James can't resist taking a bite, and Regulus knows just how to make sure he's sweet for him.

"You wouldn't," James argues, practically hissing it, and then he does take a bite, nipping at Regulus' bottom lip with a defeated groan as he tugs him back into a kiss.

Regulus speaks against his mouth to say, "I would've."

"No," James denies, breathless as he mouths along the line of Regulus' jaw, reverent and needy.

"I would have married you," Regulus whispers, eyes fluttering shut as James makes a sound against his throat like he's just been gutted. Regulus tips his head back further and gives James more room, if he wants it.

Jame does not want it. He pulls back a little. "Shut up. Fucking hell, just—just—"

"Even if we had to have a wedding here, I would have, and we could have had a real one at home," Regulus continues, still just *pushing.* Always pushing, pushing, pushing. Picking at it —at them—like a fucking scab, struck by the habitual need to draw blood again. "You would have asked, and I would have said yes. I would have said yes the *moment—"*

"Shut up, shut up, shut up. You're awful, you're the most cruel, vindictive man I've ever known, and if you don't *shut up—"*

"You still haven't said no, you know. So, James, will you accept my proposal or—"

Regulus doesn't have to take it much farther than that before James is kissing him so thoroughly he can't even catch his breath, steadily moving him to the bed. They go down in a rough tangle of limbs as Regulus winds his arms around James and feels love bleed between them like the open wound it is.

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"Does it hurt?"

Remus purses his lips and peers down at the indent of teeth on his shoulder, because apparently, when Sirius bites, he bites *hard.* Very hard. So hard that it probably would have hurt if Remus wasn't in the middle of sex when it happened.

Sirius looks a mixture of worried and smug, which is rather adorable, honestly. His expression shifts swiftly each time his gaze flicks from Remus to the mark—worried, smug, worried, smug, worried, smug. It's cute.

"No, it's fine," Remus assures him, though he won't be prodding it, even if he's tempted to. It throbs a little. He's honestly rather pleased with it.

"Well, in that case, there you go," Sirius teases. "Something for you to remember me by."

Remus stares at him. Quietly, he says, "It'll fade."

"I know, but…" Sirius trails off, then swallows, turning his head to stare at the ceiling. He closes his eyes. "I know."

In silence, Remus turns on his back, lying on the bed next to Sirius in nothing but pants, neither of them touching. It's abruptly cold between them, in the small sliver of space where their bodies aren't pressed together, seeming like some great distance to cross all of a sudden.

For just a moment, Remus really lets himself feel it, what's coming, what he's about to lose. He hasn't felt it, really, since that very first night when he couldn't build up some sort of internal defense against it. He put it somewhere else, just so he could focus on being here with Sirius while he still had the chance, because he knows what it is to not get to say goodbye to someone he loves, and he knows what it is to wish he better used the time with someone he loves that he did have.

Letting himself feel it, as it turns out, is a very stupid idea. Because it's there, underneath it all; the anger, the grief, the pain, the complete and utter relentless weight of desolation with all of it. Even deeper, the selfish, pressing need to ask, to *beg,* for Sirius to come back to him. Please just come back.

"It's not fair," Remus whispers. He doesn't move, but he hears Sirius' hair brush against the pillow, a sign that he turned his head to listen. Remus can feel Sirius' gaze latched onto the side of his face, heavy and intense. "It's not—this isn't—"

"Remus," Sirius says very carefully.

"Please," Remus chokes out, turning towards him desperately to reach for him, to take his face in his hands and stare into his eyes imploringly. Sirius looks pained. "Please, sweetheart. Just—I know it's wrong of me, I know it's not fair, I—I—"

"Shh, stop it," Sirius cuts in quickly, lifting his arms in between Remus' to cradle his face, too. "It's okay. This is just what it is to be human, my love. You're not a bad person for it, for wanting—" He stops, swallows, then gives Remus a soft smile. "You can say it. You probably shouldn't, but—"

"Come back," Remus whispers, like it's a sin, and Sirius' breath hitches. He stares at him, lips parted, gaze shiny like he's never been so enamored by a concept before in his life. "Okay, Sirius? I'm—I'm selfish enough to ask, even though I know your answer, and I—I understand it. But I have to, I have to ask, I have to at least—I have to try. Because I want you to live, and I want you to come back to me. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Regulus is my friend, but you—you're something else. You're precious to me. I want you to, please."

Sirius studies him, licking his lips, and then he exhales slowly and whispers, like a secret, "Do you know that you're the only person who has asked me that? Everyone else—they all just accepted it, what I'm going to do, and there was no one who even—I mean, no one even…argued, or protested. Maybe it's because I'm so stubborn and they know it wouldn't get them anywhere, but—but no one tried. And maybe it makes me selfish, but I'm so glad that you have."

Remus gets it, really. It's not a slight to anyone else for how they're responding to the situation. This is very hard, and no one is really in the position that he is, because yes, Remus does care for Regulus, but he doesn't feel for him what he does Sirius. He is a friend, but he's not Lily. Remus doesn't hate Regulus—of course not—but, if it were left up to him and only one brother could come home, it wouldn't be the youngest.

Even Remus knows that it's pointless to ask, because he knows Sirius, but Sirius deserves to have someone ask anyway. It's not even that Remus is angry with him for it, because he gets it. Because if it was him, if it was him and Lily going into the arena, he would do no differently than Sirius is for Regulus, than Sirius would for James. It's not about *not* choosing to come back to each other; it's about who they are.

It's about how they love.

"He's my little brother, Remus," Sirius rasps.

"I know," Remus croaks.

"I—" Sirius swallows, darting his gaze to the side, bottom lip catching between his teeth. After a beat, he squeezes his eyes shut, expression collapsing into something like shame, and when he begins speaking again, he does so softly, a mere breath, like the words are so wrong, so taboo, that to even speak them is blasphemous. "If—Remus, I will do whatever it takes for him, okay? I will. But. But if—just, if something happens, if something goes wrong and he—if I fuck it up, if I fail him, then I'm—I'm not going to stop fighting. I'm going to keep fighting to come back to you, okay? Is that—can that be enough? Tell me that's enough, because it's all I've got."

"You'd do that?" Remus asks quietly. "For me?"

"Yes," Sirius breathes out, eyes fluttering open. He still looks unsure, like he's made some grandiose mistake he can never be forgiven for by simply being human enough to want to live. It's heartbreaking. "I—I doubt I'll ever be…what you're used to now. It'll change me, losing him, and I can't—I won't be able to promise you that you'll still love what comes back out of that arena if I don't die there for my brother, but for you, I'd come back out anyway. Of course I would."

"Sirius, there is not one version of you I wouldn't love," Remus informs him simply. "You don't have to be anyone other than who you are. I just… Well, I'm—maybe it surprises me. I don't really understand why. I know you love me, but I can't give you more than a few visits a year, and I'm so—there are so many restrictions involved in our relationship because of my position, and it's such a hassle, so—not James? *Me?"*

"James—if he loses Regulus, if *we* lose Regulus, it'll be… I don't know. I think, for some time, we won't be—we won't really recover from it for a long time. Not coming back out is just as much for James as it is Regulus, in a way. Can't you see?" Sirius murmurs. "I'd die for them, but I'd live for you."

Remus has to blink hard against the sudden stinging in his eyes, because he knows better than most that dying is easy, but living? Sometimes, living is the hardest part about being alive.

The fact that Sirius would do that for him, that he loves him enough to, is something too special to Remus for him to even try to put in words. Remus, who has nothing to offer Sirius other than himself, and even that's in short supply. He can't give Sirius everything to live for,

only something, and for that to be enough… Oh, Remus feels like his chest is cracking open and flooding with warmth all at the same time.

"Thank you," Remus chokes out.

"Just—just to be clear," Sirius murmurs cautiously, "this isn't me saying I won't do everything I can to save him, Remus. I *will.* I'm going to. I'm not planning to come back."

"I know. I do know that," Remus tells him, and he loves Sirius for that, too. For who he is and how he loves. Any version of him, even this one, perhaps especially this one.

Sirius reaches out and crosses the tiny gap between them to gently run his fingers over the bite mark on Remus' shoulder again. "You know, we talk about our something quite a bit, but what would our everything look like? Have you ever imagined it?"

"I have," Remus admits, and Sirius' lips curl up into a quizzical little smile, curious eyes peering at him patiently. "We have a house. A bit quaint—"

"Like the one you grew up in?"

"Yes. Do you—did you like it when you were there?"

"I did," Sirius confirms. "It was warm. Homely. Nothing like the house I grew up in before I ever found out what a home could feel like when I moved in with the Potters."

Remus hums. "Well, our house is a home, too. Except for the staircase; that's not very quaint, because it's a bit frivolous. It has to be one of those twisty, ridiculous staircases so you can make a dramatic entrance every time you come down it."

"Oh, fuck *yes,"* Sirius agrees immediately, breaking out into a grin as he starts shaking with laughter. "No, that's perfect. I want a bell at the top I can ring so everyone—but especially

you—knows to turn all eyes to me when I start to descend."

"Very convenient. I like it."

"Mhm. Oh, and James will love it, because I'll build him a chair to take him up, and he'll get to spin around and around. I can hear him, actually. Just: *wheeee."*

"That's—hilariously accurate," Remus muses with a chuckle, shaking his head. "Shit, *I* can hear that. I have not known him long enough to justify knowing what that sounds like."

Sirius snorts and reaches up to, with no warning whatsoever, poke Remus in the side of the mouth, tugging at it playfully as he says, "Eh, some people you just understand, no matter how long you've known them. Anyway, what else?"

"We have a back porch with rocking chairs where we sit on warm nights and just—enjoy the fresh air."

"Under the moon and stars."

"In the name of cliches, yes," Remus says wryly, as Sirius' finger pulls away from his mouth to stroke along his jaw with a quiet, mindless devotion that makes Remus' heart squeeze.

"Can it be a bench?" Sirius asks. "Or a swing? Just so we can sit together, I think. We can cuddle up under the moon and stars in the spirit of more cliches."

Remus smiles. "Mm, there's a thought. A swing, then. A padded one we keep a blanket tossed over the back of."

"What else?"

"We don't have a dryer. We hang clothes out to dry outside, like my mum always did. It was—well, I always loved the routine of it, the sort of…realism of planning around storms, then inevitably having a storm blow in when you least expect it anyway. We'd all run out in the rain, laughing and slipping in mud, and rush to get the clothes back inside so we could wash them again when the sun came back. I miss that."

"Only you, Remus Lupin, would find it in yourself to be nostalgic about regular disruptions."

"You'd be surprised by the things you'll take for granted until they're gone."

Sirius sighs. "Trust me, I wouldn't."

"Sorry," Remus says with a wince. "That was tactless of me."

"No, it's fine. I get what you meant. So, no dryer. Do we have a washing machine? Can we fuck against it?" Sirius replies. "Or on it? I'm not picky."

Remus blinks at him, then arches an eyebrow until Sirius' face starts to turn red, just like he knew it would. Once the blush is there, Remus lets his laugh go. "You want to—"

"Oh, *shut up—"*

"No, no, I want to hear about this secret fantasy of yours to have sex on or against household appliances. *Do* tell me more, sweetheart. Give me all the filthy details."

"Why do you insist on fucking with me? Why—"

"Is it just the washing machine? What are your thoughts on the oven? We'll keep it off, of course, but—"

"Remus," Sirius groans, drawing his hands back like he's trying to cover his very, *very* red face.

"Personally," Remus teases, reaching out to catch Sirius' wrists and gaze at him fondly, "I'm partial to the kitchen table. It'd be nice, I think, splaying you out there and enjoying you like a meal. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Sirius clears his throat violently, and his voice still cracks a little bit when he says, "That'd be—yeah, that—that sounds nice. Really, ah, nice. Do you—would you care to elaborate on that, actually? Like a meal, you said?"

"Well, you know, when you have a very delicious meal laid out in front you, the best thing to do is savor every bite," Remus says casually, watching Sirius peer at him with parted lips and a stutter in his breath, chest hitching, flushed for an entirely different reason that has nothing to do with embarrassment.

"I want you to fuck me on the floor," Sirius blurts out, and Remus' eyebrows fly up. "And the bed. And in the pantry. And on the stairs. Just all over the house. It's our everything, right? We can do everything everywhere all the time. Whatever we want. And we can sleep together, at night, all night. I'll drool on you and you'll still call me pretty in the morning."

"Yes," Remus agrees softly.

"We'll take showers together and fight about what color we want the drapes to be in each room and wash dishes side-by-side after every single meal we share."

"Yes."

"You'll tell me what to do all the time, and I'll listen because I'm madly, deeply, desperately in love with you and just want to make you happy, so happy, and I'm—I'm so—I'm so fucking sorry I can't, Remus, I'm sorry, I'm—"

"Sirius—"

"I'm so *sorry,"* Sirius chokes out, because he's suddenly crying very fucking hard, his body curling forward as he presses closer to Remus, holding onto him tight. "Oh, oh, I'm—I don't want to do this. I don't want to leave you. I'm—I—"

Remus makes a pained noise and draws him closer, his eyes stinging as he squeezes them shut and ducks his face down to bury it in Sirius' hair. Because, the thing is, something is enough, but it is so human, so simply natural, to want everything. They can't have it; they were never going to get it, but that doesn't make it hurt any less.

For a long time, they just lay there and cry together, and grieve, and cling. Remus realizes all at once that Sirius, too, hasn't really let himself feel it. That's something Remus has known subconsciously, just from how maturely Sirius has been approaching it, but it's something that catches up to him anyway. There's no way to outrun this forever.

"It's okay," Remus whispers, his voice hoarse. "Everything is going to be okay."

"Remus?" Sirius croaks, lifting his head to stare at him through teary eyes.

"Yes?" Remus murmurs.

"I want you to promise me that—that you'll—that even if I'm not here to remind you, you'll never forget your worth, how invaluable you are. Never forget that," Sirius rasps.

Remus swallows harshly. "I promise."

"Come here," Sirius whispers, slipping his hand up to cradle the back of Remus' neck, drawing him into a slow kiss.

"I love you," Remus presses into his mouth, and his skin, and maybe his fucking soul, trying to pour it from himself until Sirius is full of it, until he'll never be without it.

Sirius takes it from him, greedily. Sirius takes it all, gratefully.

Somehow, inexplicably, it's everything.

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Dorcas peers at Marlene through the mirror, hesitating. Marlene holds her gaze steadily, waiting, not hesitant in the least. They're both tucked in the cramped bathroom, wearing nothing but big t-shirts and no pants, Dorcas' makeup smeared and her braids piled haphazardly on the top of her head, sagging a bit from the loose grip of the stretched-out hair bobble, one end of a braid hanging over her forehead. Marlene is sitting in a chair, legs spread as she leans back like she doesn't have a care in the world.

"Are you *sure* you trust me to do this?" Dorcas asks, yet again.

"If I didn't, we wouldn't be here," Marlene replies dryly. She flicks her fingers and rolls her eyes. "Just do it."

"Right, but—"

"Dorcas, you're *literally* a stylist. Like, this is *literally* something you're qualified to do."

"I'm not your stylist, though," Dorcas points out.

Marlene smiles at her through the mirror, too-sweet, eyes squinting a bit with simmering passive aggression. "No, but you are my friend, aren't you? What are friends for?"

"You know what, McKinnon?"

"What's that, Meadowes?"

"Bite me," Dorcas mutters.

"Where and how hard?" Marlene replies instantly, lips twitching as her smile softens into something real.

Dorcas huffs and leans forward over the back of the chair to cup Marlene's chin and tilt her head back, staring at her from upside down. "We're not friends."

"What are we, then?" Marlene shoots back, a challenge.

"More," Dorcas murmurs. "Definitely more."

Marlene studies her for a long moment, then she huffs a weak laugh and mumbles, "Hell of a time to reach that conclusion, Dorcas. Always too fucking late."

"If it helps at all, I always knew," Dorcas confesses. "I just wasn't—well, I fucked up. I didn't make you my priority, and I should have. I'm sorry that I didn't."

"Have you now?" Marlene whispers.

"Yes," Dorcas tells her, firm, then dips down to kiss her with that same firmness, leaving no room for doubt.

Marlene is grinning when Dorcas pulls away, and it's a very carefree, exhilarated grin that makes Dorcas' heart clench. She can see Marlene fiddling with the ring on her finger, twisting

it around and around, and the light in her eyes—oh, she looks so *happy.* Dorcas can't think of a time that she's ever seen Marlene look genuinely, wholeheartedly happy. It crushes her to think she's been a part of holding that back.

"You have the worst timing," Marlene declares, laughing again as she tugs her head forward and goes back to looking at Dorcas through the mirror, her gaze fond.

"Better late than never," Dorcas muses, earning a snort, and she sighs in exasperation as she reaches out to pluck the scissors up from the counter. "Alright, if you're actually okay with me doing this—"

"I really am. I want it. I want—" Marlene halts and lifts her hand to reach up and catch a strand of hair over her shoulder between two fingers, staring at herself with a furrow in her eyebrows. "Sometimes, I look at myself and don't recognize the person staring back at me. She looks like—before. If her hair falls the right way, you can't see the scar on her neck, and she—she used to love her hair, you know. Curled it sometimes or let her cousin do some cute hairstyle, but she doesn't do that anymore. She doesn't care about it anymore. She's not even here anymore. It's just me now, and I—I want to see me. I've gone so long without seeing me."

Dorcas feels her face soften. "She was beautiful. So are you. Tell me what you want to see, and I'll show it to you."

"Cut it short," Marlene says, holding her own gaze in the mirror. "Nothing that will get in my face. Nothing anyone can easily grab onto. Can you do that?"

"I can do that," Dorcas promises, and then she does.

It's intimate, somehow, in a way it never is with anyone else, in a way it never has been when Dorcas has done this for friends, or even for Regulus. They're both quiet, glancing at each other through the mirror after every snip of the scissors. Hair drifts down, cut away, an unburdening.

It's acceptance, Dorcas thinks. Marlene's relationship with herself has been, from what she's seen, a journey full of turbulence. Clinging to someone she can never be again, and now, here, letting go to be who she is with no shame for it. The arena changed her; she is who she is, regardless, and whoever that may be is *hers*. The reality of horror from the reflection of all that she did to survive, and she is hideous in the eyes of those afraid to look at the realest thing they'll ever see, but so beautiful to those who can't look away.

To Dorcas, Marlene is the most beautiful person she's ever seen, or known. No one else has to look. Dorcas is more than happy to never turn her eyes anywhere else.

Dorcas cuts Marlene's hair gently, tenderly, with care. She cuts it short, leaving some of it spiky and flyaway at the top and slightly on the sides, then brings out the clippers to buzz at the bottom, giving it a more natural look. She's careful and sweet when brushing off remnants of hair, never once tugging or pulling throughout the entire process.

Marlene watches avidly the entire time, focused on every clip and snip and buzz like she's fascinated by the process, by the transformation from before to after. Her old self she's no longer trying to find, and who she is now that she's been waiting to see. She looks happy again. It's beautiful.

"Done?" Marlene breathes out when Dorcas sits the clippers down and steps back.

"Done." Dorcas smiles and nods. "Do you like it?"

"Yeah," Marlene croaks. "Yeah, I—I really do. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Dorcas tells her, ridiculously pleased.

Marlene unfurls from the chair, swiping off hair and running her hands over her head, turning and tilting to see from all angles. She smiles again, at herself, then turns to smile right at Dorcas. "Do you like it?"

"That doesn't matter, for the record. It only matters that you do," Dorcas says. "But yes, I do. It suits you."

"That's good," Marlene murmurs, swiveling her head to peer at herself in the mirror again, like she can't help it. "When I die, I want to die as me."

"You're not dying," Dorcas retorts sharply.

"Dorcas," Marlene says softly, turning to face her fully, her eyes sad. "I will fight, okay? I will, but—" She sighs and shrugs a little. "But, well, the odds are never in my favor. I beat them last time, much to everyone's surprise and a lot of people's displeasure. I don't think I'll do it a second time, and if Riddle is as pissed off as I assume he is for what I did in my interview, then I won't be *able* to do it a second time."

Dorcas wavers in place for a long moment, debating with herself, because there's a *reason* she hasn't told Marlene her plan. For one thing, it's very fucking dangerous, because if even a *hint* of it gets back to Riddle in any capacity, even just as a subconscious worry that he takes the measures to handle, then the whole plan will fall apart. For another thing, to tell Marlene would be to put her at further risk, because it could influence how she behaves in the arena, how she acts and how she fights and how she survives.

And, finally, Dorcas is…scared. That's horrible, it is, but it's honest. This is one category in which Dorcas' boldness has failed her. She has, in so many ways, been lying to Marlene. Holding things back. Making decisions based on the selfish need to keep her safe, even when she knows that Marlene wouldn't appreciate it. Marlene would have taken right to recruitment; she would have wanted to be involved, and said as much all the way back when Vanity and Hodge died. Dorcas blocked every opportunity to bring Marlene in on this and made sure to keep it from her, as well as let it come between them over and over again and didn't even have the guts or decency to explain why. She broke Marlene's heart over this.

It's going to catch up with Dorcas eventually either way, but she has enough to worry about as it is, so she has simply decided to handle one problem at a time. This one can come later, because *really,* it's not smart to tell Marlene or anyone that's going into the arena what's being planned behind the scenes. It's not smart to provide the promise of it when she doesn't even know it will work, until it does. She can't do that. She can't risk everything, put Marlene in danger, give false hope she can't be one hundred percent sure of, *and* tackle the problem of her past mistakes.

So, Dorcas reaches up and cautiously brushes her fingers over the arc of Marlene's ear, stroking short hair she couldn't grab onto even if she wanted to, studying her expression for any sign of discomfort. There is none. Marlene looks enraptured by it, focused, her lips parting and her breath hitching.

"Survive," Dorcas orders, demands, *insists.* "Survive, Marlene, and keep surviving, and don't stop surviving. Do you hear me? That's what you do. Just survive."

"That's all I ever do anyway," Marlene replies, her voice soft and shaky, head tilting into Dorcas' hand.

Dorcas holds her gaze. "That's all you have to do, and the rest will work itself out."

"If you say so." Marlene's eyes flutter shut, and she sways closer, exhaling quietly. "I—oh, I like—I like that. It's different with my hair like this. Feels different. Good different."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You can—I mean, if you want… More?"

"Mm, I always want more," Dorcas murmurs, sliding her fingers up further and delving them into the shorter, spiky strands of Marlene's hair, feeling them brush along the inside of her knuckles, soft. "Between you and me, we'll find it."

Marlene releases a punched-out sound and sinks forward, her eyes still shut, utterly relaxed as she finds her way to Dorcas' mouth. She kisses her, gentle and slow, with all that she is and all that they have, and more.

Just a bit more.

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James doesn't know why he keeps doing this. Well, no, okay, he *does* know why; because he can't help it, because he's pathetic, because it hurts and he likes that it hurts in some sick, twisted way, and because he's needy and desperate and falling apart and so fucking drawn in by Regulus *every single time;* because of Regulus' eyes, and because of the dagger's edge of his words, pressing into James' throat, cold with threat, always pressing harder just how he likes, and because Regulus is so irresistibly *exhilarating* that there's nothing that feels better and worse than simply having him, almost.

In the moment, James is always overcome, caught up in it, completely lost to any and all things Regulus; how he sounds, feels, and tastes. It's no different than James spending ten years unable to ignore Regulus; if anything, it's the extreme version of it. Like this, James feels like he's unable to fucking *breathe* without Regulus, like his skin and every kiss is more vital to him than oxygen. James isn't thinking, here, his mind entirely empty of everything that's not the way Regulus moans his name, his body unaware of any sensation other than the way Regulus desperately clutches at him, his emotions taken over by the relentless beat of pleasure that rattles his bones and erases the world around him until it's just them and just this.

And then it ends.

That's the tragedy of it. That it ends. That it has to.

James has had a lot of sex in his time, alright? He *has,* and most of it wasn't actually with Regulus at all, but nothing or no one has taken James apart and put him all back together again the way *Regulus* does. Every single time, something inside him climbs the rungs of his ribs like a ladder to reach up and knock on his heart, seeking entry just to warn him about the inevitability of being torn apart again, because he will. Because he always is, over and over, without fail.

The worst part is, he lets it happen. He comes back to it each time. He *wants* it, can't get enough of it, doesn't know how to stay away. James wishes he could be angry at Regulus for it, and he is, but he's also aware that Regulus isn't all to blame.

"Wait, James, just—wait, please," Regulus blurts out the moment James starts to roll away from him after they've both slipped back into pants, his voice pitched high and desperate, eyes a little wild. He's always a bit more laid bare after sex, vulnerable, less shields up in the aftermath of James dismantling them, slowly. He savors every second of it, of watching Regulus give into it, the pure nakedness of trust and desire intermingled in the way they do this. There's nothing casual about it, between them. They're too much for it to be anything other than ardently momentous every time.

"Clearly, talking to you isn't going to get me anywhere other than—right here," James mutters, unable to keep the bitter note out of his voice, purely because there's nowhere else in this world he'd rather be. "So, yeah, I'm just going to go—"

"James—"

"Let me go. Now."

Regulus does, his hands falling slack and slipping away, and then he does quite possibly the last thing James could have ever—or would have ever—expected him to do. He covers his face with his hands and proceeds to start crying.

James cannot see it, but he *can* hear it, and it's immediately the most harrowing thing he's ever listened to. He knows the sound of a child choking on their own blood; he knows the sound of a splash as bodies hit a river glinting crimson. And yet. And yet, it's this that horrifies him the most—the sound of Regulus crying, because James has hurt him.

James doesn't think he's ever in his life hurt Regulus before, to the point of him breaking down into tears, at least not on purpose. He didn't even know he could. He wasn't aware that he had that power, and absolutely no part of him wants it.

"Stop," James blurts out reflexively, genuinely so taken off guard that he can feel the tips of his fingers tingling, numb from the pure shock of it all. "Stop it. Wait. That's not—wait, hey, don't—please don't do that. Please don't."

Mere moments ago, James would have scoffed and been angry at the idea of Regulus crying, just another form of emotional manipulation to make him fold, to make him give in, but this is absolutely not that. This is Regulus hiding his face and turning on his side as he curls up on himself like he's trying to shrink and disappear, like he's trying to save James from the sight of it, but he's too far gone to make the distance it would take to cover it up. This is Regulus breaking down *hard,* suddenly and all at once, like he's been suffering some unbearable, inescapable weight pressing down on him, and now he's finally, helplessly buckling underneath it.

James doesn't feel good about the fact that it's him. That he's the reason. That he did this. He thought—well, no, he never really thought he'd enjoy seeing Regulus like this, but he never once stopped to think that he could have a hand in *making* Regulus feel like this. He never once assumed that he could push Regulus to this point, certainly not so quickly.

James lasted ten years dealing with Regulus hating him, and being unkind, and ignoring him.

Regulus didn't even last five days.

"Okay, hey, shh," James whispers, a bit fretful, his voice strained as he eases back onto the bed and cautiously presses himself behind Regulus, curling around him, cradling him.

It's devastating, honestly, to witness something like this while knowing you're the one responsible for it, at least in part, or just mostly. James is sure that it's other things, too—including going back into the arena tomorrow, as well as the strain that exists between him and Sirius, and maybe he misses his flowers, and maybe he just wants to be held, and maybe he just wants to go home. Maybe, like James, he just wants all of this to stop feeling this way, and being this way, and maybe, just the same as James, he wants, desperately, to jump around in the rivers of time to find the calmest puddle to rest in.

Regulus isn't necessarily resistant to James touching him; it's more that he's curled up in a tight ball and tucked in on himself, leaving very little room for touching at all. James tries anyway, folding himself behind him and slipping his arm over Regulus, snaking it up between Regulus' arms to hold it to his chest, a secure weight that Regulus adjusts to and wraps himself around almost instantly. He clings to it, to James' arm, so stiff and tense that the shuddering sobs that escape him travel through every inch of his body.

James can't take it. Genuinely, he is not built for shit like this. All of his anger has gone unhelpfully silent, shutting up like a chastised child too scared to speak up again. All he is now is pure, unadulterated *distress,* everything in him craving to comfort, to fix, to try, try, try.

It takes a while for Regulus to calm down, and even when he has, he won't unravel himself from where he is. All he does is make these sniffling noises and slight hitches and hiccups in his chest and breath from where he was hyperventilating a bit, all of which tug at every single one of James' heartstrings. At some point, he makes this quiet, fussy sort of noise and grasps James' hand to cradle it between both of his own, fingers trembling as he traces brown skin and hardened calluses and the lines of raised veins. He has apparently claimed James' hand for himself, and at this particular moment, James has no intentions of taking it back.

"Can you turn over and look at me?" James murmurs.

"No," is Regulus' mumbled reply, raspy and petulant.

James sighs and ducks his head down, tucking his face into the crook of Regulus' neck. It's the side with the scar, but that doesn't stop him from kissing it, gently. This earns him another sniffle, and Regulus drags his hand up to kiss the curled fingers like they're exchanging gifts of tenderness.

"I didn't mean to make you cry," James admits.

"All you've been doing is making me cry," Regulus retorts, a bite to his tone, which isn't unexpected, because he's him. He can't be pushed to the point of breaking down and resurface among the ruins without rage for what got him there.

James feels his heart sink. "Have I?"

"No, James, I've just been having a grand time while you were treating me like shit," Regulus snaps, abruptly letting James' hand go and rolling away from him. Just like that, he's on the move, restless, a burst of energy fueled by fury, and it needs somewhere to go. Perhaps it's

only fair that he directs it right at James. "You know what? You wanted to talk, yes? So, let's *talk.* Get the fuck up. We're talking."

"Hey now—"

"No, no, you're the one who wanted to do this. So, we'll do it. Why don't we start with how much of a hypocrite you are?"

"I—excuse me?" James releases an incredulous sound of pure disbelief and rising anger, because oh, there it is. It's back, just like that, just that easily. Regulus isn't crying anymore; he's just as pissed off, and James can easily, effortlessly, match him in this. He does just that, flinging himself to stand on the side of the bed across from Regulus, jaw clenched as he glares right at him. "You're calling *me* a hypocrite? Me?!"

"Yes, *you,"* Regulus bites out. "Because you're one to talk to me about outrunning things, but look at you! As if you're doing any different, James!"

"I'm not outrunning anything," James says sharply. "You're the one who does, always, and you *can't* do that."

Regulus releases a sharp, humorless laugh. "Oh, and why can't I outrun it, James? Is that only something you get to do? What, you think this is easy for *me?* Do you think I'm having the time of my fucking life here?"

"Well, maybe you should have thought of that," James retorts, nostrils flaring. "Maybe you should have taken all that time you spent *lying to me—"*

"Oh, fuck you, James," Regulus hisses. "We're really doing this again? Either fuck me about it, *again,* or shut up about it."

"Doing this again?! We've never even done it!" James bursts out. *"You* did it! You did this. You made the fucking decision, and you *lied,* and you hurt me, and the worst part—the

absolute *worst* part—is you don't even care!"

"Yes, I lied, because I knew you would never promise not to volunteer for me if I didn't promise, too. Yes, I hurt you, but I had my reasons. And don't you *dare* say I don't care," Regulus grits out. "You can't even begin to comprehend how much I actually do. And you know what? At least I *know* I'm a bit of a hypocrite, but you? You don't even see it, do you?"

James rears back in disbelief. "Are you fucking joking? Of course I don't see it, because it's not there! I'm the only one who actually managed to keep their damn promise!"

"Good for you, do you want a gold star?" Regulus snarls, moving further down the bed, and every step he takes, James matches and follows, a mirror. "That's not what I'm talking about. You *are* a hypocrite. Why don't we talk about *our* games, hm? Why don't we do that, James?"

There's a long pause. James stares at him, his mouth slowly closing, eyebrows drawing together. Their games… They've never actually talked about their games. Not once.

"Oh, of course, I forget it doesn't matter when it's you, right? When *you've* decided to sacrifice yourself for me. When *you're* the one doing whatever it takes to keep me safe. When it's *you* so close to death, as long as it's not me," Regulus lists off, and James' face falls slack. "Isn't that right, James? It's perfectly okay for you to do that, to make that choice and never fucking tell me, and *then* plan to die anyway when I did what I could to make sure that wouldn't happen. All of that is alright, isn't it, because…why? Because it's you?"

"I—that's not—" James sucks in a harsh breath, his face twisting as he squeezes his eyes shut. He reaches up and runs his hand through his hair, gripping it and tugging fitfully, and then he releases a sound of frustration as his hand falls and his eyes shoot open. "There are some differences, aren't there?"

"Name one," Regulus challenges in a low hiss, swinging around the end of the bed at the same time that James does, chin tilted up as he stares James down.

"Well, for one thing, I didn't *lie* to you about it," James grumbles, scowling at him.

"No, you just—purposefully omitted that information until you had no choice but to reveal it," Regulus corrects sharply, and James swallows. "Not much difference between what you did and what I did, really. Try again."

"I never promised I wouldn't fucking do it."

"No, but you purposefully led me to believe that, didn't you? Don't you think I remember, James? Every time I indicated that we would be fighting, that we would *both* be trying to win, you allowed it. You never corrected me. You *knew* I was sure we were both on the same page, and you didn't want me to find out that we weren't. Again, not so different. *Try again."*

"Two wrongs don't make a right," James snaps.

Regulus hums. "No, but it sure as shit makes you a fucking hypocrite, James Potter. Because here you are, hating me for the same exact thing you did, or just very close. Holding it against me, when I didn't hold it against you. And I—I get it, I get that you're angry, and you have every right to be, but I have just as much as a right to be furious with the double standard. Why is it okay for you, James, but not me? It's not different."

"Yes, it is!" James protests. "It's different because I never did it to fucking hurt you! I did it to save you!"

"What the hell do you think I'm doing?!" Regulus holds his arms out, eyes bulging. "You think I chose to do this *to* hurt you? Is that it? Are you fucking mental? Do you really believe I ruined us for any other reason than because it would ensure that you would be *safe?!"*

"I didn't ask that from you!"

"I didn't either!"

"My reasons weren't selfish, though!" James bellows. "I never did it thinking it would hurt you, don't you get that?! I thought you fucking hated me, but you? You *knew* how I felt about you when you did it! You made an *informed decision—"*

"Oh, fuck *off,"* Regulus hisses. "My reasons were no different than yours, and you can't fucking stand it, can you? You can't *stand* that I'm making you feel the way you've made me feel, just like I can't stand that you're making me feel how I've made you feel. This is what it feels like when you do shit like this for people, and to people, and for what? Us turning it around on each other like one of us is actually in the right, when we're not? We *both* have our reasons, James! What makes *yours* more noble than mine?"

James makes a harsh noise in the back of his throat, his heart feeling battered, pure fury coursing through his veins. "You fucking prick, I do everything I do because I love you!"

"So do I!" Regulus snarls, his voice raised, trembling with fury and this horrible, inescapable desperation that echoes out between them, blunt and harsh like a stab wound. James snaps his mouth shut instantly, his battered heart giving a strange pulse, the whole world shaping around him anew. Different now. Different instantly. Different, because he didn't know.

The silence is heavy.

Love. Regulus has never said that before, that he loves James. Not outright, not in a blatant way like that. He's talked around it, sure, and he's said things to Hallows, but that's not the same; that's not real like this is.

He hasn't said the three words, but he has said three words that may as well be the same fucking thing. James wasn't aware that love confessions could come in any other form, but *so do I* has taken upon itself to prove him wrong.

There's no mistaking the impact of it, the way everything just *stops,* neither of them moving or looking away from each other. Regulus is frozen, and James isn't breathing. It's written all over their faces; *oh, this means something.*

"So do I," Regulus repeats, his voice weaker, throat bobbing on a harsh swallow. "My reasons are as noble as yours."

"You can't just—you can't *say* that and—and expect that to fix anything," James chokes out, his eyes stinging, something in him begging and pleading for him to let it be the balm to the wound, some part of him *knowing* it's enough.

"James," Regulus says, and it comes out plaintive, a rising panic in his eyes, so much regret and remorse there in his face that James never saw until this moment—and he was always looking for it, waiting for it, needing it.

James wants to let this drop, leave it alone and take it no further, just exist in this world-altering moment where love is being held out to him like a peace offering. He wants to take it; he wants to grip it like a lifeline and never let go. He can feel it already, wearing him down, weakening him. It feels so fucking good; it's what he's wanted for so, so long. Yet, he has to fight it, because it *can't* be that easy. "I didn't make a promise knowing I would break it. I stood on that stage and nearly *died* the moment I heard your name for the third time, just like I did the times before, and it took *everything* in me, all the love and respect I have for you to *not* hurt you by volunteering for you. It fucking killed me, and I still didn't do this to you. It's *because* I love you that I would have never done this to you."

"It's because I love you that I had to," Regulus whispers. He shakes his head. "Don't you get it? Because it's true. Oh, oh fuck, you cannot even begin to imagine how true it is. I love you. I love you so much, James. I've loved you since I've known you, and I've loved you this whole time. I still do. I—"

"Stop it. *Stop,* Regulus, just—" James chokes off, feeling those words crawl into him and invade every single cell in his body. It's the first time James speaks his name since telling him that he hated him. It breaks in his mouth no different than Regulus broke his promise, just as damning, just as revealing.

"I—I love you, okay? What—what was I supposed to do? What could I do, any differently than you did for me out of love? Of course it was love, James. What else can it be? What else *is* this?" Regulus gasps out, and *fuckshitfuckingfuck,* here come the tears again. He's clearly trying to fight it, but he can't talk without everything coming out all at once, ripped open from throat to navel, a complete mess of blood and tears and love; desperate, hideous, needy love. "You don't understand how *much* I love you. I—I would do anything for you, anything,

absolutely anything you needed. And you needed your mum. You needed—you—no, okay, *I* needed you to be safe, and if—if I lost you to make sure, then—then that'd be okay, that's okay, because you're safe, you're alive, and I love that you are, I love you, I love you ceaselessly, at all times, and I know—I *know* I don't get it right, I know I'm not—"

"Regulus," James croaks.

"I love you, and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry that I do, because I never do it right, but I still do. I still love you," Regulus continues, and it comes out as sob. "I'm not sorry for doing what I had to so you'd have all that you need, but I'm sorry I had to lie to do it. I'm sorry I had to hurt you to do it. I'm sorry we're even here right now. We should be dancing by a fire."

James makes a muffled sound, his vision blurring to the point that wearing his glasses doesn't help him see anyway, because his eyes are too full of tears to make anything out. He's not sure who moves first out of either of them, but that doesn't matter when it seems like a blink and a decade passes before they're colliding into each other, holding each other. Their grips are tight, clinging, and they're both a mess of tears and the simple need to be in one another's arms, trying to fall apart at the same time they're trying to keep each other together.

"Not this," Regulus chokes out. "We didn't deserve this."

And suddenly, framed that way, none of it is different. Because Sirius was right; there's no way this could have gone where it wouldn't have gone to shit. Because Regulus was right; no matter what anyone did, they would have all ended up right here, trapped in this, imprisoned in dire circumstances none of them ever deserved. Because, past all the promises and the lies and the different forms love can take, none of them are truly at fault for any of this, and each of them are suffering through this, *together,* equally as ruined by the cruel hands of fate, a crash and scatter of dominoes that leave them lost among the wreckage of the steps they took in the aftermath of the first falling. But none of them chose this.

They never wanted this.

It hits James all at once with a mounting horror that this is exactly what Riddle wanted. Exactly *this.* To further break them all, to drive people apart, to rip hope and chances right out of their fingers until they're empty-handed, left with unfulfilled fantasies of a future they'll never get to have.

Nearly a year ago *exactly,* Regulus said something to him. It was spoken in an entirely different context, and yet it's applicable to every aspect of their relationship, from the very beginning all the way to now. *Empty hands and unfulfilled fantasies; it's all very tragic, isn't it?* he'd said.

It was the first time he called them a great, big tragedy. He knew then, in a way James couldn't really understand. He always knew. And it's not fair. It was never fair. They were a tragedy in the making the moment Regulus laid eyes on him the first time and blushed when he smiled, when Regulus threw a snowball at him on his fifteenth birthday, before the last arena and after it, standing in a kitchen and daring to try, and here, now, breaking in each other's arms with a distance shoved between them that neither of them wanted.

He didn't want this, James thinks, shaking all over like the seam of himself is splitting open, overstuffed and spilling out. *He didn't want this, no more than I did.*

It's with a sickening lurch in James' gut that he realizes he's been wasting time. And yes, Sirius has said it. Sirius tried to tell him. But it was so hard to look past all the pain and anger to see the cruel reality he so desperately wanted to escape. There is no escape, and he can't outrun it. They've all made mistakes and hurt each other; they're all doing their best with what they have, with what's forced on them, with the demands of their love that they have to answer. The horrible, ugly truth is that none of them—Regulus, included—ever wanted, or deserved, to be put in this position.

They should be dancing by a fire, and here they are anyway, trying to find some way to live with the love that led them here, except it's not love's fault. Regulus *responded.* No different than James did the first time when they went into the arena together, he responded to the threat with the guiding hand of love, a hook dragging him along, a hook that pierces them both. Together, they bleed. Neither of them want to.

All this time that James could have spent trying to patch them up and stem the blood flow, he's spent finding new places to rip open. He could have been holding him. He could have been comforting him, because no matter what they do, Regulus is going back into that arena, and he has to be scared. James could have spent this time loving him.

He did, is the thing. He did. James finds that his hatred isn't and never really was hatred at all. Even this, even like this, it's love. He didn't know love could cut, but it can, and it has, and he's sorry, too. It's easy to label love as hate when one wants their love to only ever be gentle and painless, but the horrible reality is that James, like everyone else, is human. He's human, and his love can cause pain just the same as Regulus' has.

Because that's love, too. It always was, wasn't it? Regulus said it, but James is realizing it now, understanding it here on the other side of it. Regulus hated him and never truly hated him at all. Regulus always loved him. Regulus still loves him.

"Oh, oh no. No, no, no," James chants on a broken, desperate whine under the weight of his regrets, peeling back from Regulus and continuously moving back as if he can physically travel back through all the time he wasted and get a second chance. Time—he struggles so much with time. Doesn't really understand it anymore. Looking at Regulus now, he's sure this is the first minute they've met, and simultaneously convinced they've been in love for sixty years. "I'm—oh, fuck, I'm sorry. I'm so—shit, *shit,* I just—I've wasted all this time—"

"Don't do that," Regulus cuts in instantly, his eyes going gentle, face softening. "Please don't do that, James. Don't blame yourself for feeling."

"Reg," James whispers, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not angry," Regulus murmurs. "I never was, really. You do have every right to be upset with me for lying to you. That was wrong—and for that, I am sorry."

"Thank you," James croaks. "I'm sorry you were put in a position where you felt forced to lie to me. I'm sorry any of us are forced into any of this at all."

"That's not your fault. It's Riddle's," Regulus states bluntly, his eyes flashing, going bright with true anger. Nothing like the anger between them; this is cold and calculating, something that will not pass, something that cannot be changed. "Do you see why I—I did what I did in my interview? To him? Not you, but to further ruin *him.* Because he did this to us."

"I see. I do see," James admits, because he gets it. In the wake of his fury and with proper explanation, he even finds it very fucking attractive, actually. It helps as much as it hurts that Regulus wasn't *really* lying. He would marry James, if he could. He wants to. He wasn't lying about that, and *that* matters more to James than anything else.

"Do you still think you hate me?" Regulus asks.

James could laugh, honestly. He actually does, a bit, because of *course* Regulus—the fussy, stubborn little shit that he is—will insist that James just *thought* it was hate, when it really wasn't, and well, he would know, wouldn't he? He did it first. And, the thing is, James doesn't think that anymore. He knows what that feeling was now, what he mistook for hatred was just desperate, keening love, because he loves Regulus so much, so fucking much, and he doesn't want this to happen to either of them, any of them.

"No, I don't think I hate you anymore," James whispers.

"Are you still mad at me?" Regulus whispers back.

"I don't know," James confesses. It's not that simple. There's still this snarling thing right at the center of his chest every time he looks at Regulus, and he doesn't know if it's this deep-rooted protectiveness *demanding* him to keep Regulus from any further pain, or anger that Regulus lied to him—no matter his reasons—and helped put him in this position where he's going to lose one, if not two, of those he loves the most in this world. Maybe it's both. It's probably both.

Regulus studies him for a long moment, and then he blows out a deep breath as his shoulders slump like all the fight has gone out of him at once. He moves forward and reaches out to cradle James' face, drawing him down a bit and leaning up to press his forehead to James' temple, bumping into his glasses and nudging James' cheek with his nose. James' eyes flutter shut as the snarling in his chest dies down, and he slips his arms around Regulus to pull him closer.

"That's okay," Regulus breathes out, his voice a little wobbly, words escaping him shaky and scared. "You don't have to know. You don't have to be anything other than you."

"I have to let it go," James mumbles. "It's getting in the way."

"James," Regulus says softly.

"I don't feel like a good person anymore," James tells him, his voice cracking. "I don't—I'm not—"

"You *are,"* Regulus interrupts fiercely, pulling back to hold his gaze. "You're a good person. You're the best person this world will ever know, and that doesn't mean you can't be angry, or make mistakes, or get things wrong. You can, and that doesn't take away from how *good* you are. You're so good, baby."

James is not prepared for how hard those words hit him, how deep they reach within him, how good they can feel when nothing else feels good at all. He isn't really sure what the sound that leaves his mouth is, but he muffles it anyway by surging forward to kiss Regulus.

Naturally, predictably, Regulus proceeds to *melt.*

"I love you. I love you so much," James chokes out, reaching up to cradle Regulus' cheek and press fervent, desperate kisses across the other one. "I'm so sorry, love. I'm sorry this is happening. I'm sorry. I love you so fucking much."

"Shh, you can forgive me tomorrow, before I go," Regulus tells him, tugging him towards the bed.

"I forgive you now. I forgive you, Reg."

"Then forgive yourself, too."

"I need your forgiveness first for that," James declares bluntly.

Regulus' face softens again. "You have it. You always had it."

"Okay. Okay, that's—okay," James exhales, crawling onto bed and beckoning Regulus to follow, and Regulus does. James feels better than he was prepared for, because not only is it refusing to let Riddle win in the ways that it matters, but it eases that rage in James so much that he can breathe again. He's still angry, just at all the things he feels he should be angry at. Being angry at Regulus *hurts*. It hurts them both, and he doesn't want to do it anymore; he's not doing it anymore.

"James," Regulus murmurs, once they're lying curled up on the bed, facing each other with their hands tangled loosely between them, "there's something I need you to know."

"What?" James asks quietly.

"Everything I do in that arena," Regulus whispers, holding his gaze, "it's for you."

"I'm not going to judge you for how you survive in there, love," James assures him. Regulus swallows and squeezes his eyes shut. "You—I know you don't want to hear it, but you have to make peace with Sirius. You have to—"

"Shh, no, let's not talk about any of that." Regulus' eyes snap open, and he legitimately places a finger over James' lips to shut him up. James only *just* resists licking it. "Not now, not tonight, not here. We can—I'll explain more tomorrow, alright? But, for right now, can this just be us? Please?"

"Yeah, alright," James agrees gently.

"James?"

"Hm?"

"Would you marry me?" Regulus says softly, just gazing at him, his hair spilled out around his head and face in waves, eyes fixed right on him. He doesn't look like someone who just asked that question; there's no warning for it, just a simple desire to have an answer. Not *will you marry me,* because James can't, but *would you marry me, if you could?* Then and now, before everything and after, during and always—would he?

"Yes," James whispers.

Regulus' lips curl up, and then they keep curling up, and then they curl out of control until a broad, beaming smile breaks across his face in a bloom of the most beautiful thing James has ever seen. He's *grinning.* It's a goofy grin, one of delight and the sweetest joy James has ever been hit with. Regulus' face flushes, pleased and flustered like he's still a young boy with a crush, eyes lit up as he sucks in a deep breath and holds it. He looks like he wants to scream, but in a good way; he looks like James feels just looking at him, so in love that he's glowing from the inside out from it.

James huffs out a helpless, stunned laugh of pure amazement, the rush of it spreading to him as well, despite the fact that it's the last night and everything will fall apart tomorrow. And yet, somehow, that doesn't really matter right now, like this, when happiness can grow even in the harshest of conditions, when it exists between them so blatantly with something as simple as a possibility they may never get to have.

The palpable giddiness and excitement from Regulus does not wane. If anything, it just grows stronger until he's scooting almost frantically across the space between them to kiss James eagerly, earnestly, utterly breathless and happy. So happy.

Right now, there's no room for tragedy between them.

Chapter End Notes

alright, from the top!

not the prongsfoot goodbye. james asking if he's been a good best friend to sirius—i am going to go play in traffic 😃 that shit is DEVASTATING. but indeed sirius was spitting

nothing but facts!!! put some respect on his name, he's been handling this like a champ!

then remus and regulus being miserable and hot together. i love them dearly, i truly do. their friendship means a lot to me, but it's also in a very complex position at the moment, which is fair, considering the circumstances. but they really are just the epitome of: regulus 🤝 remus: being unbelievably fucked up. they bond over being unwell and being salty and sharing gossip and bitching about people they don't like. the dynamic is so funny to me lmaoooo

regulus' little moment of talking about, like, his feelings on sirius and just—the fucking CLUES. god. i can't Say Anything because of spoilers, but this whole arc between sirius and regulus makes me VIBRATE.

and then skip to dorcas, who has a lot on her plate, as we can clearly see. a lot of shit going on in the background. i love her and lily bickering so much. you know the term like "that's my work husband" or "that's my work wife"? lily and dorcas are work wives <3

and then marlene "im not waiting for you to be too late this time" mckinnon showing up!!! sweeping dorcas off her feet!!! an icon!!!

back to wolfstar. the way remus begged sirius to come back to him. the way sirius would die for james and regulus, but he'd live for remus 😭😭😭 NO STOP IM SO UPSET I LOVE THEM SO MUCH. and them talking about their everything!!! IM GONNA BANG MY HEAD AGAINST THE WALL.

then switching back to dorlene. oh that scene of dorcas cutting marlene's hair was so, so special. like, ive known since chapter 13 when i established that marlene doesn't like her hair to be pulled that she would be cutting it off before she went back into the arena a second time. it just signifies such an important turning point in her character. i love her more than i could ever express <3

also!!! it's a win for wlw!!! they finally agreed they're not friends, that they're more!!! IT ONLY TOOK 46 CHAPTERS! NO BIGGIE!!! also like, lmaooo, dorcas really does have the worst timing 😭

and finally, jegulus. this was very, very jegulus heavy, because it was the climax of this arc, as well as the resolution. this was a very important arc for them to have, because like. just this: "James is realizing it now, understanding it here on the other side of it." like, it was a big thing for james to experience this and really understand regulus and how he feels/has felt, and just the same for regulus to understand james. it WAS a role reversal, basically, but one that brought them closer together. this is it, in the sense of like, okay they KNOW now, ya know? they know it's love and how it's love and what love feels/looks like for each other.

on a lighter note, the resolution was really bittersweet, and then very sweet, in my opinion. also!!! regulus confessing his love oh my god!!! after all this time, there it is!!!

oh, and *bursts into tears* THEY'RE ENGAGED 😭

well, okay, not really—but tell that to regulus, who will ABSOLUTELY be running with this new information lmaooo. this is the same man calling james his ex when they weren't even together. james just stating he WOULD marry regulus if he could—yes, regulus' brain has immediately decided they're engaged now. james, babe, you really should have seen that coming 💀

regulus: would you marry me if you could
james: yeah
regulus: so what im hearing is we're engaged now. we just got engaged. that's what this was.
james: ...that's...not... why do i even bother trying to keep up with you? sure, whatever you say!

like PLEASE 😭 THIS MAN JUST GETS UPDATES ON HIS RELATIONSHIP AND HE'S LIKE: oh! so this is what we're doing now! okay!

i love them so much.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-remus being delighted by sirius' interview
-james being supportive of sirius' spine realignment
-dorcas now knows the potters are at the phoenix!!! 👀
-dorcas plans to save people from the hallow!!! 👀
-sirius and remus breaking down and just holding each other and finding everything in each other
-james being unable to keep his hands off of regulus in literally any capacity lmaooo
-regulus "are you gonna fuck me or not" black being a mean little shit
-also breaking down crying because james has been mean to him for a few days 😭 (he's so valid)
-james folding like a law chair the moment regulus' waterworks started
-them literally going: fighting -> sex -> fighting -> breakdowns and being tender -> fighting again -> love confessions -> breakdowns again -> making up -> discussing marriage 😭 HELP THEY'RE INSANE

The Maze

Chapter Notes

hello, all!!! we're at arena chapters again, so these warnings are about to look...bad... 😬 please check them and take care of yourselves!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-guns/threats of gun violence
-references to past deaths
-references to past murder
-death/murder/suicide (because of the whole arena thing, and the suicide isn't in explicit detail)
-depictions of violence
-references to aquaphobia (nothing explicit)
-a brief depiction of dissociative amnesia (not in the arena)
-depictions of alcoholism/alcohol abuse (not marlene)
-descriptions of vomiting (brief)
-vague depiction of a panic attack/ptsd responses
-mentions of blood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They come in the early corners of the morning, before anyone is awake, before the servants are released to return to their duties, before the sun has even risen.

There is no warning. It's not handled gently. The door bursts open, and a team of Aurors flood in, going into rooms and marching Sirius and Regulus out with guns trained on them. James and Pandora do not handle it well, but guns are trained on them, too, keeping them there, not letting them follow.

It's a mess of shouting and desperately trying to hold onto each other, pleas and fighting, and then nothing. Just nothing, because the door shuts, Sirius and Regulus are taken away, and James and Pandora are left alone.

No one even got to say goodbye.

~•~

When Remus steps into the suite, he knows immediately that something is wrong, even as he cautiously pulls his mask off. Pandora is sitting in the main room next to James, her face puffy from where she's clearly been crying. James has his head in his hands, but he lifts it and looks at Remus, his expression fracturing. And, just like that, Remus knows.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Remus whispers.

"I'm sorry, Remus," James rasps, gripping his cane and pushing to his feet. Slowly, with a more pronounced limp than usual, he makes his way over to Remus until he stops in front of him and holds his gaze. Swallowing, he reaches out with his free arm to tug Remus in against him, shorter than him, but not by very much. It's easy to tuck his face down into James' shoulder and hide the way it scrunches as his eyes sting and grief clogs his throat. "I'm so sorry."

Remus holds very still until he's sure that he's going to be able to breathe without crying, and then he wraps his arms around James in—solidarity, maybe? Friendship? Comfort, giving and receiving? Perhaps all of it. "Both of them, I'm assuming."

"Yeah," James mumbles, clearing his throat as they break apart. He squeezes Remus' shoulder. "They just—the Aurors busted in about an hour ago, dragged them out, and took them away. We fought and—and we tried, but—"

"They're not even letting *you* say goodbye?" Remus hisses, utterly furious. "You're their mentor!"

James blinks hard, swallowing. "I know, but—they said not this time. I didn't even—Regulus and I weren't even awake when they came in. There was no warning. They just…"

"What are they going to do?" Remus snaps. "Hold them all day until the games start? Alone?"

"Yes," Pandora says, then immediately bursts into tears.

"It's because of the interviews, we think," James tells him, glancing wearily over at Pandora, his shoulders slumping. "I took the lift down to go see if it was the same with Frank, and it was. All the tributes are gone, Remus. It's—punishment."

"Did—did he say anything? Sirius, I mean?" Remus asks.

"Er, he was a bit busy yelling about being woken up. He spit on one of the Aurors," James admits sheepishly, and Remus releases a weak chuckle. "But um…no, there wasn't really time for anything to be said. Not from Sirius or Regulus."

"I'm going to—" Remus stops, inhales, exhales. He takes a second, looks at James and Pandora, then forces the tension out of his body. "Okay, this is what's going to happen. On the first day of the games, everyone watches without going anywhere, so we'll all be here together for this. Tomorrow, James, you'll have to go handle mentor duties and such. But, for today, we are *all* going to go into that kitchen and put something on our stomachs before we have to watch."

"Yes," James agrees firmly, gripping Remus' arm and leaning into him for support as they walk towards the kitchen. "I'll make you tea. Sirius told me how you like it. Unless you want coffee? We can have coffee, if you want. Pandora, come on, we're having breakfast. Get up."

Pandora miserably pushes to her feet, sniffling, but she dutifully follows. Remus goes at James' pace, taking every measured step with the same defiance and resilience that he takes every day one at a time. Sirius and Regulus are not here, no one got to properly say goodbye, but to crumble under the weight of that does not help any of them.

"Tea is fine," Remus says softly, and so, that's what they have.

~•~

Time passes slowly.

This is ironic, Regulus thinks, because it didn't last time. Just last year, in the lead up into the arena, everything felt like a blur after the initial wait. The moment they left the suite, it all sped up; and he was there, hugging his brother, not wanting to let go; and he was there, shuffled through the process with no knowledge of what was coming; and he was there, watching Gideon be murdered before his very eyes, the first murder he would witness in person, the very same day that he would cap off the night with the first murder of his own; and then he was there, rising on a platform to the arena, squinting against the sun, listening to the countdown to the very first cannon that would signal the change of everything.

This time, he is left with a tracker in his arm and a quiet, cold room. Not clean from a morning bath to prepare for the filth that surely awaits him. Hungry from the lack of breakfast he should have been granted as a gesture of a last meal. Just the steady presence of discomfort, waiting, time dragging.

There's nothing to glean from the outfit he had to change into. Well, no, there is. Having no coat at least tells him that it likely won't be cold, but that does very little to reassure him. He's just in a black shirt and black trousers specifically designed for activity, easy to move in, lightweight and durable. His arms are left bare, revealing his scars, which—well, on one hand, it makes him uncomfortable, because he's always in long-sleeves, but on the other hand, he is intrigued by the idea that seeing his scars will further infuriate the Hallows since the reminder of how he got them and how unfair it is that he may be getting more can't be ignored with them on display.

Regulus realizes it as he sits there, never moving or doing anything at all, just breathing; he isn't scared this time.

Not even a bit.

He stares at the closed tube around the platform and waits in the uncomfortable seat, hands threaded together, ready. Oh, he's so ready. Possibly more ready for this than he has been anything else in his entire life.

There can't be any hesitation, any faltering, any *caring.* There can't be anything other than going in and doing what he needs to. There can't be one moment where he looks at Sirius and

—

Regulus closes his eyes, exhaling slowly, trying to shake himself free from the swell of emotion he hasn't let break out since the reaping, since Sirius volunteered again. He shuts it down and thinks, instead, of the gentle way James traced his skin last night. How James brushed Regulus' hair back and scanned his face leisurely, carefully, taking him in like he had all the time in the world and would spend it doing just that.

After all the fighting, all the pain and grief and fear, they touched one another with such reverence and love, smiling into kisses and whispering sweet words into each other's skin, letting time slip away from them like burning, midnight embers of a cigarette. Ash, ash, ash. They blazed, and then they cooled, and then they settled there, together, waiting for the wind to come in and blow them away.

It has.

~•~

Sirius, if you'd believe it, is very fucking bored.

Over time, the anger from being dragged out far too soon at gunpoint and the frustration with not getting to properly say goodbye to Remus had faded. It turned sad, and anxious, and just helplessly defeated. He had planned to kiss Remus' mask one last time, and kiss Remus, too. All he wanted to do was kiss Remus at least one more time. That's all he ever wants to do, really.

He has gone around in circles about what's coming and what he's going to have to do, again, quite literally spending hours just pacing restlessly around the room.

He has lost moments, thinking so hard and so much that he works himself up, and then he blinks and finds himself parked in the chair, no recollection of when he sat down. It worries him, frankly. This is something that doesn't happen very often anymore, unless in very stressful situations that his mind simply can't handle, and the arena is sure to pose many of

those, but he can't *afford* to slip away. He has to be present; he has to remain here, for Regulus, he *has* to.

Fortunately, Sirius has never once lost himself in a fight. When James lashed out at him, or when Regulus did back in the early stages right after his games, Sirius remained planted firmly in himself, perhaps even more tethered there by the rush of adrenaline and surge of survival instincts that pushed away any possibility of escape. He stays here when there's nowhere else to go, and in the arena, it's just the arena. It's nothing *but* adrenaline and survival instincts. He'll do what he has to. He will. No different than he did at the reaping, reflexively.

The boredom is what gets to Sirius, in the end. He's left in a room alone with literally nothing but himself, an unopened tube enclosing a platform, and a cold, steel chair. At one point, he's just sitting there, twiddling his thumbs and bouncing one leg restlessly, full of all this built up anticipation that leaves him feeling fundamentally trapped with nothing or no one to focus his energy on. He spends at least an hour doing some cuticle maintenance and repeatedly re-doing his hair over and over to the point that his hair bobble is probably sick of him.

That's why he can't be blamed when, finally, his name is called and the tube opens up, and the first thing he does is shoot to his feet with a deep exhale of relief. Maybe that seems horrid, but honestly? The suspense was fucking killing him; it wasn't good kind of suspense that Sirius associates with Remus' light caresses, but rather this heavy dread settling in his bones. He just wants to get it over with. He just wants it to be done.

He wants it to never have happened at all.

It's not until Sirius steps up onto the platform that the reality of it starts to properly sink in. He thinks of what it feels like to have Remus' fingers in his hair, Remus' mouth brushing along the curve of his throat, Remus' arms wrapped around him; he thinks of their everything, the spiral staircase and the porch swing underneath the moon and stars.

For a second, Sirius closes his eyes, and he lets himself concoct a wistful little fantasy of having all of that instead of this, and then he's slapped with the full force of his reality by the distant, muffled crack of a gunshot from somewhere within the building, followed very quickly by another.

Sirius' eyes fly open.

There's a hiss and pop of the tube closing again, and then the platform starts to rise. He tilts his head back to watch the circular opening give way as he goes higher, blinking slowly when he can't see sunshine on the other side of it. The only indicator, at first, that he is moving into an entirely different environment is the swift change in the air, going from cold and almost metallic down below, to warm and a bit stale from up above. As he's lifted up, he can feel how muggy and humid it is, and it's still quite dark, even when the platform stops.

Heart racing, Sirius swivels his head automatically to look for Regulus, only to see enclosed walls of overgrown, thick hedges on either side of him. He cranes his head back, eyes narrowing into slits. The top is *obscenely* high, to the point that he can't quite make it out from here, though he has a general idea.

It's a snarling mass of green and brown; a thick tangle of roots and leaves; branches and foliage so compact and impenetrable that he can't even see through it. This means that Sirius can't see who is on the other side of him, if anyone is at all. This means that Sirius has no fucking clue what Regulus' starting position is, or anyone else's for that matter. Great. Just great.

The sky is visible, but it seems like something from another world, something entirely out of reach. It's a big, blue blanket with a bright tinge of sunshine to it, large numbers displayed counting down along with a voice echoing out in time with it.

26, 25, 24…

The sunshine doesn't reach them down here, cast in the large shadows of the hedge walls, left to a murky dark that feels fitting somehow, like the ugly underground where rot festers and creatures dwell. Here they are, nothing more than the monsters they were made into, and finally, after all this time, there's a place that reflects it. There's some sort of cruel irony that he would find it in the arena. Of course. Where else? Where else other than the place they were created?

17, 16, 15…

In front of him, Sirius can see a long, dim passageway straight ahead. If he squints, he can make out the opening at the end, like the hall of greenery will lead him somewhere. He'd bet a lot on the fact that it's the weapons and supplies, depending on the layout. If this is what he *thinks* it is…

9, 8, 7…

A labyrinth. A maze. Sirius would fucking laugh if he had enough air in his lungs to do so. Oh, Minerva McGonagall. That woman. Quite the comedian, he thinks. Very on point, honestly, throwing them in a maze like a bunch of lab rats all just trying to find their way out; she is fucking *hilarious.* Even if she doesn't know it, even if she's doing it subconsciously, there is no way to deny the fact that this is exactly what the tributes are every year—the Hallows' stupid fucking lab rats, being played with for their morbid amusement, strung along and driven to desperate lengths by the promise of cheese.

3, 2, 1…

As soon as the cannon sounds, Sirius drops off the platform and sidles up to the hedge to his left, closing his eyes and straining his ears to listen. He can hear it, faintly, the sound of feet pounding against the ground.

Shit.

Without a second of hesitation, Sirius swivels on his heel and tears off down the passage in front of him, because if he knows one thing for sure, it's that there's going to be a fucking fight waiting on the other side of that opening at the end—one Regulus will also be caught up in.

Right at the end of the passage, there's a bag sitting on the edge that Sirius plucks up as he's running, not even stopping to think about it as he does it, not wondering why it's there, or what it means. He breaks through to the wide open space where people are pouring out of their own passages all around, and then he immediately collides into someone so hard that he and whoever it is goes sailing to the ground.

Sirius rolls with the motion, easily and agile, dropping the bag and bracing himself as his head snaps up to see who he hit. He blinks to find Narcissa mirroring his position exactly, though she doesn't have a bag. For a long, tense moment, neither of them move or do anything at all, and then, slowly and very carefully, they ease to their feet, gazes locked.

"Cissa," Sirius says, his tone clipped.

"Sirius," Narcissa murmurs, flicking her gaze over him, assessing. After a beat, she drops her hand to her stomach and arches an eyebrow at him. "Come now, surely you wouldn't harm me and little Draco, would you?"

"I'm going to give you one chance to run," Sirius tells her, holding still, "and take little Draco with you."

Narcissa breaks into a grin, huffs a laugh, then doesn't hesitate to whip around and fucking *run.* Sirius watches her go for about five seconds, then shakes his head and snatches up his bag to turn and survey his surroundings.

"Andy, that was for you, by the way," Sirius mutters under his breath, gaze darting around as he takes in the chaos currently spreading throughout the area.

It's like an open portion of a maze, a big square with weapons scattered around all over. There are a lot less bags, maybe five that he can see in all, which tells him that this is mainly a cache spot for weaponry. Sirius can see at least two or three different spears sticking out of the ground that are all very tempting, but not as tempting as it is to find his brother. All around, there are countless openings to run into, to delve further into the labyrinth. When Sirius peeks, the one he just ran out of is already closing up into a wall of dark green.

Everywhere Sirius looks, people are sprinting, some that he recognizes as they dart around, and some he can't even properly make out in the dim lighting. Everyone is trying to snatch up weapons before anyone else can get one and attack, making the most of the seconds it takes to prepare.

The sound of one cannon, followed quickly by a second, seems to draw everyone to a halt. Everything sort of just—stops. Two deaths already, that soon, and they all seem a little stunned by it, an eerie silence draping over everyone and everything, and Sirius gets it. There has been this underlying sense of camaraderie between everyone, none of them as of yet turning on each other, and it hasn't even been two minutes, so to think that *already* there's murder is just…disheartening, honestly.

But, when the source of death is located, Sirius is halted by a heavy sense of solemnity. It's Mavis and Velvet; they'd done exactly as they promised they would. They found weapons, found each other, and they died together. Their bodies are splayed out on the ground right beside one another, curled close in death like the lovers they were in life.

For a long moment, maybe half of a minute, no one moves. No one speaks. No one does anything but stare. No death eaters take the opportunity to attack anyone, and there's just this quiet, momentary mourning and respect for two people who loved each other and decided, together, that they would not participate in a game as cruel and sadistic as this one. They went out together, in complete control of their own fate, and they never deserved anything other than a long life full of love.

And then, unprompted, Regulus' voice rings out, nearly snarling. He's addressing the sky, the audience, the Hallows in a low hiss of derision when he declares, "When you take them, you take them *together,* and know that it's *your* fault."

The moment Sirius locates Regulus across the open field, he's running full-tilt right for him, and this pushes everyone back into motion. Sirius knocks into someone, clipping them as he goes by—Emmeline, he thinks—but he's not stopped, so he keeps going. The first initial deaths have passed, and the floodgates have opened. Some people are taking escape routes into the maze, uninterested in starting the fight so soon, but that's not the case for all of them.

For one thing, Sirius sees Coen scrambling away from Camilla as she runs after him with a fucking club in hand, both of them darting into the maze and shouting angrily at each other. For another thing, Regulus is in the middle of diving for the dagger closest to him when Henri tackles him to the ground, going for the same exact thing.

Sirius had yanked up his bag as he sprinted, which he now uses to swing directly at Henri's head so hard that he sails to the side, torn away from where he was just strangling Regulus.

It takes less than ten seconds. Sirius drops his bag, drags Henri back, and proceeds to ruthlessly press his boot to Henri's neck, grabbing his arm roughly to yank at it and stomp on his throat at the same time. There's a sickening *crunch* and Henri's choked noise sputters out into silence as his head hangs awkwardly on his broken, crushed neck.

The cannon sounds.

"Hey, hey, are you okay?" Sirius blurts out, dropping Henri's arm carelessly as he moves to Regulus' side. He reaches down to help Regulus sit up as he coughs and lightly touches his throat. "Reggie? Look at me. Let me see if—"

Regulus swats his hand away with a huff and scowls as he scoots further back and pushes to his feet. Sirius follows him, stepping around Henri's body to grab his bag, still watching Regulus, scanning him for further injury. He looks fine, just sort of pissed off, which—fair.

"I just saved your life. *Again,"* Sirius says pointedly, arching an eyebrow at him, because surely *now* Regulus can see that the silent treatment and cold shoulder is just immature and does neither of them any favors in the fucking arena of all places. "You're welcome for that, by the way."

Regulus stares at him for a beat, jaw clenched, then he says, in a flat voice, "Thanks," and immediately punches Sirius in the face right after.

Sirius reels from the force of it, not at all seeing it coming, and he goes stumbling back with a sharp curse of pure disbelief, his face already aching from the hit. He barely has the chance to get his bearings before he sees Regulus shake out his fist and surge forward to slam his shoulder into Sirius' chest while yanking the bag right out of his hands. Sirius wheezes, the air knocked out of him as he hits the ground, meeting Regulus' eyes with his mouth hanging open in shock.

Without a word, Regulus starts backing up, swinging the bag that the little shit just *stole* up onto his shoulders and pausing long enough to snatch up the dagger he was fighting for in the first place as he goes. And then, easy as that, he turns and takes off sprinting without looking back, ducking into the maze and just—leaving Sirius behind.

Sirius stares after him, genuinely so caught off-guard that he can't even form any thoughts for what the fuck just happened, or why. He doesn't—he can't understand. Why—

"Get the hell up, you idiot!"

At the sharp, familiar hiss in his ear, Sirius blinks harshly and scrambles to his feet, still disoriented and confused, but very sure now is *not* the time to focus on that. He swings around and comes face-to-face with Marlene, first seeing her swollen eyes and tear-stained cheeks, as well as the fierce gleam in them despite that, and *then* her new haircut.

Sirius glances down to find Marlene already holding a sword, then glances around to see that the chaos has died down. Most of everyone has already left, leaving only four others; those that are already allies. Augusta, like Marlene, has a sword in hand. Emmeline has a crossbow and quiver of bolts already settled against her back. Alice has apparently managed to grab a bag of supplies, and they have a machete gripped in one hand as they dig through it with Augusta peering over their shoulder, which seems to annoy them, but they don't say anything or look back at her for doing it.

Sirius is the only one empty-handed. Lovely.

"Well, this is shit," Emmeline announces, turning in a slow circle as she examines the area. It's cleared out, nothing left behind; no supplies or weapons otherwise.

It's not a place for provisions or anything. It's not even a place for claiming, frankly, because it's surrounded at all sides with openings into the maze. Now, it's just a field that offers no defense, shelter, or protection. No wonder everyone left.

Usually, there's a place right at the beginning that has an abundance of weapons and supplies, as well as shelter, for people to claim, generally the death eaters. This just had weapons, and not enough to go around for everybody, and it was very scarce on supplies. Sirius realizes how incredibly lucky he was to come across the bag he did before his sneaky prick of a brother fucking *decked him and took it.*

"Well," Augusta says dryly, "it certainly could have gone worse. Only three dead, and two weren't even really killed."

As one, they all swivel their heads to stare at Sirius, who is responsible for the first genuine kill in the arena. He huffs and throws his hands up, because honestly, what was he expected to do in that situation? Henri was strangling Regulus. Of course Sirius snapped his fucking neck.

"We can't stay here," Alice says firmly as they zip up their bag and stand to their feet, eyes darting around, visibly tense.

"The death eaters already fled," Emmeline notes. "What do you think their plan is?"

"I don't know, why don't we ask Regulus?" Marlene snaps.

Sirius' head immediately whips around towards her. "What's that supposed to mean? Regulus isn't a fucking death eater."

"No? Because he sure seemed to feel safe enough running in the same direction they all did," Marlene tells him, her voice sharp and her eyes cold. "You've got a bruise already blooming that says he's not *your* ally—or ours, by extension."

"Look, he's just—throwing a tantrum, basically," Sirius grumbles, grimacing as he reaches up to prod at his jaw, shooting Marlene a glare when she scoffs. "His issue is with me, not anyone else, so he's not a threat. He'll get over it."

"Hate to break it to you, boy," Augusta tells him, "but he's not a secure ally, from what I can tell. I get he's your brother—"

"Yeah, exactly, he's my *brother,"* Sirius cuts in harshly. "He may be angry at—no, okay, he *is* angry at me, but that's between us. He's *not* a death eater. He's just not."

"And if he is?" Marlene challenges. "What then, Sirius? Because if you expect me to hold back if he's trying to attack me just because he's your little brother—"

"Watch it, McKinnon," Sirius says shortly.

"Why?" Marlene snarls. "Huh? Why should I? Because he's your family? Well, you know what? Families *die.* They die. That's what they do. They—they—that's what they—"

"Marlene," Sirius murmurs gently, because he can suddenly see that she is shaking, and her breath is hitching in her chest, and tears are building up in her eyes.

Marlene chokes out, "My parents, Sirius. They killed them. They killed my—"

"Fucking hell," Sirius whispers, moving forward to catch her the moment she drops her sword and breaks down crying, ducking her face against his chest and rattling in his arms. He cups the back of her head, instinctively wanting to block her from sight, and he raises his gaze to find the other three watching with sickened, pained expressions.

Marlene starts explaining through her tears, the words muffled and stuttered, but audible all the same. The two gunshots he heard—they all heard—right before being lifted into the arena. That was Marlene's parents being murdered right in front of her eyes where she could do nothing to save them, where she could do nothing at all but watch.

It's horrible. It's fucked up. Haven't they all been through enough? Isn't the arena punishment *enough?* Yes, Marlene called for riots and rebellion, and she did so more bluntly than anyone else, but that's just too much. That's—well, that's exactly what a man like Riddle would do.

Someday, Riddle is going to fuck with the wrong person, and they're going to slaughter him, and on that day, the whole world is going to shine just a little brighter.

"Okay, Marlene, look at me," Sirius orders firmly, pushing her back by her shoulders, then cupping her face and gently wiping her tears away. "I am very sorry. They didn't deserve that, and neither did you. But, right now, you have to keep it together. They *want* you to fall apart, alright? That's exactly what they want. Don't give them the satisfaction."

Marlene swallows, blinking hard and fast, and she's so strong for how she handles it, how she adjusts to the weight of it and shifts her shoulders, and stands taller, and firms her jaw. It hits Sirius then, the reminder why the vessels of the sea are often called *she,* because no one bears the brunt of a storm like a woman. The worst part is, Marlene shouldn't have to. No one should, and yet she does. She breathes in and out, takes a step back, and picks up her sword. There she is, ready to survive.

"Sorry, I really am, but we can't stay here," Alice repeats.

"We need more supplies. A water source. Preferably some shelter. And we can't just stay here where anyone can easily find us," Emmeline lists off, docking a bolt in her crossbow as she frowns around at all the different routes they can take. The death eaters—and Regulus—all went towards the right.

"Well, I don't know about any of you, but I'm going that way," Sirius states, pointing to the right. "I have to find—"

"Oh, come off it, Sirius," Marlene snaps. "You know as soon as all the death eaters group up, they're coming right for you. Going that way is *dangerous."*

"Regulus went that way."

"Again, how do you know he's not *with* them?"

"He wouldn't. No matter how angry is, he'd never do that to me. He'd never—" Sirius halts, the mere concept making his chest ache. He shakes his head at Marlene. "He'd never hurt me, Marlene. Certainly never try to kill me."

"He already punched you," Augusta points out.

"Yes, well, brothers do that sometimes. I'll get him back for it when I see that little shit again," Sirius grumbles.

"But in the *arena?"* Marlene challenges, clearly refusing to let it go. "That just seems like a statement you can't really miss. I mean, did he ever *say* he was actually our ally, or is that just something you automatically assumed?"

Sirius clenches his jaw.

No, Regulus never said that, but…it's *Regulus.* He wouldn't. He just—he wouldn't. Not for anything.

"Well, that changes things," Augusta says firmly. "If the boy has no intentions of being an ally, then he won't be treated as such, and you may not like it—"

"Look, do any of you have siblings?" Sirius cuts in, his voice sharp. He glances around at all of them. "Well, do you? No? Exactly, so you don't know what it's like to know someone inside and out the way I know my brother. Whatever you *think* he's doing, I guarantee that you're dead wrong. I *know* him. He may be fooling all of you, but he *can't* fool me."

"I think, *because* he's your brother, you're the easiest to fool," Marlene argues, eyes narrowing.

"Okay, you are very cynical on anything family-related due to grief, and you're valid for that," Sirius mutters, "so I'm going to let that slide and not count you as a reliable source. Just… Look, *I'm* your ally, right? You have to trust me on this."

"And if you're wrong?" Augusta asks bluntly.

"I'm not," Sirius declares, steady, unwavering.

Marlene's lips press into a thin line. "Alright, fine, we'll take your word for it. *But,* if—and I mean this—if he attacks any of us, I will kill him, Sirius."

Sirius gives her a sad smile. "You can try."

"You think I won't kill you?" Marlene asks.

"I'll be offended if, at some point, you're not at least a *little* tempted," Sirius tells her with a lopsided grin, and she snorts weakly and looks away. "Right, so back to my original point. I'm going after Regulus. Who's joining?"

"Going in that direction is just *asking* for trouble," Emmeline says, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Well, you know, all for one and one for all?" Sirius tries weakly. No one looks amused. He sighs. "Okay, then leave me to it. I'm not going to ask all of you to take that risk. I'll take it on my own, and you can all go whatever way you like. No one said allies have to remain *together."*

"It'd certainly be more prudent if we did, though," Augusta informs him, huffing and shaking her head.

"So, come with me. That's your only option. We all stay in a group, all of us, or you all leave me to go on my own," Sirius announces simply, "because there's nothing or no one that's going to stop me from finding my brother. Up to you, really."

Alice clicks their tongue. "Oh, for fuck's sake. Does it even matter, truly? I'd bet my life on the fact that all these passages connect in some way or another, so I doubt we won't all be running into each other along the way *anyway.* You know the gamemakers will find some

way to get us exactly where they want us. I vote we stay together. Safety in numbers and all that. It'd be worse if we came across all the death eaters without all hands available, yeah?"

"They do have a point," Emmeline agrees.

"Yes, unfortunately they do," Augusta concedes grudgingly.

Marlene grunts and side-eyes Sirius. "Stubborn bastard."

Sirius just hums, pleased, and flashes them all a grin. Again, none of them look impressed in the least. In fact, they're all eyeing him like they're considering just killing him now so they won't have to deal with the headache he is sure to be. He's so ridiculously fond of each of them, truly.

The sound of rustling and heavy footfalls wipes the grin off his face, and they're all on edge immediately, swiveling to face the sound of what's clearly an unsteady approach. Marlene and Augusta have their swords up in seconds, Emmeline raises her crossbow, and Alice grips their machete tight. Sirius doesn't have a weapon, but he also doesn't need one to fight, so he just waits, eyes narrowed, body tense and at the ready.

The moment a form comes stumbling out of an opening into the clearing, Emmeline shoots, and the *only* reason she misses is because the form trips and lands flat on their face.

"Shit," Marlene breathes out.

Groaning, Eli pushes himself up and haphazardly makes it back to his feet, bracing himself against the spear he'd dropped when he fell. He hiccups, blinks blearily at them, then raises the spear up like a trophy, coming dangerously close to stabbing himself in the face with it.

"Look what I found," Eli slurs, swaying on the spot.

"Shit," Marlene repeats, this time with a heavy sigh.

"Sirius, go take that from him before he falls on it and dies," Augusta orders, shaking her head. "It'll do you better than him as it is. Goodness, is he *still* drunk?"

"He's going to have a bitch of a time drying out over the next couple of days," Marlene mutters with a grimace.

"If he even lives that long," Emmeline says bluntly.

Sirius eases forward with a frown, watching Eli poke the pointy end of the spear, face slack. "Hey, Eli, you wouldn't mind too terribly much if I took that, would you?"

"Nah." Eli smacks his lips and swings out the spear so wide that Sirius has to jump back, hissing in distress as his eyes bulge. Eli squints at him. "Just gets in the way, seems like. Well? Are you gonna take it or not?"

"Right." Sirius coughs and swiftly plucks the spear away from Eli, swiveling it artfully in his palm so the handle swings around his hand and balances back over. He rolls the handle along his fingers, adjusting to the weight of it, then turns his gaze back to Eli. "Have you been on your platform this entire time, Eli? Just…doing what, exactly?"

"Mm, there was a boom; haven't heard one of those in a while," Eli mumbles, scratching his head. "Startled me a bit, so I fell on the ground, maybe took a quick little nap. When I got up, I found that." He gestures to the spear, then drops his hand and smiles at Sirius. "Say, you wouldn't have a drink on you, would you? I could really use one. Haven't had one all day."

"You took a nap." Sirius turns and looks at the others, and *now* they look amused. "He took a nap."

"Eli Zatish, you never fail to amaze me," Marlene says with a fond chuckle. "Come on, old man, we need to get a move on, and you have a *really* bad night ahead of you."

Eli gives a sad little frown. "Oh. Don't like that."

"Join the club," Sirius replies wryly, clapping him on the shoulder and keeping him steady as they all turn as a group and head towards the maze. Marlene moves over to help Eli along as well, and Sirius glances at her. "Hey, McKinnon?"

"Yeah, Black?" Marlene replies, turning tired eyes to him.

"I like your hair, by the way." Sirius watches her eyes get just a little lighter, pleased, and he smiles. "It suits you."

Marlene looks away, but not before he sees her lips curling up at the corners. She doesn't reply, but Sirius doesn't need her to. Together as a group, they continue on.

Finding food, supplies, water, and shelter—those are all vital to their survival and well-being, but frankly, Sirius is worried about one thing and one thing only.

Finding Regulus.

~•~

Regulus is lost.

He really, *really* doesn't like this. The maze, that is. Well, he doesn't like any part of this, obviously, but the maze is fucking with his head, and it's only been twenty minutes. He goes down one passage and takes a corner to go in the opposite direction, only to feel like he's going in the same one, and when he tries to backtrack, he finds that there's nothing to backtrack *to.* Everywhere he turns, it's all the same, one tall hedge after the other, nothing different about any of them.

There's no sense of direction, not here, and it's disorienting. Left is right, and forward is back, and straight is a turn that loops back around. He's dizzy from it, his heart racing as he constantly swings his head to check in front of him and behind him interchangeably, on rotation, not at all appreciating how there's really nowhere to fucking *hide.*

It's not quiet. There's a muffled rustling from the hedges at all times, like something is about to reach out and grab him. He can't tell if someone is coming up behind him, or if someone will take a corner in front of him, or if there's an opening ahead that someone might run out of. It puts him on relentless tenterhooks, paranoid, too tense to really think clearly.

For a second, just one second, Regulus regrets not taking the chance to stay with Sirius.

It's just this stupid instinct he's been wrestling with for *days,* the one where, when he's scared, something in Regulus simply wants his brother. He can't help it, can't stop it, no matter how much he's been fighting it, and *continues* to fight it.

But, in this moment, if Sirius appeared in front of him, Regulus *knows* he'd be unable to stop himself from going right to him, because he'd feel safer, as ridiculous as that is.

Regulus comes to a screeching halt, breathing in, then slowly breathing out. Because no, no, there can be none of that. Just because Sirius is here does *not* mean that Regulus needs coddling. It's the fucking hunger games; of course this is terrifying. He's just going to have to get over it, deal with it on his own, and stop relying on his brother to fight his battles for him. All his life, that's all Sirius has done, really, and this time they're on the same battlefield; just on opposite sides.

Slowly, Regulus crouches down low and eases the bag off his back to quickly open it and see what, exactly, he managed to steal from Sirius. His gaze darts back and forth, checking his surroundings, and it's *still* Sirius' voice in his head reminding him to be cautious, to not linger too long, to keep going until he locates a water source at the very least.

Inside the bag, Regulus finds his first possible stroke of luck he's ever had in his *life,* and it's terribly ironic that it's not even his luck, but actually Sirius' that he just so happened to steal. There's a flashlight, a lighter, and an odd container that Regulus is quite sure he saw in the training room, used to collect rainwater. The sight of it puts a knot in Regulus' stomach as he tilts his head back to stare at the sky.

Oh.

Not good.

Very not good.

Regulus doesn't really *do* rain. When it's raining, he simply doesn't leave his house. He doesn't go outside. The one and only time it rained when he just so happened to be out at the tree back in district six, he literally broke into the mortuary and waited the five hours it took for it to stop.

If it rains here, Regulus is fucked. There's nowhere for him to *go.* It's just open sky above him, nothing to hide in or under; even the hedges are too dense for him to crawl into, but he would literally bear the brunt of sharp leaves and vines and whatever else the hedge is made of if it meant he *could* get out of the rain. But he can't. He'll be stuck.

Swallowing thickly, Regulus glances back down and continues to sift through the bag. It's not raining now, and that will just have to do. He's got this. He'll—he'll be fine. Probably.

For a moment, selfishly, Regulus wishes James were here.

The irony of that desire is not lost on him. He doesn't really want James to be in danger, just…here. Just right next to him, to touch, to talk to, to lean on. James would lift his shirt and let Regulus crawl under it to block the rain. James would crack open his chest and shelter Regulus inside, if he had to. That kind of devotion, that kind of love, it lives in their blood, in the marrow of their bones. Regulus can feel it resonating all the way from here, knowing James is watching him, knowing James…is probably quite mad at him. Again.

Well, at least this time, Regulus doesn't know about it. Doesn't have to see it. Doesn't have to live with it. He likely will never forgive Regulus for this, but maybe someday, he'll understand that it's as much for him as it is for Regulus. It's for them both.

There's a full water bottle at the bottom of the bag, along with two granola bars and a package of dried meat and berries. In a separate compartment, there's a small first aid kit, complete with bandages, antiseptic, burn cream, *and* a needle already threaded with a small spool of thread. Frankly, it's startlingly helpful, to the point that Regulus' eyebrows are raised so high in disbelief that they're practically stitched into his hairline.

He's going to start stealing Sirius' luck more often. Fucking hell, how Sirius managed to find a bag carrying at least a day's worth of food and water to survive on—which goes a really long way in the arena—as well as incredibly useful supplies, even of the medical variety, is beyond him.

There's a stir in the air behind him, a shift, a *presence* that sends a chill up Regulus' spine and has him moving on pure instinct. He swivels on the balls of his feet and springs up quickly, blade twirling in his hand and settling directly against Thornfinn's throat, who instantly freezes where he has a hatchet not unlike the one James used to use raised high as if he was preparing to strike.

"Rowle," Regulus murmurs.

"Black," Thorfinn replies, holding still.

Regulus flicks his gaze towards the hatchet, then arches an eyebrow at Thorfinn. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I saw your bag," Thorfinn mutters. "Plan to share?"

"No."

"Well, that's not very *ally* of you."

"Neither is planning to take someone's head off with a hatchet. Fucking hell, aren't you supposed to be *smart?"*

Thorfinn glares at him. "Look, you can't blame me for trying. No one even knows where you stand, no matter what your crazy fucking cousins think. So, I mean, if you're actually an ally, now is the chance to prove it."

"What's mine is mine," Regulus informs him sharply, though he draws his dagger back as he says it. "Try and take it from me, and I'll shove this dagger through your face. That includes this bag *and* trying to kill my brother."

"See, you say shit like that and then wonder why no one trusts you," Thorfinn snaps. "Who *cares* who actually kills Sirius if he's dead anyway, yeah?"

"You don't listen very well, do you?"

"Maybe *you* need to start listening, Black. I'm telling you now, the *second* I see your brother, I'm getting that kill, no matter how much you want it to be you. I'm taking his fucking head off, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"I quite literally *just* told you what I would do about it. If you don't believe me, that's *your* mistake."

"Yeah? Well, if you want to stop me, you may as well kill me now, because—"

"Okay," Regulus says, then snaps his hand out and shoves the dagger up through the soft underside of Thornfinn's chin, behind the jawbone, driving it up with enough force that he can see the tip split through Thornfinn's tongue and glisten with blood from where his mouth is open.

Thornfinn's eyes bulge, and he makes a grotesque choking noise. Regulus holds his gaze for a beat, *holds* him there, then rips the dagger right back out. Thornfinn's hatchet hits the ground

as his hands fly up to his neck, mouth opening and closing, blood pouring from his lips and between his fingers. He takes a stumbling step back, then another, then goes down. Regulus watches him bleed out, and he doesn't flinch when, minutes later, the cannon sounds.

Regulus really thinks he's alright, for just a moment, utterly unshakeable after that. He had no feelings for Thorfinn at all, and he warned him what would happen. It's the hunger games. Death happens. Murder happens. It's not even Regulus' first.

Yet, the moment he sees blood on his hand, he turns and immediately vomits on the ground so violently that he stumbles to his knees and has to catch himself with his free hand that, thankfully, is very clean. His other hand drops the blood-stained dagger, and he scrambles back from it, gagging harshly and doing his best to catch his breath.

"Oh, fuck, fuck, *fuck,"* Regulus chokes out, squeezing his eyes shut as he frantically drags his slick hand along the ground, trying desperately to get the blood *off.* The smell of it lingers in his nose, rusty and metallic. He can—he can *taste* it. He remembers the taste, and he's swallowing, he's choking it down, trying to breathe, drowning again.

The phantom feeling of hands sends him into a tailspin, and he kicks out harshly, scrambling back further as he swipes his trembling hand on his shirt and tucks his head down between his bent knees. He breathes. He tries to breathe.

Regulus isn't sure how long he remains hunched in on himself, only resurfacing when he's jostled out of his breakdown by the sound of yet *another* cannon, meaning someone else just died. Fuck. He snaps his head up at the sudden gust of wind that sails over and the pronounced sway of the hedges on either side of him as a heli-carrier hovers, coming to get Thorfinn.

Shit.

Shit, shit, *shit.*

There's no time to have a fucking meltdown, not when he knows that death will draw people in, and the *last* thing he needs is to be placed at the scene of the crime by the very group of

people he's trying to prove his trustworthiness to. He feels like Bellatrix would understand, if he explained that Thorfinn…provoked him, and Narcissa might let it slide, but everyone else would just—oh, they'd decide he's more trouble than he's worth in a heartbeat.

Regulus can't let that happen. It's *vital* that he remains allies with the death eaters. So, he flings himself to his feet and takes off running, scooping up his dagger and bag as he goes, not even looking at them. He just needs to put as much distance between himself and—and *that* as possible.

So, Regulus runs, and he keeps running, and he doesn't stop running. His lungs are protesting, and his mouth tastes sour, and he can't—he still feels the blood on his blade, and maybe if he runs forever, he'll never have to stop and face—

The next corner he takes, Regulus runs directly into Bellatrix, quite literally stumbling right into her. She catches him as he trips, her hands darting out to grasp his shoulders, steadying him. He stops, watching her gaze flick over him slowly, and then he turns his gaze to find the rest of the death eaters all standing together. Every. Single. One.

Regulus stands before them, bloody dagger in hand, face flushed and hair windswept, gasping for air.

Again—shit, shit, *shit.*

"Well, it looks like someone was having fun without the rest of us," Bellatrix says, reaching down to pluck his dagger from his hand. He lets her, feeling weak and faint and close to being sick again. She swivels it, examining the blood curiously, then tilts her head at him. "Who'd you just kill, munchkin?"

Okay, pause.

There are moments in one's life where they can pinpoint the weight of their next words. For Regulus, this is one such moment. If he says Thorfinn, there's a very good chance that at least half of this group—Yaxley, Alecto, Dixon, and possibly even Rabastan—will immediately turn on him. Bellatrix likely will not; he feels like she'd *at least* hear him out, on account of

him being her favorite cousin. But if she doesn't deem his reason good enough, that's it, and she's so fucking mental that Regulus doesn't even bother trying to figure out what her measurement for *good enough* would be.

One problem, though. They're going to find out Thorfinn is dead in a matter of hours, when the banners play in the sky. He can't say Henri on the chance that someone saw *Sirius* kill Henri, and if no one dies before the banners, or Regulus says a name that doesn't match up, then he's fucked. There was one other person killed around the same time as Thorfinn, and if he can guess who, then he'll be in the clear.

So, in the shift of one second, Regulus asks himself who is one of the smartest people he knows, and while there's a very long list of brilliant people he's acquainted with, for some reason it's Remus that pops into his head. Thinking of Remus leads him into a rabbit-hole of thoughts that tumble through his head until, before he knows it, he's speaking.

"Coen," Regulus blurts out, the name escaping him blunt and abrupt, but he doesn't waver when they all stare at him. It's the best guess he's got, because Camilla is ruthless enough to murder people—as proven in her previous games—and she is out for Coen's blood. He thinks he saw her chase after Coen. Maybe she actually caught up. "I killed Coen. From twelve."

"What happened?" Narcissa asks.

Regulus clears his throat. "We just—knocked into each other. Got into a fight. I won."

"Hm." Bellatrix swivels the dagger, then lazily wipes it clean on her shirt and holds it out to him, hilt first. She already has a dagger tucked in the waistband of her pants. "Well, good for you. That's five already."

Regulus reaches out and takes his dagger, admittedly grateful that she wiped the blood off for him. He flicks his gaze over the rest of the group. They all have weapons; Narcissa set with a bow and quiver of arrows, Dixon and Alecto leaning on their swords, Yaxley gripping a short-handled spear, Rabastan lazily holding a chain mace, while Bellatrix and Regulus have their daggers, one each. Rabastan and Narcissa have supply bags on their backs, like Regulus does.

When Regulus' gaze crawls back to Bellatrix, she's grinning at him, and she reaches out to grip his shoulder, eyes gleaming as she says, "Now, let's go make it six."

She doesn't even have to say who. He knows.

Sirius. Of course she means Sirius.

Regulus gives his dagger a lazy twirl and steps forward in silence. When they turn to go, ready and willing to hunt Sirius down, he joins them.

Chapter End Notes

here we go again...

no one getting to say goodbye. regulus thinking of james, and sirius thinking of remus before they go back into the arena 😭

the arena! the chapter title gave it away, but like. im stupidly excited about what little bit of this arena we do get to see, because like, it may seem tame now, but it is actually very fucked up and also insanely impactful to how these games go and are viewed!

just as an aside, for those of you thinking it was going to be the arena in catching fire— regulus literally would not have left his platform. they would have had to either blow him up, or get him off of it, and as soon as he hit the water, he would have sunk like a stone. he literally would have just. given up. i couldn't make this poor man swim. we all know that never goes well for him 😭

anyway, sirius!!!! him bumping into narcissa and letting her go for andromeda ☹☹☹ then mavis and velvet!!! henri. rip? i mean, he didnt really stand a chance the moment sirius came within range. sirius killing someone within five minutes of the arena... OH IM SICK 😭 and he did it to save regulus, who IMMEDIATELY PUNCHED HIM IN THE FACE AND STOLE HIS SUPPLIES LMAOOOO.

look, look, okay you can be like REGGIE WHAT THE FUCK but you've gotta admit lowkey that shit is hilarious 💀 he really is a menace, and he was just like: ill be taking that thank you! then dipped.

sirius not believing regulus is a death eater... 😭 NO BECAUSE HE SOUNDS LIKE SOME OF YALL LMAOOO

but like, sirius is soooo sure of this—then cut to regulus skipping off in his peter pettigrew (rip) era to go join the death eaters

also marlene ☹☹☹ my loveeee. she really does NOT have it easy, so be warned for that, but she's out here surviving anyway, and looking hot doing it! she's not just Over her parents' deaths btw, but like. this is definitely not the place she can really focus on that.

emmeline "shoot first ask questions second" vance my beloved <3 eli would be dead if he had better balance. NOT ELI TAKING A NAP??? HELLO??? eli is so dear to me, you don't get it 😭

and just this little group, like all of them being grumbly and prickly, and then there's sirius defending his brother with his LIFE and just grinning at everyone like he didn't just murder a man (there will be elaboration on this later!).

cut to regulus, who is—yet again—unimpressed with being in the hunger games. zero out of five stars, if you ask him. he's a mess, honestly. but hey, at least he stole some of sirius' luck! sirius will indeed be taking that back and returning the favor of being punched in the face at some point. it's okay, they're siblings, they just Do That Sometimes.

(no, really, sirius and regulus physically hitting each other will not have the impact on their relationship the way you may be worried it will. just trust the process, i am begging you. these things WILL be addressed)

anyway. thorfinn! he was supposed to be smart 😔 he was not smart... no one ever listens to regulus. why does no one ever listen to regulus?

regulus: i am telling you explicitly what i will physically do to you if you do This Thing

everyone else: *does it anyway and is immediately shocked when he follows through*

like??? DOES HE LOOK LIKE THE TYPE OF MAN WHO JOKES??? WHY DOES NO ONE TAKE HIM SERIOUSLY??? don't come at me and say i wrote it, i KNOW i did, but still. rip to everyone else, but im different. id believe every word that left regulus' mouth 😌

however, the kill did not go over well for him because he is Traumatized, so. i mean, he did what he had to do? he TOLD them no one could kill his brother but him and he MEANT that shit.

and then ofc he immediately ran into the death eaters and was put on the spot, and he did what any sensible person would do, which is ask themselves: what would remus lupin do? PLS HE'S SO VALID FOR THAT 😭

now let's see if he's a good liar...

right, so i will be back to doing numbers at the end of the notes to keep up with those who have died and such, just like i did for the last arena.

tributes remaining: 19
tributes no longer with us:
mavis
velvet
henri
thorfinn
unknown

thank you all for the lovely comments and feedback, as always. i do read them and appreciate them all.

Strings

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-death (because of the whole arena thing)
-depictions of physical injury
-references to past death/murder
-brief mentions of vomiting
-depictions of withdrawal/detoxification (not too heavy or explicit, bc it's not from the character's pov, so we really only see it from the outside)
-graphic depictions of violence/violent death (not described in too much detail, and only like two sentences, but still)
-very, very vague reference to past child abuse (regulus pov, blink-and-you-miss-it)
one mention of suicide (bc of velvet and mavis)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

James turns those words over in his head as he stares at the screen, watching Regulus walk among a group of six other death eaters. Other. Because there's seven.

Because Regulus is one of them.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

The swiftness in which Sirius and Regulus killed hadn't surprised James. He didn't really think about it, what they would do in the arena, because he was too busy doing everything he could not to think of any of that, to focus on his anger before his fear, because he knew, even then, that only one of them could get better. Deep down, James knew that, whatever kills Sirius and Regulus made, he wouldn't blame or judge them for it. He didn't the first time, after all.

It hadn't shocked James, really, to see Sirius snap a man's neck almost effortlessly, not past the initial surprise of seeing him do it after eleven years of him being away from the violence the arena draws out of someone. Honestly, James' own hands had twitched with the urge to rip Henri apart for daring to strangle Regulus; it had been one of the most terrifying moments of James' life, seeing Regulus in danger and not being able to do anything about it. While Remus had sucked in a sharp breath the moment Sirius killed Henri, James had exhaled in reflexive, selfish relief, because Regulus was *safe.*

What *had* shocked James was watching Regulus sucker-punch Sirius, steal his supplies, then leave him behind.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

James hadn't been prepared for it. Much like Sirius, he had just stared, slack-jawed, entirely disbelieving. Pandora had covered her mouth with her hand, and Remus—well, he had pressed his lips into a thin line and narrowed his eyes.

Even here, apart, James is so in tune with Sirius that his initial instinct was to revolt against the idea of Regulus being a death eater, just like Sirius, when Marlene suggested it. Marlene, who is sporting a new haircut that looks great on her. Marlene, who broke down in Sirius' arms and explained for the whole world to see that her parents were killed before her eyes. The camera did not shift away; it lingered, letting everyone see it.

A threat of what Riddle could do? Possibly. James thinks it's a double-edged sword, though. People who are afraid much prefer to hone in on their anger. He would know.

So, James didn't really believe, any more than Sirius, that Regulus was a death eater. Frankly, just watching Regulus and Sirius being back in the arena has been rough on his frayed nerves. Sirius, at least, had a group of people to stay with.

Regulus, to start with, did not.

Or so it seemed.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

He ran into the maze, and so he was alone. James had wanted to groan and bang his head against the wall because of how *stubborn* Regulus is. James loves him so fucking much, but he is genuinely such a contrarian bastard. Most of the time, this is something James finds endearing. When Regulus is sprinting into a maze alone, *away* from his brother?

Not so much.

Things went awry, because of course they did. Thorfinn Rowle. A death eater. Someone who suggested that Regulus was an ally of some sort, which James instantly disregarded, despite the familiarity in which they spoke.

It hadn't mattered anyway, in the end, because Regulus killed him. Quickly. He just struck like a fucking snake, absolutely no hesitation, and James knew—he thought—well, it seemed like Regulus was doing it for Sirius, because it was Sirius that Thorfinn made the mistake of threatening.

Regulus doesn't make warnings lightly. When he tells someone he will hurt them if they do something, he means it. He said he would stab Thorfinn in the face, and then he did just that.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

To James, Regulus killing Thorfinn had looked like further proof that Marlene was wrong, while James and Sirius—who know Regulus better than anyone—were right. Because of course they were. They had to be. It's Regulus. He's theirs, and they know him. They *know* him.

Why kill a death eater if you are one? That sort of defeats the purpose, doesn't it? James thought so, and he thought, then and there, that that was it. A done deal. Signed, sealed, and

stamped. No further questions. Marlene and Augusta could take their doubt and toss it aside.

James was proud of himself, even, for having no doubts at all. After everything these past few days, all their issues and fights, James didn't doubt Regulus. Not for a second.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

All that was left was the sickening lurch in his stomach and surge of sorrow as he watched Regulus break down after his first kill in this arena. James had felt like his chest was cracking open, and he just—he so desperately wanted to be there. He wanted to wrap his arms around Regulus and hold him. He wanted to wipe the blood from his hands and kiss each finger to remind him, to promise him, that it was okay. That it didn't make him a bad person. That, no matter what, he was doing his best, and James still loved him.

He just wanted to go there and tell him that, so he would know, so he could be comforted by it, perhaps. Seeing Regulus spiral in the aftermath of murder had left James feeling lost, and trapped, and utterly miserable from the need to simply be there for him. But he couldn't. He can't.

Then, Regulus got back up, and he ran. Swift and panicked, he ran. Desperately, he ran, like he was running from something, possibly from what he just did, or the consequences that were sure to find him if he were to stay. He ran.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

James will likely never again feel the way he did when he saw Regulus run directly into the death eaters. A muffled sound of pure panic had escaped him, and someone was holding his hand—Pandora, he thinks—so he's sure that, at that moment, he nearly crushed all the bones in *her* hand. He couldn't help it. Regulus had just barreled right into a group that James thought wanted him dead, and he did so in a state that wasn't very promising for his chances of survival.

James is pretty sure his heart has never dropped so fast in his life. He just—he could feel the cold fingers of fear walk down the length of his spine, leaving him short of breath as the

blood in his veins turned to ice.

Except.

Nothing.

Happened.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

Regulus lied. It had confused James why Bellatrix stopped to question him about who he killed at all, but it made sense to him why Regulus would lie. It's a good lie, even, because Camilla *did* catch up and kill Coen, a mere ten minutes after Regulus killed Thorfinn. It was a good lie.

Regulus is a good liar.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

He's such a good liar.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

He tells so many lies.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

James didn't believe it, even then. Even when the death eaters *didn't* attack. Even when they stopped, when they questioned him, and when they listened.

He thought that maybe, just maybe, it was a family loyalty sort of thing, in which Bellatrix and Narcissa were letting it slide because he's their cousin. He thought that, perhaps, Regulus would be able to talk himself out of the situation and run.

James kept waiting for him to run.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

Regulus did not run. He let Bellatrix take his dagger, and then he took it when she gave it back. She smiled at him, touched his shoulder, and insinuated that he would join all of them in slaughtering more people as a group—Sirius being their first target. And Regulus did.

He joined them.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

He's with them.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

Regulus is a death eater.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

How, Reg? James thinks, staring at the screen with a lump in his throat. *How is this for me? Tell me how.*

Regulus can't do that, though. He can't explain. Perhaps he planned to, but he never got the chance, and James doesn't *understand.* He doesn't know how, in any world, Regulus being a death eater could ever, ever be for *him.* Because not only are the death eaters the ones that relish in murder—even just outside of survival—but they're all hell bent on finding Sirius and killing him as soon as possible. So, how? How could this, in any capacity, be for James?

James doesn't know, and Regulus can't answer, and all that's left is trust. All that there can be is—trust. A feeling and a choice in one. After Regulus lied to him, after he broke his promise, James is once again left on the dagger's edge of trust, precariously tipping from side-to-side.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

And the thing is, somehow, impossibly, James doesn't need to have the answers to know he believes in Regulus. He doesn't know what's going to happen, or what Regulus is doing, but James knows other things. More important things. He knows he loves him. He chooses, here and now, to trust him.

Without hesitation.

Everything I do in that arena, it's for you.

Yeah, that's what James is scared of.

~•~

Sirius refuses to think about Henri. Every time his brain skitters around the topic, around what happened, Sirius forces his mind to do an abrupt turn and go in a different direction.

He's no stranger to murder. He has killed twelve—no, thirteen, it's thirteen now. He's killed thirteen people, so it's not—it isn't this impossible concept for him to wrap his mind around. In fact, it's easiest for him to handle it *in* the arena. He's no different inside it now than he was the first time, because after he made his first kill, after Gunther, Sirius never held himself back from pain—inflicting it or enduring it. He left no room for shame, or for childish fantasies where it never had to happen. It did happen. It's happening again.

And that's that.

So, he doesn't feel it, really. He doesn't need to, and he won't have to, because he's not making it back home, where he *would* feel it. Where it would hit him. Where he would be sucked into all the things he had to do in the arena to survive.

In a way, it's almost relieving to have other things to focus on. Like Eli, for example, who is slowly sweating out whatever alcohol he had in the humid heat of the maze. Like Marlene, who has gone silent and has shadows in her eyes, this horrible grief clinging to her wherever she goes. Like Alice, who seems very agitated by Augusta at all times and wants basically nothing to do with her. Like Augusta, who doesn't seem to care what Alice wants and hovers close by them *constantly.* Like Emmeline, who… Well, actually, Emmeline is steady. In all of this, Emmeline is calm, and Sirius genuinely appreciates her so much right now, more than she could ever know.

They've been walking for a while now, but the maze never really seems to lead anywhere. It's one confusing hall of green right after the next, and the only sounds are the hedges that rustle at all times, which is ominous. They can't hear a water source, no distant sounds of trickling or anything, and they haven't happened upon one either. There's no signs of wildlife for a source of food, or any fruit from the hedges, or any other caches that they've come across.

They could start a fire, but honestly, there's no need for one. It's so hot out that they're all sweating, and they're all very fucking thirsty at this point. They have nothing to cook, and no place seems like a good one to stop at, because there's no shelter or sense of defense inside the maze.

For hours, no one speaks. They all just listen, and move quietly, and stay prepared for—anything. Sirius is on edge, waiting for any sign of Regulus, or even the death eaters, but there's nothing. It's just them, this group, and the darkness that's slowly growing thicker as

the sun starts to set, except they can't really see that either. The sky above grows dimmer, slowly, and inside the maze gets darker along with it.

There has been two additional cannons after the first three, and Sirius' heart very briefly stuttered with the fear that maybe it was Regulus. He instantly discarded the notion, because no. Sirius won't believe that unless he has proof, so wherever Regulus is, he's just fine, as far as Sirius is concerned.

And yet, when another cannon sounds, the surge of fear hits him a third time, choking him until he shoves it away with *force.* Okay, so six people are dead. Just six. Three of which Sirius knows already—Velvet, Mavis, and Henri. There are three others, and he knows that the six here aren't it, which leaves fifteen people. That's fourteen people *other* than Regulus it could be. Regulus is fine. It's not him. He's fine.

Everyone better hope Regulus is fine, because if he isn't, if he's dead, Sirius is going to kill every single fucking person in this maze for daring to live when his little brother didn't.

The cannon draws everyone to a halt. Even Eli, who sways on his feet and groans quietly, as if in pain. They all stare around at each other, no one speaking for a long moment.

"Murder or maze, do you think?" Emmeline asks.

"Probably murder," Alice replies. "The maze doesn't seem to have anything in it to worry about yet, and while I don't doubt it will, surely it won't on the first night. The sun is setting. It won't be long before everyone is turning off their screens."

"Don't be foolish," Augusta snaps. "People die through the night in the games all the time, Alice. They'll just play the highlights the following morning."

Alice scowls and grits out, "Yes, thank you, Augusta, for your input that I didn't need or ask for."

"Well, if you insist on falling prey to idealistic hopes for—"

"I was making a *theory,* you fucking—"

"Do *not* interrupt me, or curse me," Augusta cuts in sharply, and Sirius winces slightly at how much it reminds him of his own mother. "Kid, if you think for a second—"

"Don't call me *kid,"* Alice interrupts bravely, their eyes narrowing as they hold Augusta's gaze. "I'm not a kid."

"You're a child—"

"I'm an *adult,* not a child. You are not my damn mother, so don't treat me as if you are. Because what Frank will put up with from you, I *won't."*

Augusta's nostrils flare. "And just what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?"

"You know what it means," Alice retorts. "I think I've made it pretty obvious by now, but allow me to make it clearer. I don't like you. I think you're a shit mother. You use the excuse *as* Frank's mother to control him, not respecting his boundaries, or understanding the basic concept that his life is his own to do whatever he wants with it, no matter *your* expectations or demands. And I know—oh how well I know that you just love him, and it fucked you up having to watch him go into his games while being his mentor, and you've never been the same since. Trust me, I get that you're the way you are because of something horrible no mother should have ever experienced, and Frank gives you a lot of leeway for that, but me? I don't. You *smother* him, Augusta. You helped save your son's life just to turn around and barely let him live it."

Augusta's cheek twitches, and so does her hand, around her sword. No one moves or says anything for a long moment, the tension thick between two people who share only one thing; how much they care about Frank Longbottom.

Sirius resists the urge to cough. This is…very awkward. He is absolutely, resolutely *not* getting involved in this, thank you very much. He has enough mother-related issues on his own to contend with, so he's not inviting more into his life. His heart goes out to Frank, though. That poor man.

"Hey, um, hey…do all of you see that, too?" Eli mutters abruptly, squinting as he lifts his hand to brace against his hairline, peering into the dark behind them.

As one, the entire group turns to see what he's talking about, and Sirius *does* see it, too. In the dark, there are forms moving right for them, and they're moving *fast.*

In the next second, Asher and Warwick come barreling closer, and Asher shrieks, *"Run!"*

That's really all that needs to be said, because one doesn't hear *run* inside the arena and simply ignore it. In seconds, Sirius is turning with everyone else and tearing down the passage with absolutely no idea what he's even running from.

The sound of heavy footfalls behind them rumbles through Sirius, so heavy that the ground shakes, so he knows it's not a person, or even a group of people. It's something else, something Hallow-made, most likely.

"Give me that!" Warwick shouts, slamming into Emmeline's side while trying to take her crossbow. "Shoot it! *Shoot it!"*

"Get *off,"* Emmeline snarls, shoving Warwick and whirling away. Warwick hits the ground, immediately trampled by Asher and Eli as they frantically work to keep running. Just like that, left behind.

Warwick releases a horrible, blood-curdling scream that Sirius can't stop himself from looking towards, nearly stumbling when he sees *why.* There's a very large statue shaped like a man, at least twelve-feet tall, if not more, with stone hands that wrap around Warwick's ribcage to crush it. The statue has no face, no features, which somehow makes it even more menacing when it crumbles Warwick up before ruthlessly ripping the body apart, right in two.

The cannon sounds.

Sirius keeps running, his heart thumping hard in his chest as he scrambles around a corner with the rest of the group, nearly skidding from how swiftly he's moving in the desperate need to put some distance between himself and that statue.

The footfalls pick back up, the brief pause in killing Warwick over, and the pace of the chase brings Sirius no comfort. It's not as fast as them, but due to size, it makes a good distance when it moves. If they can confuse it, maybe they can lose it that way, and everyone else seems to agree, because they're all taking every turn they come across.

Sirius can hear Eli wheezing. He's older and sickly, undergoing detoxification with no water or food or medicine to help him. It's not a surprise when he falls back, when he slows, or when he falls altogether and hits the ground.

"Shit!" Sirius bursts out, because all he can think about is his uncle Alphard, and how Eli, apparently, was his lover. He should leave Eli there, but he doesn't want to be a person who does that. That would weigh on him more than killing Henri did, and he knows it.

Cursing again, Sirius swivels on the spot and runs back for Eli, rushing to his side to help him to his feet again as the sound of the statue draws closer. He's not alone. Marlene came back, too. She's right there with him, hauling Eli ruthlessly to his feet and shoving him back into a run as she yells at him.

"Sirius, Marlene, *come on!"* Emmeline bellows, swinging her crossbow up and slowing to a halt. "It's *right* th—"

Sirius and Eli both stumble when the support from the other side is snatched away from them, Marlene releasing a loud scream of pain as the statue grabs her by the arm and *yanks*. Sirius *hears* her arm break, the awful crunch echoing in his ears as Marlene is dragged across the ground.

No.

No, no, no.

Not this. Sirius can't. He *can't.*

A collective cry of, *"Marlene!"* echoes out as she's lifted up into the air by her awkwardly bent arm, her sword falling to the ground as she kicks and flails, trying to keep the statue from getting ahold of her and completely ripping her apart.

Sirius digs his heels into the ground and raises his spear, launching it forward so hard that he stumbles with a grunt, which he allows to propel him into a run. The spear hits the statue directly in the face, but it just clatters against the stone and slides right off, falling to the ground. However, the force in which the spear hit does make the faceless head rock back as if avoiding a gnat. Like a pesky distraction, at most, but a pesky distraction keeps it from killing Marlene, so—

"Shoot it! Emmeline, *shoot it in the face!"* Sirius shouts.

"It doesn't *have* a face!" Emmeline shouts back, but she does release a bolt right at the head nevertheless.

The force from a crossbow versus a spear from Sirius' strength is very different. It's massive, in fact. From the crossbow, the bolt reaches velocity and force that Sirius couldn't make just by throwing his spear. So, when it lands, it *does* break past stone, little cracks forming around it.

The statue stumbles back, but doesn't let Marlene go.

Shit.

Okay, okay, think. Fuck. *Think,* Sirius, think. What can he do?

Nothing.

He can do nothing.

"Marlene!" Sirius calls as he stutters to a stop beneath her. She hangs in the air right above him, still struggling while the statue tries fruitlessly to grab the bolt and yank it out, except the statue's hands are too big to manage it. Marlene's feet are right above Sirius' head, *just* out of reach. She cranes her head down to stare at him, and he scoops up her sword. "Here!"

That's the warning he gives, and she responds immediately, her free hand falling to reach for the sword the moment he tosses it up to her. She cries out, likely from the pain in her arm as she swings herself to drive the sword in the cracks that formed in the face of the statue around the bolt.

The cracks splinter, getting wider, traveling out further like fault lines in glass. Marlene snatches the sword out, gritting her way through another pained scream, then drives her sword in again. The statue's head begins to fragment inwards from the front, and it abruptly lets Marlene go as it sails back.

Marlene crumbles to the ground as the statue starts to fall, and Sirius plucks up his spear, swiveling it in his hands as he runs forward to slam his spear down into the statue's head. The stone cracks and falls apart, the head left in crumbled, dusty pieces as the statue stops and goes still.

It immediately begins to turn to dust.

Sirius swivels on the spot, breathless, and rushes over to Marlene at the same time that Emmeline does. Eli is on his hands and knees, vomiting into a hedge.

"Are you okay?" Sirius blurts out, stupidly, as he falls to his knees next to Marlene, who is pale and cradling her arm to her chest, teeth gritted with visible pain.

"I'll live," Marlene grinds out, then starts laughing. It's dry and harsh in her throat as she tips her head back, grinning up at the sky with her teeth bared. "You hear that, you fuckers? I'll *live.* I'm still alive. I'm still here, and I'm still surviving! How do you like that? Come on, what else have you got?!"

"Okay, shut up," Emmeline declares firmly, literally reaching out to cover Marlene's mouth. "Now is *not* the time to go provoking anyone, Marlene. How's your arm?"

Marlene scowls around Emmeline's hand until she drops it, then begrudgingly grumbles, "It's broken."

"Yes, obviously, but *where?"* Sirius demands. Marlene huffs and closes her eyes before holding her arm out to him. He and Emmeline immediately start inspecting it, and then they share a look. Sirius clears his throat. "Okay, um. Not—not good. You're going to need a splint. Does Alice have—" He stops and looks around, blinking. "Where is Alice and Augusta?"

Emmeline grimaces. "They were running ahead, and they took a corner with Asher before Marlene got snatched. They didn't see it happen, and I—I don't know if they're going to be able to find their way back to us. They might, but until we run into them again, we have no supplies."

"Great," Sirius mutters, then heaves a sigh. A minute later, he barks, "Eli, find me some fucking sticks."

"Ergh," Eli says.

Somehow, Sirius knows what he means. "Take them from the hedges if you have to. I don't *care.* Just find me some damn sticks I can use for a splint!"

"Here," Emmeline murmurs, reaching out to grasp Sirius' spear on the ground and cutting strips of fabric from her shirt.

"Thanks," Sirius replies, listening to Eli cough and stumble around, mumbling to himself. The rustling of the hedges become more pronounced, and Eli yelps. They all ignore it and him, leaving him to his whims.

"I still have one arm," Marlene says as her eyes flutter open to stare at where her broken arm is swelling and turning purple in certain places already. "I'll be fine. I can still fight."

"No one is saying you can't," Sirius assures her. "Maybe you'll even get some medicine from a sponsor."

Marlene just snorts doubtfully.

"What the fuck *was* that thing?" Emmeline mumbles, her eyebrows crinkling together as she looks over at the pile of white dust that remains from the statue. "It was *huge.* The top of it nearly reached the top of the maze."

"Whatever it was, it was fucking creepy," Sirius admits, wrinkling his nose. "At least we know how to kill it, though. Emmeline, you were brilliant. You too, Marlene."

"We know," Emmeline says cheekily, and he chuckles.

Eli abruptly comes stumbling over, smelling quite awful, but carrying over the sticks requested from him. He blinks and sinks down beside Emmeline to peer at Marlene with a glimmer of genuine worry in his eyes. "You alright, girl?"

Sirius thinks that Eli has absolutely no idea what any of their names are, which is objectively hilarious, and yet he still seems to know Marlene enough to care for her. He was her mentor, and not a very good one, still a drunkard even then. He barely even spoke to sponsors on her behalf, and he would get wasted enough to cry every time something went wrong for her in

her games. He cried when she won, too. It wasn't happy tears. He just kept saying that she hadn't really won at all.

Sirius knows this, because he was one of the last few that stuck around to watch, because his tribute that year made it all the way down to the last two. He'd wanted Marlene to die, at the time, and now he's so thankful that she didn't. Marlene killed his tribute, and then she became his friend, and now here they are, put in positions where they may have to kill each other, yet still fighting so hard to keep one another alive.

Marlene's eyes soften a bit as she offers Eli a tiny, exhausted smile. "Yeah, I'm alright, old man. You?"

"Could do with a drink, but I've got sticks," Eli announces, holding them up with a toothy grin, missing a couple of teeth past his chapped, wrinkled lips. "The hedge tried to grab me and keep the sticks, but I got 'em just for you."

"Much appreciated," Marlene says with a weary laugh, "even if this is going to hurt like a bitch. Just—just get it over with."

"Want to see if you can break my fingers?" Emmeline teases as she holds her hand out in offering.

"Careful, Vance, I'm really strong," Marlene replies as she does indeed reach out to take Emmeline's hand.

"Yeah, you are," Sirius agrees softly, sadly, his heart aching because she is, they all are, and no one should have to be, not like this. "Alright, brace yourself, McKinnon."

Marlene exhales and closes her eyes. "Do your worst, Black."

Unfortunately, Sirius has no choice but to hurt her in the endeavor to help her, and so he does just that. Marlene doesn't scream, or cry, or do much of anything at all. She bites her lip and

muffles a sound of pain, but by now, her tolerance is very high, and she makes it through with just Emmeline's hand to hold onto. Emmeline grimaces right along with her, tucking her lips in and getting through Marlene practically crushing her hand like a fucking trooper.

Sirius is as quick as he can be while still being efficient, using the fabric and sticks to form a splint, then tying off her arm to her chest and side, held there to prevent further damage.

Once it's over, they all exhale in relief.

"Okay, what now?" Emmeline asks as she and Sirius help Marlene stand up, who keeps her sword in her hand.

"Well, we lost Alice and Augusta, but there's no cannon, so they're fine. Asher as well, it seems." Sirius glances around slowly. The dark is so dense now that he can't see either end of the passage, and he can only make out those close to him. When he looks up at the sky, he instinctively looks for the moon, but if it's out, if it's even there at all, he can't see it from here. "There's no point in keeping moving. We all need to rest, and it'll be easier for Alice and Augusta to find us, if they can."

"Still no water or food source, or any shelter," Marlene says.

Sirius sighs. "No, but we can keep looking tomorrow. It's too dark for us to find anything anyway. It's too hot for a fire, and maybe it's better if we're in the dark, so it won't draw anyone or *anything* in. We should sleep in shifts. I can take the first."

"I'll join you," Marlene murmurs. "Couldn't sleep now if I tried. You okay with that, Em?"

"Yeah, I'm fucking tired already," Emmeline admits, plopping down right there on the ground with a sigh. "I'll wait for the banners, then I'll be out like a light."

"Pretty tired myself," Eli mumbles, and even as he says it, he's slumping to the side to curl up on the ground, eyes fluttering shut. "S'been a long day. A real long, long day."

And, well, no one can argue with that.

They all fall silent and get settled in together after one such long day, preparing themselves for a long, long night.

~•~

Regulus would like it on the record that he doesn't like these people. Not necessarily because they're death eaters, which is a complex subject all on its own, in this context.

Dixon, for example. He was a death eater in his games, but he never seemed to like the whole murder aspect of it at all. He did it to survive, and in the arena, does that make him a bad person? Regulus doesn't think so, no more than he thought it made Peter a bad person. The difference is, Dixon didn't hesitate to kill at the end of his games, and Peter did. The difference is, Dixon got to go home, and Peter didn't.

But then there's people like Bellatrix, and Alecto, and even Thorfinn—who is now dead. They all *relished* in the murder aspect of it in their first games, and while they're all not shy about showing their bitterness with being back here, they seem just as inclined to kill as they were then, but almost more…jaded about it, in a way? Like that's all they're made for. Like that's all they know how to do now, even years after their games. Trauma takes many forms, and this one—well, this one just so happens to be damaging to more than just themselves.

Even Thorfinn made it clear he was bloodthirsty. He was eager to kill Sirius, like it was a prize. *I'm getting that kill,* he said, like it really is just a game he could reach the high score on. Is that a way to cope? If it is, Regulus finds little to no sympathy for Thorfinn.

Then there's Narcissa and Rabastan. They were the charmers, the pretty things no one could really bring themselves to break in their games. Countless sponsors adored them, so much so that the support of the sponsors and those in the arena with them got them to the end. They killed, of course they did, but only when they had to. It still came across as betrayal when they presented themselves as if they weren't a threat. Narcissa hid behind a veneer of delicacy; Rabastan hid behind warmth and calm that he weaponized to distract from what he

was capable of. They're both chameleons, changing the shades of themselves to whatever suits their survival best.

Yaxley… Corban Yaxley, the jester of the death eaters. Never the best. Never adored. A joke. He's a fucking *joke,* all talk with no follow through, which is one of the bigger reasons Regulus has absolutely no respect for him. In his games, he got cheap shots in, but didn't do very much at all. Killing isn't something to be proud of; Regulus isn't proud of being a killer. Yaxley killed one person at the end of his games—one who was already bleeding out and could barely fight and still nearly won against him anyway, mind you—but he acts like doing that makes him better, or stronger, or dangerous. He's *proud* of killing, and it's not even something to be proud of, let alone for *him,* who didn't do very much killing at all. It's fake. Regulus doesn't like fake things, and he *really* doesn't like Yaxley.

Yet, here he is, staying with all of them anyway.

The maze remains disorienting and directionless. No matter where they go, they never seem to get anywhere at all. They're trying to find Sirius, and there's talk of trying to locate Thorfinn, which Regulus very innocently doesn't comment on either way. There have been three cannons since Thorfinn died. Regulus is choosing to believe that one of them is Coen.

Regulus is also choosing to believe that none of them are Sirius. The thought won't even take shape in Regulus' head. Sirius is here, somewhere, alive. He's still here. He just is.

It's dark out now, and the heat is…very fucking annoying, honestly, but they've kept moving anyway. Regulus and Rabastan have bags that came with flashlights, which they've been using to light the way. Past the reach of the beams of light that penetrate the dark, it's pitch-black.

That makes it immediately easy to spot the banners when they come up in the sky, even before the first trumpets start playing to signal it. As one, the entire group of death eaters slow to a halt, tilting their head to stare at the sky.

As always, it plays in order.

Mavis and Velvet's banners are displayed together, which either means that they died at the same time, or it means that the gamemakers wanted to further highlight the tragedy of their deaths. It's a toss up, honestly. It could be either one either way, and for some reason, their deaths have hit Regulus hard. Maybe because, in a way, they remind him of his first games with James; just two people deeply in love, who did not want to live without each other, who had no interest in being trapped in a journey of suffering together. Regulus thinks, if he and James had come back into the arena this time, their fates would have been similar. Neither of them would have left the arena without the other. Mavis and Velvet just further represent how fucked up all this is.

After them, it's Henri. Regulus presses his lips into a thin line when he sees his face. He hates to admit it, but he'd frozen for a moment, when Henri attacked him. Stupidly, all he could think of was Bernice, and then her baby and husband, and how she had wanted so desperately to live, and how it had been Peter who had saved him when she was strangling him, such a vivid memory that he'd almost expected it to be him yet again.

But it wasn't. It was Sirius, who snapped Henri's neck in less than thirty seconds right after, murdering for Regulus in less than five minutes after the starting cannon. It *infuriates* Regulus, because there it is again, Sirius killing in his name, not even batting an eye like it didn't even matter to him. But it will matter to him. It *will,* because these things do. Because they are who they are, and Regulus still has nightmares about Avery, and Quinn, and Irene. Now, because of Regulus, Henri is just another person who will haunt Sirius.

Following Henri is Thorfinn, and Regulus feels his heart drop as he realizes, all at once, that the next person *has* to be Coen, or everyone is going to know he lied. He's at the back of the group, lighting the path they're all walking on, while Rabastan is at the front, lighting the way up ahead. He grips his dagger, feeling his muscles bunch up, fingers flexing around the flashlight. A few people glance at him, but he remains stoic, stone-faced, as if he has nothing to worry about.

"Wonder what happened to him," Alecto murmurs, and she doesn't sound…pleased, exactly. They *did* come from the same district, after all. Maybe they were friends. But she doesn't sound upset either, really. Just sort of—resigned. Maybe a little detached, like she'd already come to terms with it beforehand.

Thorfinn's banner fades, and Regulus feels his heart thump heavily in his chest as his muscles tense up in preparation to run. It isn't until Coen's banner replaces Thorfinn's that he feels his muscles unlock and his racing heart slowly calm down. The undercurrent of tension traveling through the group, directed right at him, dissolves all at once.

Regulus feels like he deserves a trophy, or something, for being such a good liar. He gets it from his mother, he knows that, but in this scenario, he is *so* grateful for it. Look at that, his mother did do something worthwhile for him after all.

Alowyn, from district eight, follows behind Coen, and then Warwick last, also from eight. So, one from twelve, both from ten, both from eight, one from seven, and one from three. Seven dead altogether, just in the first night.

Shit.

Regulus knew it was going to be brutal, he did, but he can't think of one arena in which more than five died on the very first night. Yes, two of the deaths here were suicides, but still. That's *still* seven people. There are seventeen people left.

He does a quick rundown. Bellatrix and Narcissa from one. Yaxley and Rabastan from two. Alecto from three. Asher and Majesty from four. Alice and Augusta from five. Sirius and himself from six. Lester from seven. Emmeline and Dixon from nine. Marlene and Eli from eleven. Camilla from twelve.

Of all those people, only four aren't in a group of allies. Asher, Majesty, Lester, and Camilla. If Regulus had to guess, they're all going at it alone, and will do everything they can to *stay* alone, likely hoping the two larger groups will kill each other off. It's a smart plan, frankly. It's also dangerous, because being alone means you're easier to kill.

As for the groups—well, they're evenly matched, really. The allies Sirius has are of little importance to Regulus; he's here for one thing and one thing only.

There is the passing thought of Emmeline—the one he likes most, one that he feels a bare hint of connection to, through Evan. He doesn't—it's foolish, possibly, but he can't help but feel a little sick at the thought of her dying, especially if he has a hand in it. Evan respected Emmeline. It feels like yet another betrayal to him, somehow. Regulus already had a hand in killing his best friend, and now this?

Regulus misses the nightmares Evan would come visit him in. He wants another, selfishly. He wants to apologize. He never really got to apologize, not properly.

There's so much that he's sorry for, now.

"I think we should call it," Narcissa announces once the banners fade. "We're wasting the batteries in the flashlights just roaming about, and we need our rest. Let's stop, Bella."

"You're no fun, Cissy, no fun at all," Bellatrix complains, but she heaves a sigh and nods anyway. "Alright, we'll camp here then, and sleep in shifts. One group of three, the rest in pairs. Claim your partners now. I want Alecto."

"Absolutely not," Narcissa protests immediately. "She's mine."

"You only want her because I said her first," Bella says.

"No, I want her because she's a fucking nightmare with a sword," Narcissa corrects.

Alecto looks quite pleased about being fought over, and she raises her hands, lips twitching. "Ladies, ladies, please, there's no need to argue. There's enough of me to go around. We'll just be a team of three, yeah?"

Regulus thinks Alecto is quite mental to subject herself to a shift of dealing with two of the Black sisters, who are as equally dramatic and ridiculous as the Black brothers when they want to be. He's silently grateful that they didn't feel the need to claim him, which surely would have been a headache, though they probably didn't simply because it would make the rest of the group uneasy. A clear display of family loyalty, or a sign that they're a trio who might be plotting to kill the rest in their sleep, and Regulus can internally admit to himself that he's at least a *little* tempted by the idea.

"Okay, I want Regulus," Rabastan declares.

Regulus twitches. He doesn't much care as long as it's not Yaxley, who he genuinely isn't sure he'd be able to refrain from killing if the man pushed him far enough. Dixon wouldn't be a problem, he doesn't think. He'd rather it be Dixon, because he's an older, gruff man who doesn't have much to say, while Rabastan is… Well, he's friendly, sort of.

And no, no, Regulus isn't doing this again. He's just not. He feels like he could accidentally become fond of Rabastan in some way, and that's just—not happening. He's not here to make friends. It didn't go well for him last time, literally only last year, down to the same fucking day. Exactly a year ago, Regulus spent the day with Evan Rosier, climbing a tree to get to weapons, learning to trust, not knowing that he was on a clock that was running out where the best friend he didn't even know he would have was going to leave him, before he could even properly find him, and know him.

"No," Regulus says coldly. "I'm with Dixon."

"Fine by me," Dixon agrees with a grunt.

Rabastan smacks his lips. "Well, damn, tell me how you really feel. Just because I'm in the same district as Corban doesn't mean we have to pair up. I do *not* want to be stuck with this wet napkin of a man—"

"Hey!" Yaxley blurts out, offended.

"Suck it up, buttercup," Bellatrix tells Rebastan, who does not seem to care that Yaxley is glaring at him. "The ladies will take the first shift while you all sleep, then we'll rotate to Dixon and Regulus, then to you and Corban. Sound good?"

A low grumble of agreement echoes out to her, and they all start to settle in. Regulus would not admit it to save his life, but he honestly feels safer with his cousins and Alecto, so that's who he sits beside. Well, actually, he sits *behind* them, on the outside of the group circle, like he's using them as a shield. He can't help it. His paranoia won't let him do anything else.

He also has no interest in participating in the low chatter they all start up in between passing around water and food from the three bags of supplies in the group. Regulus reluctantly pitches in, because it would look bad if he didn't, but he's not happy about it. He listens to them theorize on what actually happened to Thorfinn, discuss what the plans are for the next day, and make comments about how shit the arena itself is this year. In silence, he eats and sips water.

"Hey, give me more of that," Narcissa demands, holding out her palm to Bellatrix, who was just about to pass the small pack of dried fruit back to Regulus. A tiny smile curves her mouth. "I am eating for two, after all."

Bellatrix clicks her tongue and leans forward to dump out a little more for her, musing, "How is little Draco doing?"

"Oh, they're fine for now," Narcissa replies, her eyes flashing with that very specific gleam that exists in their family; a sign of plotting, a sign of danger, a sign Regulus picks up on right then and there because he's seen it enough to know what it is and what it means. Just like him, and Bellatrix, and Sirius, and Andromeda, and *all* of their family—Narcissa is prone to her dramatics, too. He knows she's not pregnant.

He respects her so much for pretending to be. He thinks she's rather hilarious for it, actually. There's no doubt in his mind that no one other than their family actually knows she's just lying. Andromeda surely knows, too. Regulus wonders what she thinks about all of this. Is she at home with Ted, watching all of this while forcing Dora to play in another room, so she doesn't have to see? Does she ache, watching her sisters, her cousins, her *family* in the arena again, all at once?

Regulus forces himself to stop thinking about it.

"Alright, dinner over, lights out," Bellatrix orders, and Regulus clicks his flashlight out at the same time that Rabastan does.

The dark immediately descends upon them, thick and stifling, so much so that Regulus can't see anyone else. His eyes are trying to adjust, and it only puts him more on edge. He doesn't lay down to sleep, not yet, too tense to even manage it.

He can hear the others settling in. Dixon is snoring in less than five minutes. Rabastan requests very politely to use Alecto's lap as a pillow, and she allows it. Yaxley grumbles and complains about Dixon snoring, then eventually shuts up, then eventually starts snoring, too.

"I can see you sitting up over there, munchkin," Bellatrix murmurs, because her eyes have adjusted like his has, just enough to make out the forms in the dark. "Go to sleep."

Regulus doesn't respond, but he stiffly lays down, his eyes wide open as he stares at nothing. He doesn't think he's going to manage to sleep a wink, but then Narcissa starts softly humming a gentle tune she would back when he was young, back before all of this, back before any of them knew the horrors of the arena and it was just him and his brother being looked after by their older cousins in a hollow home and a hollow family still trying to shove their broken parts together, before the games came in and ripped them all apart, for good.

Helplessly, Regulus' eyes flutter shut. With the help of Narcissa's lullaby and the phantom presence of James that his mind conjures right next to him, Regulus sleeps.

~•~

Remus takes the lift down to the basement level, his mind still churning with memory of the first day of the games, full of Sirius and all that happened to him.

He's brilliant. Sirius is absolutely, unequivocally brilliant, and so very brave. He killed someone so quickly, and Remus' heart had ached, because he knows Sirius. He *knows* that Sirius will stay focused and just—not deal with how it affects him, because his main goal is to save Regulus, and to him, nothing else matters outside of that.

But Remus knows that it does matter to him, deep down, or it will. Sirius struggles so much with the feeling that the Hallows have shaped him into something he never wanted to be, and this will surely only add to that. Right now, he gets to use the excuse that he's doing it for his brother, like a shield.

The thing is, it's not beautiful, seeing Sirius murder. *He* is beautiful, even in the midst of murder, but there's no beauty to be found in the fact that he's put in a position where he has to. Sirius doesn't deserve that. He deserves to exist under the light of the stars, eyes shining, face flushed with pleasure because Remus is touching him, and his family is close by. That's all Sirius wants, really. To be with the people he loves the most, safe and calm, present with the memories that he'll be happy to hold onto. Remus has him all figured out now.

It's simple. Sirius wants a simple life. He wants Remus, and he wants James and Regulus somewhere near, and he wants the parents he's proud to claim. He wants to build, and love, and leave blood and pain and death behind.

Remus wants the same. Maybe that's why they work so well. Because they want their lover, and their family, and their best friends. Because they want freedom.

Because they want everything.

Right now, though, what Remus wants most of all, perhaps selfishly, is for Sirius to live.

Just live.

Please live.

Come back, Remus thinks fitfully, helplessly, desperately. *Come back to me, sweetheart, please.*

The lift dings, and Remus raises his head as he steps out, moving with habitual silence down the hall towards the cells he has to return to every night. Most of the other servants are likely already there, dismissed after dinner and not kept if they have no other chores or demands to fulfill. Remus, of course, stays until the last possible moment.

It had been necessary, his presence. He wasn't prepared for how much it meant to James and Pandora that he was there with them, nor was he prepared for how comforting it was for them

to be there with him. They all sat close together, watching and reaching out to touch, murmuring reassurances and simply trying to get through it as a unit.

They all have mixed emotions about everything that's happened so far, particularly with Regulus. James was steady, Remus could see that, only murmuring that Regulus was a good liar, and an unpredictable man, and this couldn't be just what it seems. Pandora—poor Pandora was so innocently confused, sort of crushed by the whole thing, and she just kept stuttering that it didn't make any sense. But Remus?

Oh, Remus is *angry.*

I'm going to make him regret it. He will regret it this time, Remus. He's going to, Regulus had said.

Remus can see now that he meant it. He didn't think for a *second* that Regulus meant it in this way, and it's genuinely pissing him off that this is what he *chose* to do. He gets that Regulus has very complex issues around Sirius, especially Sirius volunteering for him, but to betray him like this?

It's going to break Sirius' heart.

And so, Remus is angry. He wants to drop down into the arena for the sole purpose of decking *Regulus* in the face, then take him by the shoulders and shake him. He wishes—oh, he *really* wishes he had tried to make Regulus see it better, understand it more clearly; that Sirius is doing all of this for *him;* that Sirius is scared, too; that Sirius wants to live just like everyone else, but he's ready to lay his life down for someone who has chosen, out of spite and anger and pain, to hurt him.

Regulus is ungrateful. That's all Remus can think. Maybe it comes from a place of anger, he isn't sure. Maybe it's just him latching onto whatever excuse he can use to ease the small guilt in him for wishing that Sirius would come back to him, even if that means Regulus will die. Maybe Remus just loves Sirius so much that he automatically wants to beat the fuck out of anything or anyone that hurts him, even if it *is* his stubborn, traumatized little brother, even if it *is* someone Remus considers a friend, despite everything.

And Remus knows, rationally, that doing what it takes to survive in the arena doesn't automatically make someone a bad person. He even knows, rationally, that he doesn't actually *know* what Regulus is going to do, or what his plan is. He also knows, rationally, that Regulus is pretty shit at being a death eater so far, from what he's seen, since he's already killed someone who threatened Sirius.

He knows all of that, rationally, but it turns out that Remus is more than a little irrational when it comes to Sirius' safety and well-being. He's in love. Sue him.

As Remus takes a corner to the hall with all the cells waiting, he hears the lift ding behind him again, originally assuming that it's just another servant coming down after him, at least until he hears muffled voices.

Remus comes to a screeching halt, then immediately backs himself up against the wall and strains his ears to listen, because he is nosy and soaks up gossip like a sponge.

"—don't understand just how *strict* Ms. McGonagall is. I mean, she really runs a tight ship," says a low voice, the words barely reaching Remus from down the hall.

"You have access to the control boards just like some of the other gamemakers. Surely you can…make something happen, can't you?" is the soft, silky reply.

Remus' eyes narrow. He knows those voices. The first belongs to a low-level gamemaker by the name of Verna. The second is none other than Lucius Malfoy, mentor for district one. Remus knows this, because he's worked parties with them present, even as recent as last year.

"Ms. McGonagall directs *everything,"* Verna insists in a low hiss. "Nothing gets past her, I'm telling you."

"I doubt she would mind this, though, would she?"

"She says she already has plans for Sirius Black. She's keeping a very close eye on him, especially. I was directed to give Eli Zatish a spear just so it would get to him. Whatever she has planned, I think—well, I think it's going to be brutal as it is. Honestly, you should see some of the orders we have coming up. I don't say this often, but it's—it's *sick."*

There's a pause, and then Lucius sighs and mutters, "What about Regulus Black, then? Does she watch him closely, too?"

"She watches them *all,"* Verna explains. "Like a fucking cat that never blinks. It's terrible. But…I—I mean, I could probably make sure that at least one of her plans will be directed towards Regulus. Maybe. Or I can try."

"Ah, lovely," Lucius says with a hum of satisfaction. "Exactly what I wanted to hear. Come, Verna, let's go through the garage and have a drink at the pub. We'll discuss the particulars of our…agreement."

Remus peels away from the wall and swiftly moves down the hall, turning into his open cell just as Lucius and Verna sweep past the opening at the end of the hall. As he crosses the threshold, the sensor emits a soft ping, the red light above turning green as the cell doors shut with a low clang.

For a beat, Remus just stands there, heart racing, trying to catch his breath within his mask. Fear spikes within him as he sinks down on his thin bed, hands shaking while tears prick at his eyes, pure panic sweeping through him until he's quite sure his heart is going to beat right out of his chest.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Suddenly, Remus has no space for anger within him for Regulus, only fear for his friend. No, all of his anger shifts and points in a new direction, towards Lucius Malfoy, towards the gamemakers, towards Riddle.

Just like that, Remus is reminded of the reality of it all. Like a slap to the face, it hits him that those in the arena are not truly to blame for all that happens in there.

Behind the scenes, someone is always pulling the strings.

Chapter End Notes

alright, from the top!!!

james choosing to trust regulus 😭😭😭 oh god, he loves him so much. but also james being afraid of whatever regulus Has Planned. he's so real

HELP ALICE AND AUGUSTA NOT LIKING EACH OTHER WILL NEVER NOT BE FUNNY TO ME LMAOOOO. but them having one thing in common, which is how much they love frank ☹️☹️☹️ also, we lost them. last chapter: we all have to stick together. literally a few hours later: we have misplaced two members of our team. (for those of you confused as to why, spoiler alert, the maze is disorienting as fuck and the hedges move and shit, it's wild)

MARLENE MY LOVEEEE MARLENEEEEE NOT HER ARM 😭😭😭 it's okay it's just a little snap-crackle-pop at the moment, BUT she's still surviving—or doing her damndest to, at least.

eli having No Idea what's going at any time and just Unhappy To Be Here. eli my beloved <3

emmeline being So Chill About All Of This. a compartmentalizing queen!!!

also, the statue is not as fucked up as this maze gets, believe it or not. there are indeed Worse Horrors Within, so ya know. prepare for that 🥰

oh and im sorry but imagining sirius tossing his spear at a statue and it just. clinking against it and falling to the ground. THAT SHIT IS SO FUNNY TO ME PLS 😭 it's okay babe, you tried <3

cut to regulus, who is just silently bullying all the other death eaters in his head HELP. regulus: i have chosen to ally myself with these people. also regulus: ugh i hate it here 🙄 LIKE??? he's such a little shit, i love him

but also, him missing evan and refusing to have anything to do with rabastan because of how much it hurt him to befriend someone in the arena and then lose them 😭😭😭 this

poor man. like, the arena was JUST last year for him. it's all still so vivid to him, so everything feels like. well, like it's linked back to that, in a way.

regulus being a good liar. yeah, yeah he is, he really is, but remus takes partial credit for keeping him out of trouble with the coen lie, because like. it was REMUS who said they'd be going right for each other, so. thanks, remus <3

though maybe remus regrets that a little NOW bc my man was PISSED on the behalf of sirius lmaooo. he watched regulus punch him and was immediately like: oh so you have chosen death. like, literally 😭 to all those out there who wanna smack regulus upside the head, you're like remus, and you're valid. just the same, to all those who have chosen to trust regulus, you are like james and sirius, and you're valid. to those who are simply distressed and confused and don't know what to think or feel, you are like pandora, and you are valid. also, pandora my beloved <3

anyway, a little peek at both groups. rabastan calling yaxley a wet napkin of a man IM YELLING 😭 narcissa humming a little tune ☹️☹️☹️ bellatrix and narcissa squabbling over alecto. regulus imagining james laying beside him!!! emmeline holding marlene's hand 🥰 eli taking his little nap. SIRIUS LOOKING FOR THE MOON AND NOT BEING ABLE TO FIND IT 😭 (he will complain about this later)

and finally, lucius. That Bitch. hissing and spitting at that wastrel. nothing like a piece of shit to swoop in and remind you of who the Real Enemies are. remus not even being angry at regulus once he heard lucius want to hurt him, just scared for him ☹️ also remus being nosy and a huge gossip is so funny to me. you better BELIEVE he's running right to james first thing in the morning to tell him everything 😭 james...Handles It.

yeah, that about covers it, i think. OH AND MINNIE BEING LIKE A CAT THAT NEVER BLINKS, RUNNING A TIGHT SHIP, HANDLING HER OWN SHIT!!! just know that that poor woman Struggles lmaoooo bc regulus and sirius do NOT make her job any easier 😭

right, let me do numbers, i guess

tributes remaining: 17
tributes no longer with us:
velvet
mavis
henri
thorfinn
coen
alowyn
warwick

A Lesson

Chapter Notes

hello, all!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-depictions of intense aquaphobia
-depictions of detoxification/withdrawal/alcohism
-references to past detoxification/withdrawal/alcohism/drug use
-references to past torture
-references to past deaths
-references to past use of biological warfare
-references to panic attacks
-depictions of dissociative amnesia
-mention of vomiting (brief)
-mentions of blood
-mentions of physical injuries
-depictions of violence

okay, despite the fact that no one dies in this chapter, it's going to be getting heavy again for a bit, so please please please take care of yourselves and check the warnings. ill be putting in-depth warnings and some reassurances for those who need it in the end notes, which is, as always, very valid!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James smiles at him, gently, and Regulus can't stop himself from smiling back. It's reflexive. He feels the same little heart flutter he always gets when James looks at him, especially when James is looking at him like *this*.

"Would we have vows?" James murmurs.

"I'd write you a poem," Regulus says. "You could read it, but not out loud. Only you'd get to know."

"Oh? A sad boy poem just for me?" James bats his eyelashes, his smile growing. "Reg, I'm honored."

Regulus huffs a soft laugh. "Sad? On our wedding day? No, it wouldn't be sad. Not even a little bit."

"You'd be happy, then?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I make you happy?" James asks.

"You remind me that happiness exists," Regulus admits.

James' smile slowly fades. "So, why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"You know what."

"Stop it, James," Regulus whispers, swallowing harshly as he scans James' features, laden with grief and pain. "You know why I'm doing this. I *have* to. It's—it's for you, just as much as it's for me. Please tell me you understand."

"I don't," James whispers back, and he pushes up on his elbow, tears forming in his eyes as he looks down at Regulus. "I don't understand, Regulus. Why? It doesn't have to be this way."

"Yes, it *does,"* Regulus chokes out.

"This isn't what I want," James insists. "Please, love."

Regulus flinches when a tear hits his cheek, wet and cold against his skin. "You don't mean that. You'd never say that to me, James. I don't believe you."

"It's true," James breathes out, reaching out to cup Regulus' cheek, except the weight of his hand feels like nothing more than a whisper of wind. "I'm sorry, but it's true. *Please* don't do this. I'm begging you, Reg."

"James," Regulus rasps, then flinches again when the next tear drops onto his face, and then another, and then a heavier one. His breath catches. "J-James? James, don't—please stop crying. It's—I'm—I can't—"

"It's your fault," James tells him, more tears pouring out, hitting Regulus' face, his exposed arms, his *skin.* It's wet and cold, making him tremble and try to curl away from it. "It's what you do. This is all you know how to do."

"James—"

Regulus gives another violent flinch when a tear hits the corner of his mouth, though it doesn't taste of salt. The slide of water from his cheek into his mouth makes him gasp on it, choking when more tears break past his lips, and then his eyes fly open as he jerks awake to find that it's raining.

It's coming down hard now, picking up the pace, not visible through the dark. It's still night, still the very first night, and he's maybe had a few hours of sleep, at most. The rain woke him, and the very first thing he does is fling himself back like he can outrun it, but there's nowhere to run.

Distantly, Regulus can make out the sound of Bellatrix laughing in delight, her form twirling around in the rain with her arms held out, Narcissa chuckling in agreement when she hisses how nice the rain feels in the heat.

Lucky them.

For Regulus, it's different. No part of this is *nice.* He doesn't like water, particularly water he can feel running over his skin, *especially* his face. Being in a bath is bad enough, and he has that down to a science at this point, comfortable in the routine of it, knowing his limits and adjusted to how he handles his trauma around water. He knows precisely how to wash his hair and his body without freaking the fuck out; he knows precisely how to live a full, clean life without triggering himself to do it.

Rain is not a part of his routine, for obvious reasons. It's the way his hair sags against his forehead and the sides of his face, a weight constantly under the pressure of more rushing water, no different than coming out of the crimson river with his hair plastered to his skin, heavy. It's the water drenching his clothes, weighing at them, *tugging* at him no differently than in the river, when he fought so hard to get away, to escape the hands and the rush of the river dragging him down. It's the liquid in his mouth, jumbling his mind as he struggles to breathe past it, desperate to swallow to survive, tasting blood and gasping for air. It's the complete lack of control, and no escape, and he's dying again. He's dying again.

Regulus presses himself back into the darkness, further away from everyone, hand flying up to clamp down around his mouth so hard that he's squeezing his jaw, just to make sure no one hears him cry. They can't know. They can't see it, can't see him weak and vulnerable and easy to pick off.

He drags his bag up with his free hand and lays it over the top of himself as much as he can as he curls forward and ducks his head down between the shelter of the bag and his knees. He tucks his elbows in and shrinks as much as possible, pressed into a tight, compact ball. He can still feel the rain hitting his shoulders, the back of his neck, the sides of his arms, the front of his legs. The only thing protected is his head, chest, and thighs, which are mostly blocked from the bag and how he folds in on himself. Water drips down from his hair and the end of his nose right into his lap, tears intermingled with it.

One hand pressed to his mouth to muffle the sound of his sobs and uneven breathing, the other gripping his dagger like a lifeline, Regulus sits there and endures.

Bellatrix continues to play in the rain.

~•~

Sirius jerks awake the moment he realizes that it's raining. It's hot out, humid and thick, so the rain feels nice, really. Just not for everyone. Sirius' mind immediately goes to Regulus, and he's on his feet in seconds.

Emmeline and Eli are technically on watch now, though it's clearly Emmeline doing the heavy lifting on that. Eli is a little too busy shaking and sweating, moaning in pain, working what's likely decades worth of consistent alcohol intake out of his system. It's not going well for him.

"Sirius?" Emmeline murmurs.

"I—I have to go," Sirius blurts out, snatching up his spear and squinting through the dark helplessly.

"What? Go? Sirius, go *where?* What are you—"

"It's—I have to find Regulus."

Emmeline sighs. "Okay, I know, but you're not going to be able to find him now."

"No, you don't *understand,"* Sirius hisses, borderline frantic at this point, feeling the rain drip from his hair. Oh, it's coming down hard. Fuck. "I have to find him, Em, *now.* He's—he needs me. He needs me *right now."*

"Sirius, *stop,"* Emmeline says sharply when Sirius whips around, fully prepared to start sprinting.

Sirius swivels back around and snaps, "This isn't a fucking joke. You don't get it. He—he can't handle rain, alright? It's—he has aquaphobia, which means he's likely a wreck right now, so I *need* to find him, I have to get to him and—"

"If you leave, you won't be able to find him *anyway,"* Emmeline informs him harshly, brutally honest. "It's too dark for one thing, and you won't find him before *they* want you to. Sirius, there's nothing you can do for him."

The worst part is, Sirius knows she's right. He *knows* that, and still, all he wants to do is search every inch of this maze to find Regulus as soon as possible. He's not even sure what he'd do when he did. It's not like he can fucking *stop* the rain. But he could block some of it, right? However he had to, he would. If all he could do is sit there and talk Regulus through it, that's what he'd do. At least he'd be doing *something.*

"Sirius," Emmeline says gently, "you can't protect him from everything. You can try, but you won't always be able to."

Something in Sirius outright *snarls* at that. *Yes, I can, and I will,* he thinks, instinctively, furiously.

Except no, no, he can't.

He hasn't always been able to.

And he won't this time.

Sirius cannot stop the rain, and he cannot get to Regulus, and he feels like tearing the world apart because of it. He feels like uprooting this entire maze to clear a path to his brother. He is helpless, frustrated, and *stuck.*

All he can think about is Regulus somewhere out there, shivering and trembling, even in the heat. Weeping. Drenched. Suffering. Just as stuck and helpless as Sirius feels, undergoing torture that, in turn, feels tortuous to Sirius.

"Sit down," Emmeline orders, and so Sirius does. "Catch what rain you can and drink that. Stay hydrated. Wherever Regulus is, he's alive. No cannon, remember?"

Sirius does as she says, cupping his palms together to catch handfuls of rain and sip on it slowly. He tells himself, as he does, that maybe Regulus is sleeping through it. Or maybe he did find a place in the maze with some shelter, and Sirius is just worrying for nothing. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Whether Regulus is maybe, possibly, hopefully okay or not, he *is* alive, and that matters the most, right now.

The rain doesn't stop until morning, but a cannon never sounds, and Sirius' chest aches with grief and pulses with pride to know that, despite everything, Regulus survived.

~•~

Dorcas sits on the very edge of her chair and stares at the screen with wide eyes, breath held as she watches Rita do the recap of the previous night, playing a few highlight reels that weren't broadcasted live. She needs to know Marlene made it through the night. She won't breathe again until she does.

Marlene, who nearly fucking *died.* Marlene, who now has a broken arm. Marlene, who thankfully still has the ring on her other hand. Marlene, whose parents were killed just the same way Fabian and Gideon were.

Dorcas has been persistently nauseous since the moment the games started, and it's only gotten worse with everything that has gone wrong so far, one right after the next, and it was only the first fucking *day.* It doesn't look promising for the second.

But there. A small clip of Marlene in the shade of vague green from night vision from the cameras, eyes glinting like opaque orbs, otherworldly and monstrous. Beautiful. In the clip, she's sipping water as it rains in her free hand, the other still tied in a splint against her body. She made it to morning.

Dorcas exhales.

The clip changes to show Regulus, who clearly had a very bad night. Dorcas' heart clenches seeing him like that, small and afraid. She remembers when Sirius came to her after the previous games and asked her, hopefully, if there was any possible way she would accommodate Regulus' aquaphobia by letting him take a bath with a very little water, just as much as necessary to help him get clean, and if she would stay and talk to him through it. She agreed. Of course she did.

She sat right there in the room with him and kept her back to him as she talked, explaining her favorite fabrics to work with, talking about the effect the cut of clothes can have on the perception of an outfit, rambling on about her personal feeling that accessories can sometimes bring an outfit together, or completely deconstruct it. She talked and talked and knew that he barely took in a word of it as he bathed behind her, crying as quietly as he could throughout the whole process.

It had broken her heart.

Seeing him like this does, too.

But he's alive. He made it through the night, just like Marlene did, just like Sirius did. They're all alive, one day closer to freedom if they just keep surviving. They're here, no matter how the night treated them—which was not well, not at all.

Honestly, the night didn't seem to treat *any* of the remaining tributes well. The clips shuffle through basically all of them waking up at some point from nightmares, or simply paranoid. Eli's condition only worsened through the night, to the point that it was touch and go for a bit, a genuine threat of death on the horizon. He pulled through, but Dorcas has no idea if he's functioning this morning or not. There's Marlene's discomfort with her arm, Majesty sleeping in fits of one or two hours at a time before they apparently felt compelled to get up and move to a new spot, and more than a few people jerking awake in their sleep from nightmares, some even having panic attacks.

This includes the death eaters, which probably shouldn't surprise Dorcas as much as it does. Even they're not free from how being back in the arena affects them. Alecto nearly took Dixon's head off with her sword when he shook her awake because she was groaning and crying out in her sleep. Rabastan woke up with tears glistening on his cheeks.

And then there's Sirius, who Marlene poked with a stick from afar during his nightmare, which turned out to be a good thing when he came up swinging and making vague, belligerent threats to someone named Gunther. When he calmed, it was strange, like he sort of just—detached. He stared off into space for a while, not really doing much or acknowledging anyone, and then he eventually blinked, looked around, and heaved a sigh as he gripped the back of his neck and hung his head.

Rita sure has a lot to say, but she never *once* acknowledges the clear signs of trauma from each and every single tribute in that arena. It makes Dorcas grind her teeth.

Day two is… Well, it's here whether they like it or not, and Dorcas is absolutely fucking terrified. She doesn't *care* what any of these people do in the arena; she doesn't care that Regulus is a death eater apparently planning to kill his brother; she doesn't care that Augusta and Alice seem to have no warm feelings between them. None of that matters to her.

What matters is getting everyone out that she can, the *moment* she can, regardless of what happens inside there. The terrifying part is that the moment she can isn't here yet, and she can do nothing but watch the woman she loves and her friends fucking *suffer.* She just needs them to survive for a little longer. Just keep surviving. Please keep surviving.

The sound of her phone ringing has her head snapping up as she bolts to her feet and immediately dives for it.

"Patronus?" Lily says in lieu of a greeting.

"Starfish," Dorcas replies quickly. "What is it? What have you got? Please tell me—"

"The third night," Lily cuts in, no-nonsense, and Dorcas' breath catches. "So, tomorrow night. Are you going to be ready for that? Can you manage it?"

Dorcas chokes out a relieved exhale and rasps, "Yes, absolutely I'll manage it. Fucking hell, Evans, you move *fast.* I mean, we were planning for day five, then you said maybe night four, but now it's *tomorrow?* How did you…?"

"Meadowes, you know just as well as many others what my mouth can do. *Literally."*

"Lily, have you been using sex for favors?"

"No." Lily pauses, then snorts. "Well, alright, so this is how it works, yeah? I'm already *having* sex, and then I'm like, say, look at you all laid out and desperate to give me what I want; don't you want to do this very small, very simple thing for me? And then they mostly always say yes, and they get what *they* want, all while I'm having a grand time and also getting what *I* want. See? Win-win. I mean, I couldn't do it with *all* of them, because I didn't have sex with everyone I talked to, *but* a lot of people owe me anyway. Six years worth of secrets and gossip will do that for a person, you see."

"I cannot *believe* that this revolution is partially running on your competency in sex."

"Oh, if only it could *fully* run on that. Everything would go so smoothly. Shit, we'd win the war in, like, a week."

"Someday, someone is going to humble you," Dorcas informs her with a low hum of amusement. "I just want you to know, on that day, I'm going to laugh."

Lily just snorts, skeptical, and then her voice has softened considerably when she murmurs, "How are you doing, then? Molly has kept me updated on the games. I hear it's been shit and Marlene's…off to a rough start?"

"She's still alive," Dorcas replies, her voice dropping lower, softer, and she has to swallow past the lump that forms in her throat. "She's surviving."

"Well, I thought you'd like to know, that mission in district eleven brought in some more people—and, of those people, there was a small family closely related to the McKinnons. A married couple and their infant son. The wife used to *be* a McKinnon before she took her husband's last name."

"Marlene's cousin. The baby—a boy, right? Maximus?"

"Mhm, that's the one," Lily confirms, and Dorcas' shoulders slump with relief, her eyes fluttering shut. "Apparently, the district was rioting *majorly* since Marlene's interview, and it didn't help that the mayor abandoned her post and joined her people against the Aurors. The Order went in and got a few people out, the mayor especially, and from what I've heard, the district is now under lockdown. People kept in their homes, not allowed to leave, Aurors patrolling the streets. There's speculation that eleven will get the same treatment as six did, but that thankfully hasn't happened yet."

Dorcas presses her lips into a thin line. "No, I don't think Riddle will take it that far. He's still keeping what happened to district six quiet. No formal announcement, not even as a thinly veiled threat. Just—nothing. It's smart for him not to, though, because it's…getting a lot worse here. The protests have been getting bolder. They've taken to standing outside his castle now, demanding he stop the games. A lot of people are refusing to watch, and others are so horrified by what they see that it's just pissing them off even more."

"Yeah, I can imagine if they find out that he has the power to wipe out nearly an entire district as easily as he can, they won't handle it well," Lily mutters. "The other districts either, if I had to guess. The spread of rebellion is just growing at a rate that even the Order is struggling to keep up with, so I know for a *fact* that Riddle can't. You should see Dumbledore. He's not around much, but when I have seen him, his eyes are always twinkling. But, then again, that may have something to do with the fact that his brother is here."

"His—" Dorcas blinks. "Wait, what? He has a brother?"

Lily sighs. "As it turns out, he does. Aberforth Dumbledore, Mayor of district six, which is apparently where they're both from. Talk about fucking irony, yeah?"

"The plot thickens," Dorcas mumbles, shaking her head incredulously as she glances at the screen, sees Camilla walking through the maze, then glances away again. "Okay, that's—it's

not important right now. How are the Potters?"

"Oh, they're fine. Euphemia—sorry, Effie, she told me to call her Effie. Anyway, she's healed up and walking around now, though a bit slow and sore. I keep telling her I know *exactly* how to make her feel better, but she insists she's a married woman, and also far too old for me. Disappointing, really."

"Oh, no, I get you. She's something, isn't she?"

"Truly," Lily agrees. "In any case, she and Monty have been focused on the games a lot, watching Sirius and Regulus, worrying about James. You know, parent stuff. But, I mean, they've also been trying to take care of people from their district. There's a lot of mourning going on at the moment. The grief is heavy here, Dorcas. Really fucking heavy."

"Yes," Dorcas murmurs, "that's to be expected. I think we're going to lift a lot of spirits tomorrow, all over the world. I mean, no one's ever *stopped* the games before. It's going to invigorate a lot of people, Lily."

"It's war after that," Lily says quietly. "You know that, don't you? Once it's done, there's no going back."

Dorcas takes a deep breath in, then slowly lets it out and focuses her eyes on the screen. "I know."

~•~

James makes a beeline right for Lucius the moment he steps into the watch party, his stride full of purpose, lacking a cane today because his leg feels just fine for now.

He doesn't need a cane to scare the piss out of Lucius Malfoy.

As soon as Lucius sees him coming, he tenses up, even when standing next to Lestrange and Dolohov. There's a group of sponsors lingering nearby, rising whispers getting louder the second they see James coming, enticed by possible drama.

"Potter," Lucius greets stiffly.

"James, *James,* don't—" Frank is suddenly right there, grabbing at James' arm to try and tug him away.

James shakes him off. "Listen to me *very* closely, Malfoy. If I find out that you've been trying to bribe gamemakers again, the next time I hit you, I'm not going to stop until you're fucking dead, do you hear me?"

"I've done no such thing," Lucius retorts sharply. "I don't appreciate the implication that—"

"No? So, you didn't take Verna—a gamemaker—out to the pub last night to bribe her? To ensure that Regulus would endure worse in the arena, or die quicker? Sirius, too?" James challenges, his voice a low hiss so no one hears but them.

"Obviously I didn't," Lucius snaps. "You're new as a mentor, but allow me to make it clear how this works. Gamemakers can't be bribed, Potter."

"Oh, I know they're not *supposed* to be, but we *all* know that it can happen, and has happened," James argues. "Funny, really, because there's a witness placing you at the pub last night with Verna, where you two discussed an *agreement."* This is technically true, because Remus is the witness, and he told James all about what he overheard this morning over breakfast. "This means that you're *purposefully* doing what you can to influence the games. Today, it's Regulus. Who's to say, tomorrow, it's not Rabastan? Or Alecto? Or Alice? Anything to get ahead, right, Malfoy? Anything for *you* to win."

Frank drops his hands from James, and now he's standing right beside him, staring Lucius down.

Lucius looks around to find all eyes on him, the bruise on his cheek gone, likely with the help of Hallow medicine, so there's just an empty spot that James is practically *vibrating* to hit again. Dolohov takes a firm step back from Lucius, his face dropping into a scowl, and Lestrange's eyes slowly narrow.

There's a long, tense silence.

How many times has Lucius bribed various gamemakers and sponsors to get his tributes farther? How many years did he bring home Victors just because he resorts to bribery and manipulation? There's a fine line between being a mentor who does everything they can within the constraints they're forced into and being a mentor who goes behind the scenes to influence the games themselves.

Sirius, for example. The one and only time he influenced the games was with Slughorn, and that was to get James and Regulus *both* out. Perhaps, in a way, that's no different than what Lucius has done to bring tributes home; the motivation and intent behind it *is* different, though. Sirius did it out of love and desperation. Lucius did it for glory.

And this is ultimately worse, because he's actively working to make sure Regulus, at the very least, *suffers.* He'd like it to be Sirius, too, from what Remus said, but McGonagall is keeping a very firm eye on him, apparently.

This is not a good look for Lucius, not at all. Any respect the other mentors might have had for him is called into immediate question. Their tributes are in the arena, too. It's very, *very* stupid to make these sort of moves, because once found out, there are repercussions.

Even now, already, there are repercussions. People are watching them, but they have no idea what's going on. The only people who are close enough to hear are Frank, Dolohov, and Lestrange. Just that easily, with that accusation laid out for them, they've all turned cold eyes to Lucius.

"Oh, I see what you're trying to do." Lucius laughs smoothly and holds up a hand. "Don't listen to this nonsense. He's trying to knock down the competition, and who can blame him? My tributes are indeed a threat to be worried about. Solid effort, Potter, but you see—it's my word against yours."

"I don't care about words against words, Lucius," James informs him, speaking low and firm, never once breaking his gaze. "The next time you get in the way, words won't be used. You'll just be fucking dead."

With that, James turns around and walks away, letting that truth settle behind him as he goes, because it was not a lie. James isn't a good liar. He never has been.

If it wasn't obvious, James is *not* in a good mood. There are many, many reasons for this. One, a general lack of sleep because he spent the previous night worrying about Sirius and Regulus. Two, the push-and-pull on going back and forth on what the hell Regulus is even *doing* with the death eaters, and still trusting him, despite his confusion. Three, waking up and seeing that Regulus had to spend the night in the rain, blatantly tormented by it, and James could not get to him or help him. And then, *finally,* when Remus swept in to ramble about what he overheard the previous night, it was just a cherry on top of this shit sundae.

So, yes, James is not in the mood to be making empty threats. He said what he said, and he meant it. He came to say what he needed to, and he did. And now, he has work to do.

"You know, if it comes to it, I'll help," Frank announces as he falls into step with him. "With Malfoy, I mean."

"Noted," James says, heaving a sigh as he abruptly stops and clears his throat. "Right now, though, can you explain how to, um, use a donation?"

Frank blinks at him. "Already?"

James nods and mumbles, "Yeah, I…uh, I need to get a message to Regulus."

"Right, well, be careful not to waste donations too early, James," Frank warns, but he nonetheless points over James' shoulder. "If it's that important, follow me..."

James follows Frank, because it is, indeed, that important.

~•~

Regulus has a headache.

Spending all night in a cramped position, sobbing silently, and repeatedly falling into one panic attack right after the next will do that to a person, he supposes. The rain had thankfully stopped when the sky started growing lighter, and the dark began to fade. Regulus was instantly relieved, calmer, more clear-headed. By the time daylight really broke, and everyone could actually see him, he was carrying on as if the previous night didn't even happen. No one even knew.

Well, he doesn't doubt that countless people watching knew. James knew. James likely saw the highlight reels, but Regulus hopes that James can see that he's fine now.

Fine is subjective, really. He is fine *comparatively,* how about that? Up and moving, focused, vision clear with no tears to block them. Still here and still continuing on.

It's oddly…comforting to know that he survived it. Some part of him didn't think he could, especially not alone, but he did. Right by himself, he got through it. No Barty, no Sirius, no James. Should he be proud of that? Can't he be proud of that?

He is proud of that. Does he want it to happen again? No, absolutely not. Is he sure that he can survive it, if it does? Yes, he is, and it *comforts* him to know that.

It's day two, and the group is on the move again, setting out once more with the hope that they'll come across Sirius. Regulus walks along with them silently, waiting for whatever the day will throw at him.

The soft chime of a sponsor box has them all coming to a slow halt, every head tipping back as they watch the box float in on a parachute over the top of the hedge. It drifts down gently,

bobbing and weaving through the air, sinking into place right over Regulus. He swallows thickly and holds his hands out just as the box softly settles into his palms.

"Aw, your boyfriend sent you a *present,"* Rabastan teases, his tone lighthearted and good-natured.

"Fiancé," Regulus corrects sharply, eyebrows furrowed as he stares at the box. His stomach turns over, and he is so fucking nervous that he almost can't bring himself to open it.

"Oh?" Rabastan says, sounding amused. "Well, I mean you said you two were planning to get married, but I didn't think it was anything official. Good for you, man."

"Munchkin is all grown-up," Bellatrix chokes out with a fake sniffle. "Hear that, Cissy? He's an engaged man."

"Welcome to the family, James," Narcissa announces lightly, lips twitching when Regulus cuts a glare in her direction.

"Are you gonna open it or not?" Dixon mutters.

Regulus scowls, not at all appreciating that he has an audience watching him like vultures. He especially doesn't like that Yaxley is here for this, who has rolled his eyes at least twice already. Sighing, Regulus peels open the box and tilts it towards him to see what's inside.

Immediately, against his will, his face explodes with heat, flushing with some ridiculous inner delight to see a bagel sitting next to a bit of cream cheese in the smallest container he's ever seen in his life, outlined in the shape of a flower. He can't help the way his face softens, automatically, because of course James sent him a bagel, and of course James found some way to send him a flower, even here. After last night, it's a steady source of comfort that puts a bright burst of warmth right in the center of his chest. James had to know that it would make him feel better. Regulus could cry.

What he does, instead, is feel his lips curl up at the corners, his face still hot and his heart still fluttering. Again, he wishes James were here, not for him to be in danger, but solely so Regulus could kiss him. Oh, he misses him so much.

"Fucking hell, is he *smiling?"* Rabastan asks. "I didn't know he could do that. James Potter, you've got *skills."*

"Look at 'im," Alecto coos mockingly, "he's *blushing."*

Yaxley makes a sound of disgust.

"Alright, alright, fuck off," Regulus grumbles, his smile fading as he glares at all of them, huffing when they all just continue to look amused, except for Yaxley. Even Dixon looks faintly entertained by the whole ordeal.

"What'd he get you?" Bellatrix asks curiously, bounding over eagerly and peering down into the box before he can fully snatch it out of sight. She blinks down at it, then lifts her head to stare at him blankly. "It's a bagel."

"Listen—"

"You're getting googly-eyed over a *bagel?"*

"I'm not—shut up, fuck *off,"* Regulus snaps when Narcissa proceeds to start laughing and Rabastan has to bend over and brace his hands on his knees as he erupts into giggles. "None of you know the context, so just mind your fucking business."

The laughter continues.

Regulus ignores it, reaching past the bagel and cream cheese flower to get the small white card. When he flips it over, there are no words. The card just reads: *???*

This is, objectively, sort of hilarious. Just: *???* Just that, which James actively decided to send, most likely because it properly sums up his emotional state at the moment, at least in regards to the company Regulus has chosen to keep.

Grimacing slightly, Regulus glances up wearily and says nothing before crumbling the card in his fist. He does enjoy his bagel, though, as the group continues on.

Wisely, no one asks for him to share.

~•~

Sirius watches Marlene pace back and forth, restless, swinging her sword around in her hand. Her other arm looks worse now, in the light of the day. It's secure, at least, but there's no ignoring that it's injured. In a fight, if whoever her opponent is happens to be smart, they're going right for that arm.

Slowly, Sirius trades a look with Emmeline. She raises her eyebrows at him. He shrugs back. They both sigh.

"What?" Marlene snaps, tossing them both a glare.

"Stop pacing," Emmeline says. "It's making me nervous."

Marlene scoffs. "You don't get nervous."

"Well, better to say that than to say it's getting on my nerves. You're annoying, McKinnon. Take a load off, yeah?"

"We should be *moving."*

Sirius looks skyward, begging for patience. "We agreed to wait as long as we can to see if Alice and Augusta can make it back to us, Marlene."

"Yes, well, clearly they're not. They would have by now, if they could," Marlene grits out. "We'll come across them if we just get a fucking move on. Can we *go?"*

"Come off it," Emmeline scolds, "Eli had a really bad night, and he's still resting."

This is true. Sirius darts a glance at Eli, who spent most of the night moaning in pain between vomiting, until there was just nothing left for his body to give. They took turns making sure he had rainwater to drink, which didn't help too much, but they made sure he was hydrated in all that mess. The poor man has been sweating, and hallucinating, and begging for a drink any time he gets lucid enough to form full sentences.

Finally, a couple of hours ago, he settled down into genuine rest, which was a good sign. Sirius was actually a bit worried he was going to have a stroke, or a heart attack, and just not make it through the night.

The thing is, Sirius is just as antsy to get up and go as Marlene is, though likely for very different reasons. He doubts she cares very much about finding Regulus, but it's clear that she does not at *all* appreciate staying in one place too long.

"Well, too fucking bad," Marlene declares sharply, marching over to drop down in a crouch by Eli, leaning her sword up against the side of her thigh. "If we keep lingering, they'll find some way to get us moving, and I don't fancy waiting around to find out what else they have up their sleeves." She reaches out with her free hand and smacks Eli right across the face, not hard, just enough to jolt him awake. "Hey, old man, time to get up and go. Come on, get a move on."

"Blergh," Eli garbles out.

Marlene softens, just a tad. "Yeah, I know. I know it's rough, but we need to go. I'll help you stand, come on."

Grumbling, Emmeline surges forward to help Marlene get Eli up. He looks fucking awful, dead on his feet, hands shaking and still sweating. Sirius grips his spear and keeps a watch around them while Emmeline and Marlene make sure that Eli can walk. He's speaking, but it's raspy and stuttered. He's moving, but it's slow and stilted.

It takes a few minutes, but then they're on the move, and Eli keeps waving people off. He doesn't want to be touched, and he grunts any time someone gets too close to him. Likely due to pain and withdrawals, he's grouchy and harsher. They leave him be, for the most part. Emmeline walks beside him since, for some reason, she's the one he doesn't mind being near him. Maybe because he doesn't recognize her at all. Marlene was his tribute. Sirius… Well, he has the same family genes as his uncle Alphard, so Sirius is probably confusing for Eli, especially with the hell his mind and body are suffering.

Sirius falls into step with Marlene, and he glances over at her with his heart sinking to his feet. "Marlene?"

"Yeah?"

"You said you knew. How…?"

Marlene just looks at him, and Sirius feels his stomach fall out from beneath him along with his heart. A lump forms in his throat, and he wants so badly to stop and pull her into a hug, but he knows she won't stand for it. Not here. Not like this. Not after all that she's been through lately.

Sirius knows, too. He may not know to the degree that Eli is going through it, but he's detoxed and suffered withdrawal as well. Many, many times. He never wanted Marlene to get in that deep, and all he can think about is the times he let Marlene drink because he knew how hard being a mentor was, or all the times he caught the signs of her turning to drinking as a crutch and dismissed them, because they all drink when things get hard, and they all handle it, and it didn't have to mean that Marlene was becoming dependent on it.

But she looks at him, and he knows she did. She looks at him, and his chest *aches,* because he tried—he always tried so fucking hard—to look out for her, to help her, and he failed. He fucked it up. He didn't even fucking *notice.*

"Oh, fuck, Marlene," Sirius croaks, "I'm—I'm sorry. Shit, I—"

"Sirius," Marlene cuts in, "don't worry about it. Was it shit? Yeah. But did I get through it? *Yeah.* I fucking pulled through, and I'm still here. You're part of the reason I am, whether you realize it or not. Let's leave it at that, okay?"

"You could have told me," Sirius whispers. "I would have helped you, Marlene."

"You were one of the people I didn't want to know." Marlene clears her throat and looks away. "Didn't want to disappoint you, I guess. I don't know. I just… You were always trying, for me, and then I—" She shakes her head, swallowing. "I did get help, though. Someone really important to me encouraged me to, and I was brave enough to actually do it. I'm good now, yeah? Don't—I don't want you to treat me differently."

Sirius stares at her, stricken. "I wouldn't. Never. I swear it. I—well, not many people know this, but *I* know, too. I needed help, too, and there's no shame in it. I'd never be disappointed in you, okay? I'm proud of you."

"I didn't know you…" Marlene trails off and looks at him, her lips tipping down. He gives a tiny shrug and a small, sad smile. There's a lot people don't know about him, things he could never reveal when playing the role he did in the Hallow. Her gaze is soft. "Yeah, well, I'm proud of you, too."

That's all that's said about it. That's all that needs to be said, between them. He leans over and gently bumps his shoulder into hers, the uninjured one, and they continue on.

~•~

"Hey, does everyone hear that?"

Regulus unfortunately hears that. And, by *that,* he means the increased rustle of the hedges ahead of the group, so loud that everyone has come to a sudden halt. The wall of green on either side up ahead is shaking.

"Well," Rabastan says, "that can't be good."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious, as if that wasn't becoming *increasingly* fucking clear," Alecto hisses, already backing up while everyone joins her in doing the same.

The moment—literally the *exact* moment—that Regulus sees a pale, clawed hand burst free from the hedge, he's turning and sprinting without looking back. Fuck the rest of them, he knows what the hell that is.

"Go, go, go!" Dixon roars.

Regulus doesn't need to be told that. He is *gone.* He's running as fast as he ever has, possibly, not waiting on anyone else or caring where they go. Not that they can go anywhere, really, because they're all trapped in a long passage together. There was, at some point, a different passage to turn into, but it seems to have disappeared on the way back.

The rustle of the hedges grows more pronounced, shaking violently on either side of him, then right up ahead. In front of him, hands burst forth from each side, spilling out all the way from the top to the ground, clawed fingers desperate to grab onto something. Regulus' chokes out a harsh breath and dives forward through it.

A sword slices right beside him, sending various hands to the ground, gushing blood, the scent of it thick in his nose. He shakes off the harsh grip of one clawed hand on his arm, nails digging in, swiveling his dagger to slam down into the wrist as he wrenches himself free with a snarl.

He trips forward and skids in the dirt, scrambling to propel himself around the corner that opens itself in front of him, the hedge shuddering as it parts.

Regulus makes it through, still sprinting, still outrunning the hands that continue to burst free from either side of him. He doesn't look back, but he can hear the pounding of footsteps behind him, just one pair, one person panting.

Regulus doesn't care who it is, or that the group just got split up. He just keeps running, and he doesn't stop.

~•~

"What the fuck is *that?"* Marlene chokes out.

Sirius is already backing up, his heart racing as he watches the fog spill out around a corner up ahead, a cloud of bright green pouring out along the passage in front of them. He has no idea what that is, but he doesn't doubt that it's bad news.

"Run!" Sirius orders sharply, then does just that himself, pivoting on the spot and taking off. He can hear the others following, even Eli, who is wheezing as he goes.

Sirius dives around the first corner he comes across, and he keeps going, sucked into the lure of his survival instincts where running is the only thing he knows. His ears ring. He can feel his heart beat in his teeth, and he wants to *bite,* chew, and taste just how badly he wants to live. He forgot this; he forgot just how this feels, that knife's edge of the worst thing he's ever experienced and the most exhilarated he's ever been.

You never truly do feel as alive as when death is breathing down your neck.

Sirius turns, and he runs. He turns, and runs, and turns, and runs. He goes and keeps going and feels like he's going nowhere, convinced that there is something nipping at his heels,

reaching for his ankles, and one give in his stride will end with him on the ground, then beneath it, in his grave.

The world has faded away, and everything else is lost. He doesn't know where he is, where his allies are, or what he's actually running from. He just feels, intrinsically, that he cannot give into the waiting embrace of death that tries to yank him back by his collar, that whispers like the wind against the shell of his ear.

I will have you, eventually, it says. *I have everyone, eventually.*

Not yet. Not yet. Not yet, not yet, not yet.

And so, Sirius runs, and he doesn't stop running until he takes a corner and slams directly someone else, stumbling from the impact of it until he almost tips. The crash brings the world into sharp focus, and the first thing he hears is weeping.

Sirius inhales sharply when he gets his bearings enough to take in Camilla right in front of him, one eye clawed out, blood pouring down her cheek. There are deep gouges all over her face and neck, as well as her arms and legs, and Sirius' stomach lurches when he recognizes it.

"There were—all the hands, there were so many hands," Camilla chokes out. "They—they kept *clawing* at me. They—"

"Okay, hey, okay," Sirius blurts out as she shifts like she's going to rush past him. "No, you can't go that way. Trust me, it's not a good idea. There's some kind of green fog, and I'd bet my life on it being deadly, so not that way, okay?"

"We can't go back that way," Camilla sobs, gesturing shakily behind her. "The hands. There's so many fucking—"

Sirius reaches down to grab her hand, swallowing thickly as he looks at her. One eye is fine, the other is a bloody mess. "I can see a place to turn up here. Come on."

"The hands—"

"I promise, if there are hands, we *won't* go that way."

Camilla's shoulders hitch. "There's *nowhere to go."*

Seeing that Camilla isn't in the best of states at the moment, which is fair, Sirius just keeps a firm grip on her hand and tugs her into a run. He's lost everyone else, has no idea where they are, but he knows no one has died. There's no cannon. It just seems that the maze is a fucking minefield of horrors at this particular moment. Camilla is right, though. There really is nowhere to go; they're all just rats in a maze with no way out, guided from one nightmare to the next.

The running resumes, now with someone Sirius never really expected to find himself with in the first place. Camilla is still crying, even as she stumbles along behind him.

They sprint down one passage, then take a corner to run up the next. There's an opening halfway down that Sirius tugs them into, only to come to a screeching halt when hands proceed to burst forth from the hedges in front of them. Camilla bumps into his back, then screams.

For a second, Sirius stares at the hands and can't move, thinking of Regulus, the river, the scars on his skin to this day. Camilla yanks at the back of his shirt, pulling on him, and Sirius blinks as the world tilts. He's there, and then—

Sirius blinks again to find himself running, Camilla' scream still ringing in his ears. They're going in the opposite direction, backtracking again. They're—

Sirius blinks as they stop and stumble back, watching a green fog spill out from a corner up ahead, and—

Sirius blinks—

Sirius blinks—

Sirius—

~•~

"Oh no," Remus whispers. "No, no, no."

His eyes are locked on the screen, heart in his throat as he watches that curtain fall in Sirius' eyes. A light flickering, and then it goes out, and then he's gone. Blank. There, but not.

"What?" Pandora whines. "What is it? Remus, what—"

The thing is, Remus recognizes it. That fog. The shade of it. He remembers it, even through his torture, what it looked like when it came from a canister. It nearly killed him, and was that it? Was he just a body in an experiment for the games? A mere step on the sequence of events that would lead to this moment, where—what? Other servants died to it. Were they trying to find the right formula where it would cause pain, but not kill? Was Remus the success that led to this?

"Sirius is—he has—there are times when he—when he just sort of—" Remus swallows, the words catching in his throat, and he stares helplessly as Camilla tugs frantically on Sirius' arm, trying to get him to move again. Sirius doesn't.

"Why isn't he *running?"* Pandora asks desperately, fitfully, her eyes glimmering with tears. She has her hands clasped tight together, legs bouncing up and down with pure anxiety.

"He's not there," Remus croaks. *Come back,* he thinks, staring at Sirius with wide eyes. *Come back. You have to come back now, right now, sweetheart, or you're going to—*

The hedge next to Sirius abruptly parts, opening up into a new passage, and Camilla proceeds to shove Sirius inside and dive in after him just as the fog spills out closer and the hands burst free on the other side of where they were just standing.

Remus exhales.

Sirius still isn't there, not really, but he starts running once he's in motion, seemingly just because Camilla tugs on him. It's eerie watching Sirius go through the motions of it, running with no expression. He's not going to remember this, not this part, and Remus wonders if that's a kindness.

"Oh, this is so bad. I feel sick," Pandora gasps out, her arm coming up to cradle her stomach. "This is *sick,* Remus. It's always been sick, but this—"

"I get it," Remus rasps, because he does.

No one inside that maze isn't going through it right now. All of them are running for their lives. Each group is broken up to the point that it's either people running in pairs, or people running alone. Death is surrounding them on all sides, every single one of them. They all just want to survive.

That's all they're trying to do.

Survive.

Remus continues to watch Sirius, waiting desperately for him to come back to himself, needing to see it, to be sure. It's not the first time Sirius has slipped away. Remus saw him do

it briefly during the highlight reel for last night, after Marlene poked him awake with a stick and he came up swinging. It hadn't lasted too long, and he wasn't in *immediate* peril, so it wasn't as concerning as this is.

It doesn't take that long for Sirius to come back this time either, thankfully. Remus watches it happen, watches him give a harsh blink and stumble a bit in surprise to find himself running, watches him essentially shake it off with a grimace and just—keep running. Of course he does.

It's not like he can do anything else.

Pandora makes a small, muffled noise of fear. "Remus, they can't all run forever, but—but I don't think this is really something any of them can *fight.* They have no chance, and it's not fair. It's—it's *wrong."*

"I know," Remus says softly. "Maybe that's the point."

~•~

The room is dead silent, packed with so much tension that no one even seems to be breathing. James stands next to Frank, eyes wide as he flicks gaze between the screen and the map displaying the positions of all the tributes.

"This is about to get messy," Frank whispers.

"It's already a mess," James croaks.

It is. It's *such* a fucking mess in that arena right now, for pretty much everyone. Majesty is alone, running from hands. Lester is alone, running from fog. Bellatrix and Narcissa got split up running from both. Marlene is alone with a broken arm, running for her fucking life. Augusta and Alice are running together, while Alecto is alone, just like Dixon is. Eli and Emmeline are together, an unlikely pair the same way Sirius and Camilla, Rabastan and

Asher, and Regulus and Yaxley are—though, Regulus doesn't seem to even realize that Yaxley is running behind him, and since it's the fucking hands they're running *from,* James isn't surprised by this at all.

They're all so caught up in the midst of escaping external threats that no one seems to care to turn on each other. It reminds James viscerally of the moment he and Regulus teamed up with Axus, Bernice, and Peter to take down the Hallow-made spider wearing Irene's face and torso. Survival is a strong motivator; it can rip people apart, and it can bring them together. James knows this. He's experienced both.

Again, James' eyes flick to the map.

The layout of the maze is intricate. It's a very large square, with one open space in the middle where everyone started, which contained weapons and a few bags of supplies. There are three others that contain food and more supplies, and no one has found those yet. One of them has a shelter with two crates containing food and various supplies, but it's scarce overall. The other two just have bags and two small platforms with a spread of the bare minimum when it comes to nutrition. And that's it. No animals to kill and cook, no streams to stumble across, no caves or trees to hide in.

It's like every tribute's worst nightmare, quite frankly. James *hates* the arena, purely because of how big of a mind-fuck it is. It only further snatches any sense of security from those inside it; everything they counted on is just—gone. The environment doesn't cater to *anyone* in any capacity.

That's not even counting that the fucking walls of the maze *move.* They shift and change whenever and wherever they like. They open up in certain places, then close in others. One passage will turn into a loop with no way out. James watched Majesty walk in a fucking circle for an hour straight.

James remembers how his mum said, once, that the games used to be just people thrown into a field and told to kill each other, and how no one could truly glamorize that. He's finding that this arena feels the same way, except worse, because the people within are thrown in to be tormented and toyed with all the while. It's sickening to watch.

The worst part is, James knows that there are some people out there who are actually enjoying it. People who wave off the tributes' nightmares with a roll of their eyes; people who get excited for the fights and thrive on the violence; people who always have, and still do, live for all that the hunger games stands for, no matter the arena, and—to them—the worse it is for those inside, the better it is for them watching.

They see these real people, and they have no empathy, none whatsoever. James could understand if it was fake, if these were paid actors and no one was *actually* set out to be hurt, because that's not *reality.* That's not real. That's just characters that don't actually exist, and no one is actually being harmed. But this? It's *real.* These are real people dying; these are real people suffering. How can anyone watch that and *enjoy* it?

It's like the difference between a secret fantasy and what someone is actually willing to do. James, for example. He has had *dreams* of Regulus, ah, using his dagger during…intimate moments, but is that something he'd actually *do?*

Well…

Okay, bad example.

Maybe this doesn't need a comparison. Maybe it should be simple enough to understand on its own. *Maybe* the fact that people—real, live people—are being tormented and killed, or forced to kill, is distressing enough by itself. Or it should be. James is pretty sure it's normal to find that distressing, which means everyone else needs to get a fucking grip.

The amount of people who find it distressing in the Hallow is on the rise, and James thinks he can see why. It's like tributes aren't really people to them, and they can only achieve the label of *human* by becoming a Victor, inviting a sense of realism to their lives just by being the one to live, and suddenly they are real to these people.

So, now, in the eyes of many Hallows, they're actually watching real people, because these are all Victors; they've already achieved humanity. It's harder for them to see it, and enjoy it, now that they've applied this sense of reality to it.

You look at a body and just see a body, and it doesn't really matter what happens to it because it is not your own, or someone's that you love. But…when you look at a body and see the soul within, too, you can't unsee it.

James remembers coming on the train a year ago, waving out at beaming faces, flashing smiles at those who screamed and cheered at him in pure delight.

"How can you stand yourself, doing that?" Regulus had asked.

"They don't know," James had replied, still smiling. *"Just as we've been conditioned, so have they, Regulus. It's not really their fault, if you think about it. They didn't make the games."*

"They watch them. They love them."

"Yes, just as they were taught to. Just as we watch them. Just as we were taught to dread them."

James remembers as if it was yesterday, and some part of him that struggles with time so much isn't entirely sure that it wasn't. His eyebrows scrunch together as he watches the screen. Slowly, he tilts his head.

Huh.

He feels the thought take shape in his mind, as farfetched and out of bounds as it seems, but it —fits. Minerva McGonagall is a strict professor, it turns out, and she appears to be teaching everyone who was conditioned to love the games to dread them instead. No one will be able to watch and continue on *not* knowing, not anymore. Now, why would she do that?

Is she doing it on purpose?

James turns that over in his mind for a bit, then ultimately lets it go, because no matter what lesson these people need to learn, he doesn't at all appreciate his best friend and the man he loves being used in the demonstration.

~•~

Regulus takes a corner and is instantly relieved to see a complete lack of hands, and he slows a little as he goes further in and finds the hedges calm. His chest is heaving, lungs on fire, and he just—he needs a second. Just one second.

Fuck.

Carefully, Regulus draws to a halt and raises both hands to brace on his head as he struggles to regulate his breathing, keeping a wary eye on the hedges, but no hands break free. He turns, slowly, and watches Yaxley jog to halt behind him. The idiot bends over and braces his hands on his knees, still gripping his short-spear, gasping for air.

"What," Yaxley wheezes, "the fuck?"

Okay, that's a fair assessment, actually, but Regulus dislikes Yaxley enough that he doesn't bother to agree or respond. He just stands there and feels his racing heart slowly start to calm.

After a bit, Yaxley straights up and tilts his head back as he blows out a deep breath. Regulus stares at him, lowering his arms, his dagger gripped in one hand. Yaxley drops his head forward and looks at him. They're both very still, suddenly.

Regulus' fingers twitch around his dagger. He could…

It'd be simple, really. Just one flick, and the blade would bury into Yaxley's fucking skull. Regulus could lie again, to the others, lie and say that Yaxley was ripped apart by the hands. He could describe it in detail, because he knows what it feels like. He could make it believable.

It's one less person to deal with, and they're all going to have to die anyway. Regulus wouldn't be defending himself, though. He would be killing just to kill, and he's never… He hasn't actually done that before. It was never about taking someone's life when he was taking lives. The closest he ever came to that was Irene, but that had been mercy. A kindness, some would say. It still haunts Regulus, despite that.

But Thorfinn… He killed Thorfinn, not out of self-defense or kindness or even an accident.

Murder is murder, and Regulus doesn't feel good about it, any of it, but his feelings on killing Thorfinn are very similar to his feelings on killing Quinn. He didn't particularly *want* to kill them; he just…did, as a response, without really thinking about it beforehand. An instinct, really. Quinn threw her spear at Evan, so Regulus threw his dagger at her. Thorfinn said he'd have to be killed to be stopped from going after Sirius, even though Regulus *explicitly told him* what he'd do about that, and so Regulus killed him. Newton's third law: for every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction.

But, to kill Yaxley now, that would be murder for murder's sake. Well, the laws of that are complex here, in the arena, when murder is forced upon people. However, Regulus could simply *not* kill Yaxley, at this moment, because Yaxley has done nothing to warrant it, other than be someone Regulus doesn't like. He hasn't threatened Sirius explicitly; he hasn't tried to attack Regulus; he hasn't done anything, really.

Before Regulus can decide either way—because, internally, he is genuinely debating it—the sound of approaching steps from behind snatches his attention, along with Yaxley's. They get maybe five seconds to brace themselves, and then two people are barreling around the corner and colliding directly into them so hard they all go tumbling to the ground.

Regulus rolls with the motion, coughing harshly as he shoves himself back and braces one knee on the ground. When he lifts his head, the first thing Regulus sees is his brother.

The second thing he sees is Sirius' fist, just the flash of it, just seconds before it collides with the side of his face.

Well, yeah, okay.

Fair's fair.

Chapter End Notes

to give a bit more in depth warnings for this chapter: at some point through the night, regulus wakes up to find it raining. he doesn't handle it well, and it's stated that he cries/suffers/has panic attacks though it. but he does survive and continue on the following morning.

just the same, sirius experiences dissociative amnesia again, twice. one time is shown through outside povs and he's not in immediate danger. the second time, he is actively running and in danger—it's brief, and he does come back to himself to keep running.

there's a character who is injured where it's depicted that they have claw marks and one of their eyes is very badly injured. it's only mentioned a few times and nothing too explicit, but still.

to everyone else!

WELL.

okay first, shoutout to rae (rollercoasterwords) who called james sending regulus a bagel in the arena all the way back on, like, chapter 39 (i think???) when i said the bagel would be angsty and it WAS, briefly, when james was being petty, but it's sweet again. they were literally convinced that sirius and regulus were going back in the arena and james would be their sponsor because of that damn bagel comment, and they were RIGHT. it's literally using the wrong formula to get the correct answer and i am in awe of them.

anyway, starting from the top!

regulus dreaming about james 😭 he's just like me!!! but it turning into a nightmare. that's rough, buddy. (sorry i have to make jokes to cope). look, the rain was rough, and i can tell you all that it will NOT be happening again. the rain, that is.

but that juxtaposition between bellatrix playing in the rain while regulus has silent panic attacks a few feet from her, compared to sirius somewhere farther away jumping up out of his sleep as soon as he registers that it's raining because he knows regulus isn't okay. IM GONNA CRY 😭😭😭

then dorcas!!! her being so, so worried about marlene, just so desperate to save her and all the tributes, but she can't yet. BUT LILY COMING IN A CLUTCH!!! these two are NOT playing around. they've decided to dismantle the hunger games and deconstruct the entire plan of the war from the inside of the organization they're affiliated with, and it

has taken them LESS THAN A WEEK!!! they're icons, i tell you. where would we be without them?

also the third night!!! only three nights!!! these people just have to survive the rest of this day, then all of the next. should be simple, right? 😃

cut to james!!! on my knees for this man!!! yes babe, threaten to kill people for the love of your life and your best friend!!! king behavior! shout-out to remus "gossipmonger" lupin who went running right to james to tell him EVERYTHING. also shoutout to frank "ill help you beat lucius malfoy up" longbottom, another king!!!

the maze!!! it is getting increasingly more fucked up as we go along, and like. that's the whole point. the callbacks to the past arena with the hands, the introduction of the fog, and that's not even IT.

also just. the whole thing of like, all the tributes being traumatized and dealing with ptsd and all of that. because like, yeah, some of these people have had years between their last arena and this one, but that doesn't matter. and it's like, forcing the viewers to see that, forcing the viewers to acknowledge how fucked up this all is—well, its like with slughorn but on a broader scale. there can't be pushback against a problem that someone doesn't know is there, and yeah some people just flat-out don't care, but some don't even know that there's a problem at all. and now they're seeing it.

oh!!! oh and that bit between marlene and sirius!!! they mean so much to me ☹️ the fact that marlene didn't want to disappoint him, and them saying they're proud of each other!!!

and then regulus and sirius meeting, with fists! sorry im just. im laughing a little because sirius was so eager to find regulus, then immediately punched him when he did 😭 he doesn't even MEAN to, that's the hilarious part. we'll see more of them in the next chapter, which im INTENSELY excited for.

since no one died this chapter, and the numbers are the same as the last, ill do honorable mentions instead bc i lowkey miss them:

-"its a bagel" LMAOOO BELLATRIX THAT WAS FUNNY IM SORRY SHE WAS SO UNIMPRESSED 😭
-regulus calling james his fiance
-emmeline, eli, pandora my beloved <3
-lily. just lily. HER FLIRTING WITH EFFIE GOODBYE
-effie and monty watching the games ☹️
-remus having no idea what the green fog is or how it works, but knowing his involvement is fucked up
-james literally sending regulus a message that just says "???" PLS HES SO REAL 😭
-people protesting outside riddle's castle <3
-some of marlene's family being okay!!!

Brother

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-graphic depictions of violence
-death/murder
-references to child abuse
-brief, blink-and-you-miss-it depiction of dissociative amnesia (like one sentence)
-depictions of physical injures
-mentions of blood
-references to sacrificial suicide (it does not occur)
-fucked up, complex family dynamics
-angst, angst, angst

listen, please listen, this chapter is very, VERY heavy in some parts, so i will be putting a brief summary in the end notes and some reassurances for those of you who need it, which is very valid.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The thing is, Sirius doesn't even mean to hit him.

Now, don't get him wrong, he had fully intended to smack the fuck out of Regulus the moment he got in range, purely just to get him back for punching him and stealing his supplies. He's even agitated, a bit, that this hit isn't what that's about.

But, really, Sirius just reacts on instinct. He slams into someone, is shoved, and naturally just lashes out with his fist before he even thinks about it. He's coming down from the rush of running for his life, then unexpectedly thrown off his feet, and *then* he's punching his little brother in the face before he even realizes what's happening at all.

Regulus *eats* it. He takes the hit like he was waiting for it.

Slowly, Regulus rolls his head back up, cheek red from where Sirius hit him, and then he smiles. It's not a nice smile at all, and it's followed by a low, raspy laugh. "Oh. Ha. *Yeah."*

And then he's launching off the ground to punch Sirius so hard that he stumbles back with a grunt. Before he can even get his balance, Regulus is grabbing him by the front of his shirt and dragging him around to shove him down to the ground. Regulus hits him again, and Sirius hits him right back, and oh shit, they're having an all-out brawl.

It's *mean.* It's nails and hair-pulling and brutal in the way only siblings can be. In mere seconds, they've both made each other bleed, and they don't seem inclined to stop there.

Sirius huffs as he kicks out and slams his boot into Regulus' leg, earning a low hiss of pain, and he uses the space to scramble backwards along the ground. Again, he lifts his leg and kicks once more, his boot colliding with Regulus' chest so hard that he wheezes as he goes sailing back, hitting the ground with a thud and a low groan.

Sirius drags himself to his feet, panting, then spits out blood at his feet as he scowls at Regulus, who is slowly pushing himself up to stand, his movements full of strain.

A grunt from the side steals both of their focus, and they swivel at the same time to see Yaxley and Camilla fighting. Despite Camilla's injuries, she's swinging her club at Yaxley's head with frightening precision.

Sirius doesn't even think about it; he just immediately dives into the fray, reaching out to snag Yaxley by the back of his shirt and wrench him around. Yaxley stumbles, then slams his elbow down into Sirius' arm to get free. He trips forward and knocks into Regulus, who he promptly moves to stand behind, as if Regulus is going to protect him.

Regulus' expression falls flat immediately. He looks absolutely unamused by this turn of events.

"Well?" Yaxley demands, nudging Regulus in the back. "Go on, Regulus, kill him."

Sirius blinks, then he busts out laughing. He nearly drops his spear from the way laughter flows through him and just seems to jump free from his mouth. "Kill—wait, *kill?* Who, me? *Regulus?* Regulus kill me? How stupid are you, Yaxley? He's not going to kill me. I'm his *brother,* idiot."

"You know, Black, that's your problem," Yaxley tells him with a sneer. "You're so fucking *arrogant."*

"This isn't arrogance. This is *fact,"* Sirius argues. "I don't know where you get off on treating him like some sort of ally—"

This time, Yaxley is the one who laughs. His eyes light up, and he shakes his head. *"Oh?* Oh, this is just too good. You mean you don't *know?* You don't even know, do you? Goodness, Regulus, did you not tell him?"

Slowly, Sirius' eyes crawl to Regulus, who holds his gaze steadily, and it's like the world falls out from beneath Sirius' feet for a moment. He feels suspended here, completely weightless as everything gives way around him, and he's left hanging in the balance as everything he believes—everything he knows—is called into question.

Because of that look on Regulus' face. Because of that look in Regulus' eyes. Because, even after all this time, Regulus is still looking right at him the same way he did the moment he shut down at the reaping. Even here, in the arena, Regulus is lost to him. Sirius feels a lump form in his throat.

"No," Sirius rasps, his chest pulsing with this horrible, harsh pain that makes breathing difficult, and in this moment, he wishes James were here to sync his breathing to.

"Yes," Yaxley says with relish, gleeful.

"No," Sirius repeats in a croak, just looking at Regulus and waiting, still waiting, for it all to become clear, because surely Regulus wouldn't. He *wouldn't.* Not when—not when Sirius is

the main target. "You're—no, you're not, Reggie. You're not."

Regulus is blank-faced when he says, blandly, "What? Not a death eater? Is that what you think?"

"Of course that's what I think, because you're *not,"* Sirius bursts out, itchy all over and desperate, his heart beating hard and fast in his chest. "You—you wouldn't be, because they want me *dead,* and you could have just stayed with me. So, you wouldn't. You're not. You wouldn't do that to me."

"Oh, but that's exactly what I did," Regulus says softly, and Sirius inhales sharply, freezing in place. Regulus' eyes flash, glinting like blades. "I joined them the *moment* Bella offered. I jumped at the chance, even. So, who's the idiot, Sirius? Because, if you ask me, it's *you."*

Sirius holds his breath for a long moment, staring at him, and then he exhales and slowly narrows his eyes. "So, you want to kill me, is that it? You think you actually can?"

"Why wouldn't he be able to?" Yaxley interjects, lips curling into a smirk. "You wouldn't be his first kill. I mean, he already killed Coen, so he's clearly capable."

"Uh," Camilla says, "that's bullshit."

"No one asked you," Regulus snaps, tossing her a harsh glare.

Camilla scoffs, looking offended. "Oh, *hell* no. I did not spend nearly a decade of my life trying to kill that bastard for some little entitled bitch of a brat to try and take the credit. Fuck that and fuck you. *I* killed Coen. That was *me."*

"I understand it must have been difficult for you, not getting to kill him," Regulus says calmly, "but creating a false narrative in your head to cope isn't actually reality. It's also not healthy. Perhaps you should seek help."

"Camilla," Sirius says warningly, because he can see her shoulders tense as she flexes her fingers around her club.

"You lying *snake,"* Camilla snarls, then proceeds to launch herself forward right at Regulus.

All hell breaks loose immediately. Camilla and Regulus get into a tussle, and Sirius surges forward to—well, he isn't really sure, at this point, still rather stuck in *protect Regulus* mode. It's not a mode he's sure he can come out of, honestly.

Yaxley takes the opportunity to sucker punch Sirius while he's distracted, and Sirius releases a low growl of frustration as he whips around towards him, wild-eyed and *furious.* Yaxley's eyes go round and big with alarm, and he frantically tries to drive his short-spear forward, but Sirius swings his own spear in an arc to knock the aim to the side.

There's the clatter of spear handle against spear handle, and Sirius shoves up with a grunt to yank the short-spear from Yaxley's hand. It goes flying and skids along the ground. A short yelp escapes Yaxley as Sirius snatches him forward by the collar, then proceeds to headbutt him in the face.

Yaxley curses and shoves Sirius back, stumbling forward into him and trying to wrestle the spear from him. Sirius trips backwards until he collides into something—no, someone. Ironically, he finds himself pressed back-to-back with Regulus, who is trying to fight off Camilla.

"You're a fucking *death eater?!"* Sirius snarls as he dodges Yaxley's elbow.

"Yeah, it doesn't feel good, does it?!" Regulus snarls back, ducking to the side just as Camilla's club comes swinging past Sirius' arm, where Regulus' head just was.

"How is this even *comparable,* you little shit?!" Sirius bellows, swinging his knee up to slam it between Yaxley's legs, making him choke and bend over with a low moan of pain. "I

fucking *volunteered* for you! This—you're literally contributing to have me killed, Regulus! That's not even *close* to the same thing! That's, like, the *opposite* thing!"

"Betrayal is betrayal is betrayal!" Regulus shouts, and he leans back into Sirius harshly as he kicks out with his leg. Sirius can hear Camilla's gasp as the kick lands.

"Betrayal?! You fucking *dramatic* little—"

"Me?! *I'm* dramatic?! *You're* dr—"

"Oh, for fuck's *sake!"* Sirius bursts out, officially done with this shit, reaching the end of his rope.

Okay, no more playing around. Sirius surges forward and slams the heel of his hand into Yaxley's nose, hooking his foot around his ankle and *sweeping.* Yaxley hits the ground with a choked noise, and he doesn't have enough time to get his breath back before Sirius swivels his spear up and drives it down into his chest. It's quick, a strike that lands fast and hard enough that Yaxley curls up from the force of it, blood splattering against his lips when he coughs.

Sirius yanks the spear out harshly, the open wound of Yaxley's chest gushing immediately. Yaxley rasps and scrabbles at his chest, stunned as the light slowly dims in his eyes, bleeding out. He tries to say something, but Sirius does not care what he has to say. He turns around to see Regulus shoving Camilla back, who instantly lifts her club to swing it at his head. He ducks at the same time that Sirius jerks forward and launches his spear at her with ruthless precision.

The spear embeds itself right in Camilla's chest, landing so hard that her feet come off the ground as she sails back before she drops with a choked noise, then goes still.

A cannon. That'd be Yaxley.

A beat.

Another cannon. That'd be Camilla.

Regulus heaves out a harsh breath, then turns to face him, and they glare at each other in thick silence.

"Did you even kill Coen?" Sirius snaps.

"No," Regulus admits with no shame whatsoever.

Sirius grinds his teeth. "Regulus Arcturus Black, I do not know what has gotten into you—"

"Oh, well, don't you sound just like *Mother?"* Regulus hisses, and Sirius rears back in offense. Regulus curls his lip in distaste and mocks, *"Sirius Orion Black, what has gotten into you? We didn't raise you this way.* Blah, blah, *fucking* blah. That's what you sound like, I hope you know. You sound *stupid."*

"You sound stupid," Sirius corrects. "You *are* stupid. What the hell were you thinking, being allies with the death eaters? Reggie, you can't *trust* them."

"But I can trust you?" Regulus retorts.

"Yes! Fucking *obviously!"* Sirius' eyes bulge as he flings his arms out. "Are you mental?! You're my little brother!"

Regulus only seems to get angrier. "No, but I *did* trust you, Sirius! I fucking *trusted* you, and what did you do? You ruined it. You ruined *everything."*

"Regulus," Sirius grits out, "if you don't start using your mind, I'm going to think you've *lost it."*

"You are the worst person in this world. You are the *worst* fucking brother anyone could have," Regulus hisses, marching forward and reaching out to shove Sirius in the chest. "You *promised.* You promised me—"

"Yeah, well, I lied," Sirius cuts in coldly, swatting Regulus hands away with a scowl. "Didn't you do the same? What room do you have to judge me when you—"

"It's different!" Regulus argues furiously, eyes blazing, face a furious red. A grown man acting like a fucking *child.* Sirius wants to grab him and shake him. "I was going to lose James *anyway,* don't you get it?! I never even really got to have him! But you—I got you back. I *had* you back, and you took that from me. You weren't—you promised you wouldn't do that. How could you *do* that, after I—I *begged* you not to? And for what? Me? You think you did it for me? No, you did it for *you.* You tossed me aside, and it's not even the first time!"

"Do you realize how *childish* you sound?" Sirius asks sharply, staring him down. "You sound like a child throwing a fit because you didn't get your way. Grow *up,* Regulus."

"You won't let me!" Regulus roars, and Sirius flinches in pure surprise, his eyes widening. "You won't fucking let me. *This* is what you made me. Disappointed by your own design? You have no one to blame but yourself, because you won't respect me like an adult, because you look at me and see your little brother like I'm still a kid you have to take care of, which is ironic, because you didn't even do *that* right."

Sirius is not prepared for how much those words hurt. They sting. A lot. Oh, boy, do they sting. He—he tried really hard to take care of Regulus, he truly did, but…

Swallowing, Sirius hoarsely whispers, "I was a kid, too."

"Yes, I know," Regulus says, his volume dropping and his voice going cold. His eyes are colder. "The one who didn't grow up is you, Sirius, not me. You're still that kid trying to

protect me at every turn, but I got older, and I learned to take care of myself, and I don't *need* you anymore."

"Shut up," Sirius says reflexively, his mouth dry, heart thundering hard in his chest. *You do,* he thinks desperately. *You do need me. You'll always need me.*

"You cannot even begin to imagine how much I hate you," Regulus informs him, his voice clipped. "How much I've *always* hated you . The most freeing parts of my life were the ones you weren't involved in."

"Shut *up,"* Sirius repeats, a loud ringing in his ears.

"What I regret most isn't that you broke your promise, Sirius," Regulus continues. "It's that I wasted time caring enough to ask for a promise from you at all."

Sirius squeezes his eyes shut, trying to think, needing to *think.* It's difficult, very difficult, to push past the spiraling thoughts in his head to try and be rational. Regulus' words cut into him more deeply, more ruthlessly, than his dagger ever could.

"And I don't anymore," Regulus presses on. "Care, that is. It's liberating, honestly. Seeing who you are, truly, after being fooled into thinking you could ever be worth my effort. See, you're *stifling.* You're selfish. You're every single thing Mother and Father ever said about you. I didn't understand then, but I get it now, what they saw when they looked at you, and why they were so fucking *disappointed."*

No.

No, it's not right.

No, it just doesn't *fit.*

Sirius' mind just—doesn't accept it. Not this. Not from his little brother. His little brother. Always his little brother.

Slowly, Sirius peels his eyes open and stares at Regulus, and really, it's the mention of their parents that truly solidifies it for Sirius. Because all he can think about is how, after their parents died, it was *Regulus* who still loved them. Even after everything they'd put him—both of them—through, Regulus still fucking loved them so much that he couldn't get out of bed for *days* after they died, and still, even now, misses them when he barely has anything to miss.

"Oh, you're *clever,"* Sirius breathes out, and Regulus blinks, visibly startled. "You—okay, I don't give you enough credit, I can see that. You little *genius*. I mean, you're still a prick, just to be clear, but that—that almost worked."

Regulus stares at him, then flatly says, "What?"

"You almost had me going," Sirius admits with a snort, shaking his head as he lazily reaches out to slap the dagger out of Regulus' hand, watching it land on the ground before he broadens his stance. "Alright, Mr. *Death Eater*. Give it a go."

"Give…it…a…go," Regulus repeats slowly.

Sirius' lips twitch, and he arches an eyebrow. "Yeah, you're a death eater, right? You hate me, want me dead, all that. So, give it a go." Regulus just stares at him some more, and Sirius shakes out his hands, rolls his head on his neck, and bounces in place. He grins. "Come on, Reggie, haven't you ever wondered who's better between me and you?"

"No," Regulus says shortly. "I know that already."

"Ah, but what if you're wrong?" Sirius teases.

Regulus sighs. "I'm not."

With that, Regulus shifts forward, and Sirius meets him halfway; hand to hand and hit for hit; two stars colliding in the middle of the day while the brightest laughs like they're not in the midst of burning themselves up.

It's honestly a bit fun, despite everything. The rush of it has Sirius' blood pumping, his whole world narrowing down to blocking every single hit Regulus throws at him. He dodges, leans out of the way, dances out of range; still laughing; utterly breathless as keeps himself out of reach, *watching* Regulus try desperately to close the distance.

Perhaps that's a bit messed up, but Sirius can't help but be ridiculously warmed by it. Regulus —that's the thing with him, really. His actions have always spoken for him, no matter what words left his mouth. Regulus can say anything he likes to imply he despises Sirius, and yet, here he is, doing everything in his power just to touch him. To have him again.

"Oh, you'll want to stop leaving yourself open here," Sirius announces, swatting Regulus in the side gently. He busts out laughing and jerks back when Regulus tries to slam his fist into the side of Sirius' face, only narrowly missing. "Your form is good, really, but you're getting sloppy."

"Fuck *off,"* Regulus snarls, then tries to hit him again.

Sirius easily pushes his arm aside and says, warmly, "You know, I'll bet you killed a death eater, didn't you? Not Coen, you said, so… Thorfinn? Did you kill Rowle, Reggie?"

"So?" Regulus snaps, abruptly pausing in place to squint at him, his chest heaving.

"Doesn't make for a very good ally," Sirius points out, amused.

"He provoked me," Regulus mutters. "Can't help that. It's not a reflection of my loyalties."

"Mhm," Sirius hums skeptically. "Sure it's not."

Regulus' lips flatten out. "Just *what* are you insinuating?"

"Tired yet? Need a break?" Sirius asks with a grin, raising his eyebrows. "If you have to catch your breath—"

Sirius yelps and ducks hastily when Regulus' hand darts out. He's *fast.* Always has been, really. Sirius can't say who's faster between them, because he suspects it depends on the circumstances and just what they're trying to prove. At the moment, Regulus has something to prove, but bully for him, because Sirius isn't buying it.

There's another round of Regulus repeatedly trying to beat the ever-loving shit out of him, and Sirius repeatedly not letting him do so. It's a fun round. Sirius wins again, and he's laughing by the end, when Regulus jerks away with a low sound of frustration. He stomps off, utterly furious, then paces back towards Sirius, looking like he's out for blood.

"Fight *back!"* Regulus snaps, looking so pent up and rattling with so much rage that it's sort of just—sad. "I didn't take you for a fucking *coward.* Of all the things you've been, I can at least say you've never been that. What's this, then?!"

"I don't have to fight you," Sirius says simply. "I can beat you without ever laying a hand on you. I'm better, Reggie. I just *am,* and that's okay. I had to be, for you. I had to be, for this. So, I am, and you can take your time coming to terms with that; you really have some things to work through—"

"You absolute bastard," Regulus hisses, swinging out with his fist again, which Sirius artfully dodges.

Sirius sighs wistfully. "Oh, if only. But no, sadly, I am our parents' son. Their eldest. Less sadly, *your* big brother."

"I wish you weren't," Regulus spits out.

"Liar," Sirius replies, swatting Regulus upside the head and kicking his feet further apart. "You're not staying steady in your balance. Think about your center of gravity, yeah? If you stand like *that,* instead of *this,* you'll be easy to take down."

"Stop it! Just—fucking *stop,"* Regulus declares, smacking at Sirius' hands and glaring at him. He takes a step back, gaze calculating and sharp. "You're not going to fight me."

"No," Sirius says. "I'm not."

Regulus clenches his jaw. "Why?"

"Because I know you," Sirius tells him simply. "You're mad, and you want to lash out, but you don't *really* want to hurt me. You couldn't kill me if you tried, not even if I gave you the chance. So, sure, you're a death eater. You're a death eater because you wanted to get back at me, since you're a mean, miserable little shit. You're also a death eater to make sure none of the others lay a hand on me. Let me guess, you told them only *you* could kill me? Something like that, yeah?"

"Oh, is that what you think?" Regulus blinks at him, and it's like all of his anger just—falls away. Before, he was a shattered window that let the storm from within spill out; now, just like that, he's boarded the window up, and everything is still from the inside out. "Has it ever crossed your mind to think that I joined the death eaters because I *agree* with them?"

Sirius smacks his teeth. "Oh, please. Give it *up,* Regulus. I've got you all figured out, and you can't fool me. You just *can't."*

"You've fooled yourself. I didn't even have to do anything; *that's* how much of an idiot you are," Regulus says. "You think I'm trying to *protect* you, really? That's more your thing than mine, isn't it?"

"You just do it differently," Sirius mutters. "Dramatically, to be more clear. Besides, you're angry with me. Of course you want to be a prick about the whole thing."

Regulus scoffs. "For fuck's sake, Sirius, you're *clinging.* Do you realize that? You're so desperate to believe I'd never hurt you that you're forming lies to cope with it. I didn't join the death eaters to protect you, you fucking idiot."

"And what about James?" Sirius asks bluntly, and Regulus goes very still. Sirius hums. "Yeah. He's watching right now, you know. Watching us both. Are you really just alright with, what, killing me right in front of him? You planned to?"

"James…" Regulus trails off, expression twitching, and then his face seems to turn to stone. "Everything I do, I do for James, and for me, and for *us.* He knows that. I told him that, and he'll understand that, when the time comes."

Sirius heaves a sigh. "You know James. You know him, Regulus. You *know* he'd never recover from it, and whatever you'd do to me, you'd never do that to *him."*

"You underestimate how much he loves me."

"No, *you* do, generally. I know how much he loves you. And I know you don't even fully realize it, because you don't know how to accept it, so I know you're not using that as an excuse to do whatever you're *pretending* you're trying to do in here."

"Okay," Regulus murmurs, "then you underestimate just how much I love *him."*

"I—" Sirius pauses, faltering, his mind skipping like a record bumped off the track. He can't help it, that insidious thought that, in his desperation to make it back to James, Regulus would cling to his anger at Sirius just to cope, let it twist into hatred so he could let Sirius die and not feel just how much it hurts. Regulus would do that. He's a messy, complex man thrown into impossible situations and wrestling with feelings he doesn't know how to handle. Sirius hesitates for a long beat, then shakes it off. "No, I'm not buying that either."

"You really want to believe in me that badly?" Regulus asks.

"I *do* believe in you," Sirius insists, like a challenge, just daring Regulus to prove him wrong, because he *can't.* He can't trick Sirius, can't sway Sirius, can't change Sirius' mind. "There is nothing in this world that you can say or do that will change that, Reggie. You're my brother. I love you. That's what it is, that's what it's always been, and that's what it will forever be."

Regulus doesn't crack. He doesn't thaw. He remains unmoved and cold. With a sharp nod, he turns on his heel and dips down to snatch the dagger out of the ground. He grips it tight, then stands, pivots, and moves right for Sirius.

"That's your mistake," Regulus announces, and then he's flinging himself forward, and it's—different.

It's immediately different than before.

Sirius can feel the shift, somehow. Regulus is different when he's fighting with a dagger, for one thing. Deadlier. Sharper, like he's becoming a part of the blade. Colder, faster, more ruthless. He's also just different now from moments before, as if he's done letting emotion take the lead.

It's harder, then, to block and dodge. Sirius does, but he's not laughing anymore, because he has to *focus.* He can't miss one move, one shift of Regulus' body, one flash of the dagger. If he does—well, if he does, Regulus is going to cut him.

It's that simple. It's not Sirius just letting Regulus blow off steam, not now. It's Sirius *actively* defending himself, because if he doesn't, he's going to get hurt. Possibly very hurt.

Sirius' survival instincts rear up within him, and when Regulus darts his hand out, Sirius catches his wrist and *twists.* He's trying to disarm him, get the dagger out of the equation, but Regulus—stubborn as he is—refuses to let it go. What he does, instead, is flip the dagger in his bent hand and *slices.*

Sirius lets him go with a curse, jerking back in disbelief, utterly astonished by the sight of the cut on his forearm where Regulus got him. Blood drips down in a small stream, a tiny crimson river that flows onto the ground.

It doesn't even hurt that much. It's not very deep, and Sirius has had worse, but it's disorienting purely because it's *Regulus* who has done it. He looks up with a reprimand on his tongue, only to inhale sharply when he sees Regulus *still coming.*

Sirius reacts without meaning to, yet again. He catches Regulus' hand with the dagger, then swings out with his free hand to punch Regulus right in the face. Regulus grunts, curses, and tries to correct where Sirius just threw him off course. Sirius doesn't let him, doesn't even give him time, just yanks on his wrist and gets an arm around Regulus' throat. Easily, swiftly, Sirius jerks Regulus around and brings his arms up to secure him in a headlock.

"Fucking *quit it,* you little shit," Sirius hisses in his ear. "This isn't going to work. You're just pissing me off."

Regulus doesn't respond outside of a snarl, and then he throws his elbow back into Sirius' chest *hard.* Sirius—stubborn as he is—doesn't let go. Regulus shifts, throwing his elbow back again, then reaches back to fist Sirius by the back of his shirt as he launches himself forward, bending in half and fully tossing Sirius right over him.

Sirius feels the world tilt in a swirling rush, and then he lands flat on his back with his breath punching out of his lungs. He wheezes for a second, blinking rapidly, then rolls out of the way when Regulus tries to bury his dagger in his shoulder.

With a grunt, Sirius scrambles to his feet and kicks out before Regulus can stand up. His boot collides into Regulus' cheek so hard that his head snaps to the side, a mark left in the shape of the tread of Sirius' boot, stark and dirty against flushed skin. It takes genuine effort for Sirius not kick him in the face again, then just stomp his fucking head into the ground. Anyone else, and their head would break open under his boot like a melon.

"Done throwing a tantrum yet?" Sirius grits out as Regulus rolls his jaw, then eases to his feet.

"Oh, is that what you think this is?" Regulus asks mockingly, tilting his head. "You've really convinced yourself, haven't you? That I wouldn't betray you. That I wouldn't kill you."

"You *won't,"* Sirius declares. "You can hurt me, because I hurt you, but you won't cross a line. You can't, so just *give up.* Let it go, Reggie. I'm here. We're here, and it's done. Let's just fucking hug it out and get through this *together."*

"Only one of us can make it home," Regulus tells him.

Sirius softens, helplessly. "I know, and that's you. It's you, and I know you know that. I *know* you know I'll make sure you get home, and it *hurts,* it scares you, but giving into anger isn't going to help. It's only going to make it worse when I'm gone."

"I'm not going to be hurt at all," Regulus states, and he sounds like he means it. He looks like he means it. "I'm going to be entirely at peace when this is all over."

"Stop it," Sirius whispers. "Just stop. Don't you get it? You can't prove something I already know isn't real."

Regulus doesn't move, doesn't break his gaze, doesn't do anything for a long moment—and then, calmly, he says, "Are you willing to bet your life on that?"

"Yes," Sirius says firmly, then holds his arms out and leaves himself an open target. All Regulus has to do is throw his dagger, and that'll be it. He doesn't.

"Are you willing to bet someone else's life on that?" Regulus asks quietly, holding his gaze. "Your moon's, perhaps."

Sirius freezes. All of his muscles lock up as his heart starts beating hard and fast in his chest. "Regulus—"

"I know your moon, don't I, Sirius?" Regulus says, staring him down. "Oh, that would hurt, wouldn't it? That'd make you give up altogether, if I just so happened to say their name."

"Shut the fuck up," Sirius bursts out, frantic and ferocious in a heartbeat, feeling wild and untamed and pushed to the brink just that quickly, just that easily, because it's *Remus.* It's Remus, and Sirius can't be rational about Remus.

"Their life would be ruined the moment they were connected back to you," Regulus murmurs. "Because that's what you do. You ruin things. Why don't I share with the world just how easily you ruined the moon? A name. That's all it'll take."

"Don't you fucking *dare,"* Sirius hisses, stepping forward and hearing his blood rush in his ears, instincts going haywire, everything thrown off balance by the threat. If Regulus says Remus' name, that's it. Remus is dead. He—he wouldn't do that, right? Remus is his friend. So, why does he look like that? Why is Sirius so scared? "Shut up. Stop. You *wouldn't."*

"No?" Regulus says softly, never breaking his gaze, never backing down. His mouth opens, slowly, lips shaping around the very first syllable, "R—"

Sirius doesn't let him finish. Doesn't even give him the chance. In seconds, he has Regulus flat on his back on the ground, hitting him once, twice, a third time.

"Shut the fuck up!" Sirius roars, shaking all over as he leans over Regulus and hovers his fist in threat.

Regulus coughs, then slurs, "R—"

Sirius hits him again.

Again.

Again.

And again.

Things go in and out, his mind in an uproar, and he's here, then gone, here, then not, and back again. Sirius feels like the world is spinning around him, swirling in a hazy wash of dull watercolors, the air stale and the stench of death and blood clinging to the inside of his nose.

Everything seems to fall apart, and it *hurts,* because this—it's proof. It's convincing. Sirius, for the first time, doesn't believe in his brother. Because Regulus wants to say Remus' name, and that would hurt Sirius more than dying by Regulus' hand. This isn't anger. This goes beyond Regulus just being *angry* at him. Regulus meant it. Oh, oh fuck, he meant it when he said Sirius was dead to him, and he's—he's actually trying to do it.

He actually wants to kill Sirius and get home, whatever it takes. His own brother. Sirius, who was going to die for him. Sirius, who still wants to. Sirius, who still would, if it wasn't for the fact that the man he loves is under threat.

And it's here, with Regulus underneath him, being beaten to death by Sirius' hands, that Sirius realizes he hates him, too.

After everything that Sirius did for him.

After everything that Sirius suffered for him.

After everything that Sirius tried so fucking hard to fix.

After all of that, it was *Regulus* who threw it away, angry and betrayed and hurt. His little brother. Always his little brother.

And Sirius hates him for it.

"I gave *everything* for you!" Sirius shouts, then hits Regulus again. "And this is what you give to me?!"

Regulus is gagging on his own blood.

"You ungrateful, spiteful, *hateful* piece of shit!" Sirius chokes out, his vision blurring with tears until the way Regulus lays there, face covered in blood, doesn't even seem real. Just a simple illusion. A dream. A memory he wants to hold onto and shove away in equal measure.

A rattling breath escapes Regulus, and he lifts his hand weakly, fingers slack around his dagger. "R—"

Sirius hits him again, heaving out a harsh breath that escapes him like a sob, hot tears dripping down the length of his nose as he confesses, "I *hate* you. I fucking hate you. Why would you do this? How could you do this to me, after I—after all of it? All I've ever done is *love you!* Everything I did, I did for *you!* It's your fault, and I hate that you were ever fucking *born!"*

Regulus pushes the dagger forward, still trying, still fucking *trying,* even now. It wobbles, swaying weakly through the air, too slow, laughably slow to the point that Sirius easily snatches it from his grip as he wheezes, "R—"

"Shut up!" Sirius bellows.

"You'll—" Regulus coughs again, eyes rolling around before settling on him once more. "You'll have to kill me."

"I will! Don't fucking push me, because I *will,"* Sirius snarls, vibrating in place, suspended in this moment of horrible, sickening rage, and hurt, and betrayal, and fear.

Regulus just looks at him and whispers, "R—"

Sirius hits him with one hand to shut him up, and Regulus twists beneath him, wheezing, only for him to jerk to a halt the moment he sees Sirius raise the dagger up.

Sirius doesn't bring it down, but he wants to. He wants to so badly that he's shaking. He wants to drive the dagger down into Regulus' chest and *twist.* All he has to do is try to speak Remus' name again, and Sirius will. All he has to say is—

"It's okay," Regulus gasps, one bloodstained hand coming up to shakily cover Sirius' around the dagger. His fingers are slick as they wrap around Sirius' hand, and he swallows, he swallows his own blood just to look right at Sirius and choke out, "I love you, too. Wanted to say it for a while. Sorry. I'm so sorry I didn't. Sorry I'm saying it now, but I do. It's okay, right? It's okay. I love you, too."

Sirius feels a horrible, cold sensation slowly crawl through his body, and he can't—he can't move, can't look away from Regulus' face. His hands ache, knuckles busted, and his little brother lays bloody and beaten beneath him, under the threat of dagger's death, and Sirius is the one who put him there.

And he knows why.

He can see it, suddenly. It does become clear, then, all at once. Regulus did trick him. He did fool him. Just not in the way Sirius was prepared for. He never imagined this at all.

Regulus never intended to go home.

Sirius releases a whine and presses the back of his wrist against his mouth as he stares down at Regulus through the tears in his eyes. Oh. Oh, it's all coming together now.

Regulus *knew* Sirius was planning to get him home, and he knew Sirius would sooner kill himself than let Regulus do the same, and Sirius *is* better than Regulus. Faster. Stronger.

Even more efficient, depending on the circumstances.

There was no way Regulus could make sure Sirius got home unless *Sirius* did. Only Sirius could get himself home, and he wasn't going to, and that was the last obstacle Regulus had to get through. He knew *exactly* how.

Sirius wasn't going to let anyone kill his brother, and yet here he is, at death's door, because Sirius was tricked. Because Sirius faltered. Because Sirius was goaded into it like a fucking fool. Regulus was never going to say Remus' name, was he? Regulus found Sirius' button, and he pushed it, repeatedly, until he pushed Sirius right over the edge. On purpose.

Sirius wasn't going to let Regulus die for him, and so, Regulus pushed Sirius to kill him instead. A simple, effective plan to twist Sirius' mind around, banking on his survival instincts and just how much he loves Remus. A simple, effective act of turning himself into the bad guy, saying all the wrong things and siding with all the wrong people, becoming something Sirius could hate enough to fight, because once he started fighting, *really* fighting, that was it.

A sacrifice. It was a sacrifice.

I love you, too.

As if all the times Sirius has said it, every single one, there was an echo of Regulus returning it. There was. Sirius *knew* that. He knew Regulus loved him.

I love you, too.

How did he forget? How did he let himself doubt, even for a moment, even out of fear?

I love you, too.

The words crack open Sirius' chest, and he chokes out a harsh sob as he drops the dagger. His hands come up shakily to cup Regulus' face, and maybe it was true, maybe Regulus was right when he said Sirius still looks at him like a kid, because it doesn't matter to him that Regulus is twenty-six years old right now; Sirius looks at him and remembers, vaguely, so very vaguely, the way he had a lisp at the age of six because his front baby teeth fell out, so when he giggled and whispered Sirius' name, it didn't really come out right, but Sirius came running right to him every time anyway. It's been twenty years and twenty seconds, and Sirius is still here.

Regulus' eyes snap open, cloudy and hazy, then brighten with growing alarm as he takes Sirius in, weeping over him. His face is swollen and busted open, slashes of crimson across his pale skin, but his panic comes through loud and clear.

"Pick it up," Regulus croaks. "Pick it up. Sirius, pick it up."

Sirius shakes his head, sucking in a harsh breath, chest stuttering around his tears. Regulus lifts his hand to fist the front of Sirius' shirt, desperate, making a low noise. It sounds like he's begging. Again, Sirius shakes his head, eyes stinging. Regulus whimpers, his hand dropping.

The worst part is, Regulus would have seen it through. He got right there to the end before he slipped, before he fucked it up, because he's human, and in what he considered his last moments, he just wanted to say one final thing.

I love you, too.

"Then—then let me do it, okay? Let me do it. Please just let me do it," Regulus chants, his hand frantically patting at the ground as he tries to locate the dagger. Sirius shifts to kick it away *hard,* and Regulus starts crying in earnest. "Don't, please don't do this to me. Sirius, please just—please do it, or let me do it. Don't make me live without you, please don't, Sirius —"

Regulus is a bloody, blubbering mess and caught on the borderline of a fucking panic attack —and Sirius doesn't care. He reaches down to snag Regulus' collar and haul him up. He's a little limp and loose, delirious from Sirius beating the fuck out of him, so he flows like water and slumps easily into Sirius' body. Sirius wraps his arms around and holds him, staring

blankly out at nothing as he cups the back of Regulus' head and the tears fall freely down his face.

Sirius can do nothing but sit there and listen to his brother plead with slurred, choked words. Plead to die. Plead for Sirius' life. Plead with desperation that overflows like a pipe finally bursting, flying apart under the pressure.

Eventually, Regulus gets so desperate that he tries an entirely different tactic. "James," he says. "Sirius, James needs you. He needs you. Don't—don't do this to him. Don't—"

"Regulus, Regulus, *stop,"* Sirius orders firmly, drawing back to grab his shoulders and shake him a little bit. Regulus' chest rises and falls at a rapid rate, eyes wide and wild like an animal caught in a trap. "Stop. It's over. It's done, okay? You—you tried, and it didn't work, and that's it. Just stop."

"I'll—I'll say it. I'll say the name," Regulus chokes out.

Sirius swallows, then rasps, "No you won't."

"R—R—" and that's it. That's as far as he gets. Sirius does nothing, and Regulus' mouth remains open. Sirius waits, and then Regulus' busted lip begins to tremble as the building tears in his eyes spill over. He ducks his head forward and sobs out, "Fuck. *Fuck."*

"Yeah, I know, you little fuck-up," Sirius mumbles with a weak, tear-filled laugh. He cups the back of Regulus' neck and pulls him back into a hug.

Regulus drops his head down on Sirius' shoulder and weeps. His fingers twist in Sirius' shirt at his sides, clinging, restless. "I'm sorry. Fuck, I'm so sorry. I—I really—I tried."

"I know," Sirius whispers.

"I was trying so hard," Regulus gasps out, shaking and crying, crying and shaking. "I'm sorry. I'm—"

"I know, Reggie. It's okay. It's going to be okay." Sirius swallows harshly, because he knows, realistically, that it's not. It can't be. All this time, he's given so much thought to what his loss would do to James, and to Remus, but not so much to Regulus. A huge oversight on his part, Sirius now knows. He's going to have to leave his little brother, too. For some reason, he could never really look past knowing he would do anything he could to protect Regulus, even die to save him, to see that he would be leaving him behind. Again.

And that must have been the very first thing Regulus became aware of the second he heard Sirius volunteer for him. It's horrible, because the arena has brought Regulus back to him twice, once when Regulus became a Victor and right this very second, but for Regulus, all the arena does is take Sirius away.

Regulus leans against him and sobs like he just lost everything, and maybe, in a way, he did.

~•~

With a wince, Regulus dabs at his face with the supplies from the medkit in his—in Sirius' bag. Sirius took it back, and Regulus let him, not saying a word of protest.

Sirius sits beside him in silence, cleaning his arm up where Regulus sliced him open with a dagger.

The heli-carrier has already come by to scoop up Yaxley and Camilla, which is what initially got them to stop crying and separate, because oh, right, they're still in the middle of the fucking hunger games. Reality is a bitch, truly.

Sirius had gotten up to retrieve his spear from Camilla's body, then they started taking care of their injuries. Not speaking. Not looking at each other.

Regulus is worried if he opens his mouth, he'll throw up.

The thing is.

Well, you see, the thing is, Regulus had a plan, right? It was a good plan, and he knows this because it *nearly* worked. It would have worked if he hadn't fucked it up in the home stretch. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut, or pretend like he was going to say Remus' name again, and then just die.

He was so close. So fucking close.

But of course he fucked it up, because he's a fuck-up, and he always fails when it matters most for him not to. Was he scared to die? Yes, admittedly he was, but not nearly as terrified as he was to die without saying it at least once, just once, needing to say it, a selfish desire to prove that he does have that in him, and all that he was doing—all of it—was *because* he loves Sirius, too. Sirius and James.

A major part of the plan was making them angry with him. Making them hate him, even. Being someone easier for them to lose and let go of. Regulus knows through his parents that being angry with someone who dies doesn't make it hurt less, but he can only imagine the pain he'd feel if he *hadn't* been angry with them, if they were good people who never hurt him or Sirius, if they had done right by them.

He was trying, in his own way, to make it easier for them.

He fucked that up, too.

Regulus should have just fucking plucked up the dagger in the first five minutes and gotten it over with, but…well, how the fuck was he supposed to do that, knowing Sirius might have fallen apart after that? It would have hurt him, weakened him, and then the death eaters could have actually had a chance at killing him. Regulus had to be here; he *had* to, just to make sure no one got to Sirius.

It wasn't supposed to go like this. Regulus had hoped to get farther in the games and bring the numbers down significantly before he goaded Sirius into killing him. Because it had to be Sirius who killed him. Sirius is better—Regulus has always known that, and he was counting on that. If Sirius killed him, if he reached that point, then he'd get out. He'd keep going. He'd have no reason to stop and nothing holding him back.

All Regulus has ever done is hold Sirius back. Drag him down. Sink his claws into him and fretfully, desperately never want him to leave. Regulus could set him free, like this, and it's no less than he deserves, really, after all the pain and trauma and grief that Regulus has invited into his life.

Regulus is his little brother, and all that's ever done for him is make his life *worse.* Everything—all of it—is his fault. Sirius even said it. Yeah, Regulus wishes he was never born, too.

And, alright, a part of Regulus had hoped that maybe… Well, maybe, like this, Sirius would regret volunteering for him, because he *should.* Because he has every right to, and why doesn't he? Regulus can't stand it, being loved that much, being responsible for what Sirius' love costs him.

It always costs him.

This time, it's going to cost him everything. He doesn't even see it, why it needs to be him that gets out. How can't he see it? All the lives he's touched. All the people who need him. Effie, Monty, Andy, Pandora, Remus, *James.*

Oh, James…

Regulus, too. Regulus really needs it to be Sirius who goes home. Because how is he supposed to live with it? The fact that he's killed his brother; how does he carry the weight of that? How does he continue on with that always in the back of his mind? So, he killed himself, too.

It was an easy choice. It's no different than the decision Sirius made for him. Here they are, both of them walking corpses, slain by each other's hands and their own. Only one can keep going, at the end of all this. Only one of them can revive.

Regulus still wants it to be Sirius. It has to be, because Regulus is the sword Sirius picks up, and the sword Sirius falls on, and Sirius deserves the chance to let the sword go.

"Here," Sirius says curtly, holding out a water bottle.

Regulus takes it gratefully, because he can still taste blood in his mouth, and he feels dangerously close to being sick from it. He swallowed blood again. It makes his stomach churn.

The water helps. He swishes it in his mouth, spits it out, then actually sips some down. His entire fucking face is throbbing, but it's as clean as it's can get. It's probably a fright to see, swollen and busted open all over. One eye won't open all the way, and his bottom lip stings every time his mouth moves.

A soft chime has them both tilting their heads back to watch as a sponsor box floats gently down in the space between them. Neither of them move. They both just stare at it like it might bite them, equally wary and chagrined.

For the first time since their fight, they look at each other. Sirius arches an eyebrow. His face is swollen and bruised in certain places, but not nearly as bad as Regulus' at the moment. Regulus can't arch an eyebrow back, because it would hurt his face, so he just inclines his head to Sirius. He's not brave enough to face down a scolding from James first.

Sirius blows out a deep breath and reaches out to snag the box, drawing it into his lap. He hesitates, then flips it open to reach inside. There's a quiet hum of approval when Sirius pulls out a small container of salve for their injuries, which is admittedly relieving to see. What comes out after is two half-loaves of bread and a small spread of cheese for them to share.

"There's no note," Sirius breathes out, tipping his head back to stare up at the sky, stricken.

Regulus looks away, his eyes fluttering shut, chest pulsing with a harsh, horrible pain he almost can't breathe around. James' silence speaks volumes. He must be so upset. *I'm sorry,* Regulus thinks. *I'm so sorry, James.*

In silence, they open up the salve to put on their own injuries—Regulus needs most of it—and then they eat and pass water back and forth between them.

When that's done, Sirius stands up and waves him to his feet, mumbling that they should use the rest of the daylight they do have to get away from here. Just to move. Just to not stay in one place too long. The maze has made them paranoid, all of them most likely, but at least the hands have gone away.

The maze is calm now as they walk through it, walking in no direction, walking without a word between them. Sirius has Regulus' dagger, because he doesn't trust him with it. He even said so, blunt and harsh when he picked it up. That's fair.

They walk together in silence for *hours.*

Regulus doesn't know what to say. Sirius won't look at him, or acknowledge him, and Regulus can't stop himself from stealing quick peeks, waiting for something. Anything.

As the day passes, the salve does its job in healing Sirius, from what Regulus can see. The swelling goes down in his face and hands, bruises fading a bit and knuckles scabbing over. The cut on Sirius' arm scabs over last. Regulus' own face stops hurting as much, but he suspects, since he's worse off, he won't heal fully until tomorrow.

There's not a sound between them, other than their quiet and careful footsteps, along with the consistent rustling of the hedges they walk in the middle of. Regulus keeps waiting for hands to burst out and grab him, but they never do.

Neither of them really do much of anything until they take one corner and both suck in a sharp breath at the same time. In front of them is a small open, shed-like shelter with a back,

two walls on either side, and a roof—all made of metal. Under it are two open crates that show packages of dried meat and fruit. Regulus thinks he sees a flashlight, too.

The area is small and square, compact with the shelter at the center, but there's one way in and one way out. At least at the moment. Regulus doesn't doubt that the hedges surrounding the open space could open up or shift; this maze is a fucking mess on one's mind. In fact, the maze isn't really a maze at all, at least not for everyone. A maze indicates there's a way out, but only one person will achieve that.

Sirius and Regulus trade a quick look, and then they move forward at the same time to head into the shelter and pick over the crates. It's very sparse, unfortunately. There is a flashlight, as well as enough food for them to put something else on their stomachs, passing a package of dried meat back and forth as they pick over everything else.

There's also two more bottles of water, which is good, because they finished off one and half already between drinking and cleaning up. One crate has a bit of rope that Sirius immediately plucks out of Regulus' hands to put in his bag. Regulus scowls, but again, fair is fair. He stole from Sirius first, after all. It's not much rope, from what Regulus can tell, only long enough to reach from his feet to his waist, at most.

Regulus wants his dagger, mostly. Despite what Sirius might be worried about, Regulus isn't going to do some sort of sacrificial suicide—at least not yet. Not until he's sure Sirius is the last one at the end, and then it's fair game.

Once the crates are cleared, they both toss them out and make use of the space and security the shelter gives them, putting their backs against the wall and peering out the open front.

The first thing Sirius says to him, after hours of silence, is a very harsh, "You're un-fucking-forgivable, you know."

"That was the plan," Regulus mumbles.

"You're a prick. You're—" Sirius' nostrils flare as he looks over at him. "I mean, the hypocrisy *alone,* Regulus…"

"I know," Regulus admits. "I know I'm a hypocrite, but so are you. How are you mad at me for doing the same thing as you?"

"You did it in a much worse way," Sirius snaps. "Or you were planning to. How do you think that would have felt for me, huh? If I—if I actually—"

Regulus tangles his fingers together in his lap. "It's—well, that's the thing, isn't it? If you *had,* you would have been justified. I—I made it to where you could kill me, and that'd be fair. You'd have reason to. You could hate me. So, you wouldn't have felt—I mean, you could—you could live with it, because I'm not a good person, and that's all I was showing you. What were you going to do? Mourn the brother who tried to kill you, who hurt you, who—who ruined your fucking life?"

"You're so fucking *stupid,"* Sirius whispers, squeezing his eyes shut. He shakes his head sharply, lips pressed into a thin line, and then he looks right at Regulus. "Listen to me, there is no world in which I *wouldn't* mourn the loss of you, because it would be a loss. I don't care what you've done, or how bad of a person you make yourself out to be. You're my *brother.* Don't you get it? I would never be the same if I lost you. And, fuck, if I lost it enough to *kill* you? Do you—can you even imagine what that would do to me, Regulus? I—I would never get over that, no matter what you did to goad me into it. Even if all that you said out there was true and not just some trick, even if you crossed the line, I would *never* recover. Never."

"Oh." Regulus' shoulders slump.

Sirius stares at him incredulously. "Did you honestly not know that? You thought, what, that I'd just—carry on?"

"I hoped," Regulus chokes out, because it's true, and he doesn't know if that makes him foolish or simply desperate, because he wanted so badly to just—just— "Just this once, all I wanted to do was take the burnt of the pain and do the hard things for *you* this time."

"Fuck's sake, Reggie," Sirius mumbles, heaving a sigh as he rubs a weary hand over his face. He drops his hand and stares at him. "Look, I get that your heart was in the right place here, but—no. Just no. This was *not* okay."

Regulus' eyes drift shut. "I know I get it wrong. I know that. But I just—I wanted—" His eyes snap open, and he looks over at Sirius helplessly. "I had to try, and that was the only thing I could do, Sirius, because I can't—I can't *beat* you. I can't win when you're in the race, do you realize that? The moment you set your mind to something, that's *it.* I only had one chance to outsmart you, and I fucked it all up."

"I thought you hated me," Sirius whispers. "You said I was dead to you. Was that all lies, too?"

"Yes and no," Regulus admits, grimacing. "I do hate you. I hate you and I don't, obviously. And I—I killed you the moment you volunteered for me, both times. Something in you dies, and I know that firsthand now, and it's *my* fault. Every single thing you've suffered, all that you've lost, it can all be traced right back to me. I didn't want to be at fault for it again."

"Hey, no, that's not—don't do that, Regulus," Sirius says firmly. "That's not on you, okay?"

"You said it. You said you wished I was never born."

"I know what I said. I was pissed off and out of my head, but that's not—it's not true. You clearly didn't mean it when you said you didn't care about me anymore, and I'm assuming most of the rest was just you trying to get me to…"

"Yes." Regulus clears his throat and awkwardly mutters, "I'm sorry. Bringing our parents into it was—low."

Sirius gives him a wry look. "You think?"

"I'm just really good at hurting people I never really want to hurt at all," Regulus says softly, his gaze drifting up against his will, mind turning to James, who is never too far from his mind anyway. "I'm not—good, you know? Not like you."

"Regulus, you just tried to sacrifice yourself for me, and in such a way where you draped yourself in everything bad in an attempt to make it easier for everyone," Sirius says flatly. "It's unconventional, yes, but that's not something *bad* people would care to do. And what even is good, really? In this world? Here? I don't think anyone is simply *good,* you know? I don't think anyone can be; I think there are the people who try, and the people who don't, and you—you try. You really try."

Regulus blinks harshly past the stinging in his eyes. "And I fail. Every time, I fail."

"We all do," Sirius murmurs, "and then we try again."

"I'm so tired," Regulus rasps, looking at him with this unshakeable, soul-deep *exhaustion.* "You should be the one who gets to keep trying. It should be you. I want it to be you."

"Don't you think I want the same thing for you?" Sirius asks.

"There's a difference, though," Regulus whispers. "A stark difference that you're not even conscious of. See, you—you have a family. Not just me, but the Potters. You have James, will *always* have James, and I—I never really did at all. You can go on without me if you have them, if you have James, and James can as well. You two already did it, didn't you? But me? I never could, Sirius. I never really did."

"You don't know what you mean to us," Sirius croaks, his expression twisting, pained.

"Maybe not. Maybe I do. Regardless, what I *do* know is that you two never needed me to—to make it. Not the first time, and not this last time. I wasn't there like I should have been for either of you, and you managed, because you need each other. You may want me, too, but we can't have what we want anymore," Regulus explains quietly.

Sirius sounds strained when he mutters, "What about you? What do you need, Regulus?"

"I need you both," Regulus admits, turning to hold Sirius' gaze. "Do you—do you get what I'm saying? I *can't* come out of this arena. It has to be you. We all need it to be you."

"Reggie," Sirius says softly.

Regulus shakes his head and swallows past the lump in his throat to scoot closer to Sirius, needing to get closer to convey the importance of what he's trying to explain. "It has to be you, okay? It *has to,* because I don't want to go home if I'm not going home with you. I—I just don't see the point."

Sirius looks stricken. "James. *James* is the point, Regulus. You two—you could be—"

"Do you think, for even a *second,* that either of us would ever be able to heal in this world without you in it, even with each other?" Regulus whispers. "He needs you, Sirius. *You.* I know he loves me, okay? I do. And I—fuck, I love him so much that I can barely stand it. But he made it through this past year without me, and he *wouldn't have* without you." He blinks hard and gives Sirius a sad smile. "I wouldn't have either."

"Well, we're in a bitch of a situation then," Sirius tells him, his voice cracking, "because I—I refuse to believe that. I don't accept that. You two will be—you'll make it without me. You'll have to, because there is *nothing* you could say that's going to stop me from getting you home."

"Can you cut it out?" Regulus grinds his teeth. "Stop being stubborn about this. Think about it logically, alright? You never needed me as much as you needed him."

"Shut up. Shut *up.* Just—"

"You didn't. You *don't.* He has taken care of you, and I've always failed to. You have taken care of him, and I've barely even started trying to. It's not me, Sirius. Don't you get it? We know this. We spent ten years knowing this. It's always you and him, and not me, and I'm *okay* with that now."

"Fuck you," Sirius says, his nostrils flaring. "No. Fuck that and fuck you and—and fuck all of this. I'm getting you home."

"What—what about your moon?" Regulus tries, desperate at this point. "Your moon needs you, too. Sirius—"

"Drop it," Sirius cuts in harshly, so harshly that Regulus' mouth snaps shut as he pulls back. Sirius stares at him, and then his face softens as he releases a sigh. "You really love me, huh?"

Regulus is obviously not going to ever say that out loud again unless he's on the brink of death. He gives Sirius a blank look for even daring to expect it. For some reason, this makes Sirius laugh, his face lighting up.

"Yeah, you do," Sirius coos. "Oh, I'm never letting this go. I'm going to hold it over your head until my last breath."

"You know when I said you're the worst brother?"

"I do recall, yes."

"That one was true."

"Ah, you love me, really."

"Fuck off," Regulus grumbles, looking away with a huff, and then he's tilting his head back to stare at the roof when the first little *ting* hits it, followed quickly by another, and then some more until it grows in consistency.

It's raining.

"Alright?" Sirius asks quietly, no longer amused, not rejoicing in the rain the way Bellatrix did, despite the heat.

"Yeah," Regulus replies, equally quiet, leaning back against the wall to watch the rain, where it's not an issue when he's not stuck in it, where—just as he knew he would—he feels safe, simply because Sirius is with him. "Yeah, I'm alright."

Chapter End Notes

for those of you who need the summary, for the deaths first: sirius kills yaxley and camilla.

for those of you who need a summary with less details: sirius and regulus fight, REALLY fight, and they both harm each other physically and with words. regulus almost succeeds in goading sirius into killing him, by threatening to reveal remus to the world (he does not!!!), but in the end he breaks and tells sirius that he loves him. there's a bit of resolution between them after that, and they talk, and regulus' plan to never go home and get sirius home is talked about and explained.

for those of you who need reassurances: yes, sirius and regulus will talk more and be a team in the upcoming chapters. they will have further resolution than just this, i promise you. and also, regulus himself will have a personal breakthrough/revelation as well. also, remus is very, very safe!!! he will not be found out in the hallow, and it's explained more in the next chapter. trust the process, i beg you, or tap out if it's better for you!!!

to everyone else:

sorry, i have to make the joke. i HAVE to.

bfb regulus 🤝 crimson rivers regulus: pretending to threaten remus' life 😭😭😭

sorry, okay, i use humor to cope. this chapter was...whew, it was a lot. sibling and family dynamics fuck me up more than any romantic or platonic relationship ever could. sirius and regulus' relationship as brothers outweighs literally any ship for me, so you can imagine the mess i was while writing this chapter. i literally cried. regulus and sirius always make me cry over anyone else.

there was a couple things i wanted to cover bc i talk about sirius and regulus a lot on my tumblr, like A LOT, especially in crimson rivers, but not everyone goes to see that stuff. ive done, like, essay-length deep dives on them wayyy too many times to count, so i can't possibly sum up my thoughts/feelings on them here, but like.

blanket statement: neither sirius or regulus are to blame for their child abuse in any world, obviously, and to villainize either of them as a result of how their trauma shapes them or how they coped or how they responded to it (for example, sirius leaving) is not okay.

in crimson rivers specifically, it's even more complex, because of other external issues (the arena and such) that allows these desperate feelings to manifest. because they do love each other, and they both want to save each other, not just for them or for james or anyone else, but for THEMSELVES too. and like, they're put in these horrible, fucked up, complex circumstances where they're pushed to these lengths for each other and forced to see how far they'll go.

like with regulus, he was literally put in this position where he knew his brother was going to be forced to fight and kill for him AGAIN, and what's worse, DIE FOR HIM. and he takes that blame unto himself when it's sirius' choice, and by making himself into something sirius could/would kill, something sirius wouldn't die for, something sirius would fight—well, it was a sacrifice, yes, and also self-punishment in the sense that he genuinely feels he deserves it and doesn't feel that he, over sirius, deserves to live.

and it's like, he does want to be the one doing the hard things this time, he doesn't want to live without sirius, or live with the knowledge that sirius died for him. he's angry and scared and desperate—we see more on it later, and we also see him have a breakthrough and this really, really important progress of like. grasping his own worth and understanding, fully, that he does deserve to live and WANTS to.

and sirius—he couldn't really see the impact his loss would have on regulus specifically, because he's so focused on this, on saving regulus, on doing what he feels he has to. he has his own sort of breakthrough as well in that regard where it's like. hey, i deserve to live as well, and i can fight for myself, too.

so like, there is the promise of future growth, and further resolution, i swear. these two truly do mean the world to me. and no, obviously i don't condone the actions taken here, and it will be further addressed when there's proper time for it.

a couple of brief mentions: james not sending a note!!! also remus! again, we will see more on them later.

let me do numbers!

tributes remaining: 15
tributes no longer with us:
velvet
mavis
henri
thorfinn
coen
alowyn
warwick

yaxley
camilla

Climbing

Chapter Notes

hello, all!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past violence/death/murder/sacrificial suicide attempts
-depictions of violence (not towards people)
-mentions of blood
-vague hints of aquaphobia
-brief mention of physical injuries

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus nudges a waffle over to James just as James eases a cup of tea in front of him, doing Sirius' partner-ly duties in his stead while he's away. Objectively, this is hilarious.

In reality, it just makes Remus miss Sirius more.

And, well, Remus will never admit it, at least not to James, but Sirius makes his tea better. This may just be because Remus finds basically everyone lackluster compared to Sirius. It's not James' fault; he's really doing his best.

"How are you this morning?" Remus murmurs.

"Oh, you know," James says vaguely, heaving a sigh and lazily pouring syrup over his waffle. He's been miserable, really, since what happened between Sirius and Regulus.

He had come bustling in yesterday, grumpy and huffy about the whole thing, but he just got progressively sadder as he had to sit there and watch his…boyfriend? Fiancé? Honestly, it's unclear, and at this point, Remus is too polite to ask. Either way, he got progressively sadder as he had to watch Regulus list out all the reasons Sirius should be the one to live, in a clear

fit of desperation, and on this list just so happened to include James and the tragedy of their whole situation.

"You know it's not—it isn't that he doesn't want to come back to you, right?" Remus asks gently, because he understands Regulus enough to know that for a fact. "He's just—really fucking desperate, James. He's scared. He's… Well, you heard him. He doesn't want to lose his brother."

James sighs and puts down the syrup. "I know. It's just… Look, I don't want to lose either of them, and I can't—I can't even *think* about it, if I'm honest. But what I *can* think about is how Regulus views himself. And I—I can't help but think that I somehow contributed to that in some way. Didn't make him realize just how much I—" He cuts himself off, swallowing thickly. "I love him so much. It tears me apart that I can't make him see just how special he is."

"James, as much as we might wish to, we can't make people love themselves just by loving them enough," Remus says softly. "There's no measurement you have to meet for that to be possible. You can love Regulus, or anyone, so much you break the fucking scale, but…some people just don't know how to love themselves, and they have to learn that. Do you think if it could be done for them, you and Sirius wouldn't have managed that for Regulus by now?"

"I…" James closes his eyes, looking pained, and then he blows out a deep breath as his eyes drift open again. "Yeah, I know. I do know what you're saying. He was—I think he was learning to, before all of this. You should have seen him, Remus. It was amazing. He was—he was *trying,* you know, and—and then this happened, and it's not fair. It's not fair to him, or any of us."

"No," Remus agrees quietly, "it's not."

"I can't even be really upset with him about it," James says, lips tipping down. "What he did, I mean. Or what he was planning to do, and the fact that I factor in it at all. It's like with my mum, yeah? I couldn't be upset with him for making sure she was safe, and I can't be upset with him for wanting to get my best friend back to me—and so many others."

"You're not upset?" Remus asks, startled.

"I'm angry, don't get me wrong. Angry at him for scaring the fuck out of me and taking it that far, and angry at the situation, and just—angry. But in the same breath... It's upsetting that he's so ready to throw himself away for it, but it's like—I get it now, the way he loves. It's—oh, hell, Remus, it's messy the way he loves. Messy and—and almost *violent,* you know? He does it with all of him, all he's got, and it's just this tangled, complicated *force* in him that spills out, even when he tries to keep it all inside. Like it's too big for him, and too big for the world, and he thinks he doesn't do it right, but all it really is…" James' face softens, gentle and adoring. "He doesn't know how to stop. That's all it is. And I don't think he should. In a better world, it wouldn't show itself the way it does here. In a better world, it'd never hurt anyone."

Remus turns that over in his mind and thinks of all he knows about Regulus, and—well, yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. It's a pattern with him, the way his love reveals itself in big gestures and dire circumstances. The first time he ever called James *baby* was in a panic. When Evan died, Regulus released a scream so raw with grief that it was chilling, something awful and quaking rising from the depths of him. One of the secrets he kept close to his chest was that he missed his brother. He tipped himself into a river, believing he wouldn't come back out, and knowing he could never return the same. He tried to get his own brother to kill him just so he wouldn't have to live without him, and he only failed in that endeavor because he needed his brother to know that, despite everything and perhaps because of it all, he loved him. Still loves him.

If the world was different, better, kinder, maybe Regulus' love wouldn't flow out of him this way at all. Maybe it'd be easier, calmer, softer. Remus knows how difficult it is to love here; he knows how much it hurts. He thinks, maybe, Regulus is a very sensitive person. Most probably wouldn't be able to see it that way, but tender hearts grow barbs to resist being bruised.

"I don't know what's going to happen. I just know I love him. I love them both," James mumbles, then sighs again and lifts his fork to poke at his waffle. He doesn't seem very interested in it and raises his gaze to Remus instead. "What about you? How are you doing this morning?"

Remus gives him a wry look and mutters, "Oh, you know."

James' lips twitch at the corners. "Yeah, I suppose I do. Still, I'm checking in. You have to give me something."

"Do I?"

"Mhm. Just open up a bit, please, that's all I ask. Let me… I don't know. Let me help."

"I don't need you to take care of me, James," Remus tells him, shaking his head. "Just worry about yourself."

"No," James says simply, holding his gaze. "No, I'll worry about you, too, thank you very much. Nice try, but that's not how this is going to go. I'm not stupid, you know. You do this thing where you, like, exude this—sense of serenity and calm, as if you're strong enough to bear everything on your own, but that's not going to slide with me. We all need people to lean on from time-to-time, and I'm here. I'm right here, so lean."

The thing is, James is his friend. Remus knows that. But it's here, in this exact moment, that Remus fully settles into their dynamic, letting it take shape around him, feeling the weight of importance shift until it grows just a bit more. Sometimes, you can really feel a moment with another person, like this tangible thing you can reach out to touch, and you just know, somehow, that whatever bond existed before has strengthened. Remus does feel like he can reach out and touch this moment, here, with James; he's quite sure it would be warm.

Unfortunately, Remus does have a habit of not really opening up to other people, and he's almost not sure how to. Even with Sirius, it took time, and it took a bond they worked together to build. He's opened up to Regulus only a bit, and that's—well, he's quite sure it's partially just because Regulus sort of had no choice but to expose his own vulnerabilities to Remus, so Remus simply returned the favor. It *did* bring them closer together, but they're both equally fucked up enough that they wouldn't have done it on their own.

"Ah, I don't—really know what to say," Remus admits, feeling a bit out of sorts, honestly. Not for the first time, he aches for the ease he always felt with Lily, no matter what.

"Hm." James looks thoughtful, and fortunately for Remus, he clearly knows how to do this whole friend thing and opening up business enough to guide him through it. "Were you okay last night? I didn't even—I wasn't really in a place to ask, but Regulus threatened to—" He grimaces, then coughs. "Well, that wasn't okay, regardless of the reasons behind it."

Remus frowns. "You know, honestly, I wasn't even scared. Mostly I was just—confused. Because, yes, I knew he was angry with Sirius, but he never treated *me* differently. I couldn't make sense of why he would have been alright with me before the arena and then just…do that. I'm not angry with him or anything. I think I knew he wouldn't really do it. Just from logic, basically. He never specified a gender. He only used the terms *the moon* and *your moon* when talking to Sirius. He didn't say my full name, and then…couldn't, wouldn't, even when Sirius actually gave him the chance to."

"Yeah, alright, but you'd still have every right to be upset with him about it," James informs him. "I mean, are you in danger now? Did he—did that put you in danger?"

"What? No." Remus snorts. "The Hallows would sooner believe Sirius fell in love with the *actual* moon before they believed he fell in love with a servant. I mean, had Regulus said my full name, that'd be different, but he didn't. I'm safe, James, I promise. But…well, I suppose I'm a little upset he used me as leverage over Sirius, just to work him up."

"Mm, I know. He's a prick," James agrees with a sigh, and it sounds ridiculously soppy and lovesick. Remus gives him a flat look, and James looks sheepish. "Sorry. No, I'm—I mean it. You do have every right to be upset. And I'm glad you're safe."

"I'm not… I don't like that he did it, but I also know why he did." Remus swallows and tries to shove back the awful, insidious thought that he almost, almost, almost wished it had worked. He squeezes his eyes shut. Oh, he's so selfish. So fucked up. No different than James, he can't help it.

"Remus?" James says gently.

"I'm fine," Remus rasps reflexively, eyes flying open, and then James just stares him down, waiting like he'll wait here all day if he has to, even though they both know he won't. His gaze is piercing behind his glasses, and Remus gives in. "I just… I think that was it, you know. That was—it was the only chance of—of Sirius getting out."

Because that's the thing. Regulus was right. Sirius was never going to let his little brother die, but if Sirius felt betrayed by him enough to get angry and kill him, that anger could possibly

carry him right out of the arena, send him on a rampage, and leave him ruthless in the endeavor to get home. But, if Regulus had simply died or killed himself while Sirius was trying so hard to get him home, it wouldn't matter what promise Sirius gave to Remus about trying to make it back home. He would try, Remus is sure, but he'd be grieving. He'd be a fucking mess. Remus knows firsthand how impossible it feels to achieve much of anything after the loss of one of the most important people in your life; after his mother died, Remus barely managed much of anything, not even with trying to get Greyback arrested and out of the district, because not even revenge could overpower his grief.

So, Remus does think Sirius would have tried, but he wouldn't have had the same chances of actually managing it as he would have if Regulus' plan actually worked. And now? Oh, now Sirius isn't going to let *anything* happen to his brother, if he can help it. That's it. Sirius likely isn't coming back, and Remus doesn't think he can handle that.

James is quiet for a long moment, then his throat bobs up and down as he swallows convulsively. He breathes in and out, and Remus can *see* him putting his own feelings aside to be here for Remus, to listen, to let him open up. "You're not a bad person for being hurt by that, Remus. You're only human, and you don't have to—well, you shouldn't be ashamed of wanting the man you love to make it out."

"I'm not ready to lose him," Remus whispers. "I don't think I'll ever be ready to lose him. I—I don't—I can't—"

"I know," James croaks. "Remus, I *know."*

Remus releases a hoarse, pained laugh. "Yeah, I guess you would, wouldn't you? Fuck, this is—it's awful for you, too."

"It's awful for everyone, I think. Some more than others. Them the most; the ones inside the arena," James mumbles. "I keep trying to—to find some sort of comfort in all of this, like a habit, but the thing is… Sometimes, things are just shit."

"Trust me, I'm well aware," Remus replies. "If there's one thing I've learned, though, impermanence only solidifies importance. You can learn through loss to better cherish what you have, and be thankful for what you got. It's awful, mostly, but you look back and there are glimpses that you can't bring yourself to regret. The inevitability of endings can't remove

all that came before it. That still exists, and we get that, and we keep that. And that's—that's special. That's precious."

James looks at him for a long moment, then smiles and softly murmurs, "That was really beautiful, Remus."

"Oh. Ha, right," Remus mutters with a cough, reaching around to rub the back of his neck awkwardly.

"It's—no, I mean it. I—" James clears his throat, his eyebrows crumbling together. "That's something I've been sort of struggling with, because I—I wasted a lot of time with Regulus, you know? These past few days, I mean. Time that could have been better spent, and I didn't…really know how to come to terms with that. So, this is… It's nice, I guess, to be grateful for—for what time we did spend together, right there at the end. We all want more time, I think, and coping with not having it is… It's very fucking hard."

"Yeah," Remus whispers, a lump in his throat. "It is."

"You're a very wise man, Remus Lupin," James declares, playfully pointing his fork at him.

Remus quirks a tiny smile. "I do my best."

"And you do it well," James says, and it's sincere. Remus knows that. He can tell, and it warms him. "See? Opening up a bit isn't so bad. We should do this again sometime."

"Oh, shut up," Remus mutters with a huff of laughter when James grins at him. Remus rolls his eyes, then picks up his spoon to stir his tea, drifting off in thought. After a long moment passes, he looks up and regards James for a beat, pensive, and then he speaks. "My birthday is March 10th."

James blinks at him. "Is it? Hey, I was born on March 27th! You're seventeen days older than me."

"Ah, that explains why I'm wiser than you."

"Ha ha, very funny. Happy early birthday."

"James, my birthday—and yours—is still a bit away."

"Eh, who's counting? Happy belated birthday, then, for all the ones I missed."

Remus shakes his head, amused. "Thanks."

"Not that this isn't lovely information to have about you, but what made you bring it up?" James asks curiously.

"Well, I just…" Remus purses his lips, then pushes them from side-to-side, then blows out a deep breath. "I guess I've just been thinking about all the things I never got to say to—to a lot of people. No one knows that about me, you know. My birthday. No one in the Hallow, in any case. It's not even that important, really, but we were talking about opening up and—and someone should know, I think. Even Sirius didn't know. It's not something that ever came up, and that's only one thing I didn't get to tell him. I don't know his either."

"November 3rd," James says softly. "Four months before us."

"Oh," Remus whispers. "I missed it."

James' face softens. "He was—it was a good day for him, you know. Mum made a cake. He spent a good bit of the day just bothering Reg, who pretended to not know it was his birthday at all. It was hilarious. He wouldn't wish Sirius a happy birthday; he waited all the way until nearly midnight, down to the last second, then opened his window and shouted it across the street. Sirius was on the roof, talking to you, and we all heard him curse and nearly fall off, then laugh."

"Talking to me," Remus repeats.

"Yeah. Talking to the moon, talking to you, same thing," James tells him, waving his fork lazily. "You didn't miss it, not really. You were always there for him, there with him, believe it or not. I know that's—I know it's not fair that neither of you got more than that, but it's…it was…"

"Something," Remus fills in, his chest warm and tight at the same time. "It was something."

"Yeah," James murmurs. "It meant a lot to him. *You* mean a lot to him, Remus. He loves you so much."

Remus' lips curl up. "I know he does."

James' lips curl up in a response, a gentle echo, warm and tender and bittersweet. They fall silent again, comfortable and perhaps even comforted, and then they both look up when the door opens. Pandora shuffles in looking a little worse for wear, still clad in pajamas, her makeup from last night faded and smeared on her face. Remus and James simultaneously frown and look at each other, and it's been a long time since Remus has had a friend he could communicate with without ever saying a word. Again, he and Sirius can, but. Well, Sirius isn't *just* his friend. He's his best friend, in a way, and so much more. Never the best friend that Lily was—and still is. No, that's just Lily. It'll always be Lily.

Pandora moves over to the side of the counter in between both of them and reaches out to grab one of their hands in each of hers. Without a word of warning, she brings Remus' hand to her mouth to press a quick, gentle kiss to the back of his fingers, then does the same thing to James. Remus feels his ears go hot, because he knows what that means, a Hallow gesture for deep admiration. No ones ever done that to him before, so he's a bit flustered by it, admittedly.

James, however, is apparently more accustomed to it, because he looks less flustered and more fond. "And just what was that for exactly, Pandora?"

"Well, you know, I woke up and didn't want to get out of bed, then I thought about you two being up and waiting for me, and suddenly I magically found my way to my feet," Pandora says, and it's delivered lightly, as if it's some simple thing, but the sincerity in her voice makes the impact of her words heavier. There's something charming about her, and what she has said, and James must agree, because he kisses her hand in return.

"We're having breakfast before I go," James tells her. He drapes his arm around her shoulders and gives her a squeeze that she seems happy to lean into. "Hungry?"

"No, queasy, actually. But I should eat," Pandora admits, and they both give her a hum of approval and encouragement at the same time, though they both understand how hard it is to keep up an appetite when your loved ones are at constant risk of dying. "And you, James. How's it going, then? You mentioned you handled it with Lucius *calmly—"* She gives him a squinty, suspicious side-eye, "—so there will be no problems today, right? Do you need anything? Should I come?"

"Pandora, really, I'm fine," James insists. "You stay here with Remus, okay? It helps knowing you two have each other, and that I'm coming back to you by the end of the day. Besides, I have Frank to lean on, and I think I saw Dorcas loitering around at some point yesterday, but I didn't get to talk to her, so maybe I will today. I even spoke to Lestrange a bit. He's mad at Lucius, I suppose, so he made a point to chat with me and shake my hand where Lucius and, conveniently, sponsors could see. It's probably just a whole bunch of nonsense and ulterior motives, but…well, he's alright for the most part, despite his tributes being death eaters. I, ah, don't really have room to judge on that one, all things considered."

Remus should not find that mildly amusing, but James looks so sheepish that it *is* sort of hilarious. James, in love with a death eater. Who would have thought? Shaking his head, Remus leans down the counter with a huff of laughter.

"Come on, James made you a plate already," Remus murmurs, offering Pandora a tiny smile as he slides her plate of breakfast in front of her. "Tuck in. I have a feeling it's going to be a long fucking day full of nothing but insanity."

And, well, has he ever been wrong before?

~•~

Sirius knows the moment Regulus wakes up, because he goes tense and jerks slightly as his head flies up from Sirius' shoulder. He blinks around blearily, getting his bearings, then looks at Sirius' shoulder—which he was using as a pillow only moments before—and immediately scowls.

"Oh, don't look like that. *You* did it," Sirius tells him with a snort, helplessly amused. Regulus squints at him suspiciously as if he doesn't believe that for a second, but it's true.

At some point during the night, Regulus had eventually nodded off. There's not a whole lot of space in the shelter anyway, so they were nearly shoulder-to-shoulder as it was. Sirius hadn't been paying attention, his head tipped back against the wall and his eyes closed as he enjoyed the easy breeze that blew in, a bit cool from the rain, a marvel in the heat. He'd felt it when Regulus' head had dropped on his shoulder, peeked open an eye to see him sleeping, then closed his eyes and went back to the inside of his mind, where Remus' warm laughter was echoing in his ears and Remus' smile was flashing behind his eyelids.

Sirius didn't sleep. He couldn't. He won't, just on the off chance that Regulus might do something stupid like get himself killed while Sirius is indulging in a nap. Eh, it's fine. Sirius will sleep when he's dead, and hey, that'll probably arrive for him sooner rather than later. Silver lining?

Bad joke. He's glad he didn't say it out loud. The only person he could count on to laugh at it would be Marlene, most likely. Sirius wonders how she is this morning. She's alive. He does know that much. The banners last night proved it.

There are nine people dead now. Fifteen remaining. Five death eaters—not including Regulus, because Sirius refuses to count him—which are Narcissa, Bellatrix, Alecto, Rabastan, and Dixon. Separate from them, an ex-death eater if you will, is Regulus. Then there's Sirius, Marlene, Emmeline, Augusta, Eli, and Alice. Other than that, it's just Asher, Majesty, and Lester. It's only day three… Fucking hell.

The thing is, it's not unheard of. Last year, for example; Sirius couldn't forget it if he tried. By the end of day two, sixteen people remained, and by the end of day three, eleven did. It was considered a brutal year, as far as games go, and this year is clearly shaping up to be even worse. The fact that it's an arena full of hardened, traumatized Victors only adds to that.

With a grunt, Regulus pushes to his feet and immediately looks around for something to do, except there's nothing to do, because Sirius has already handled everything. This, for some reason, only makes Regulus scowl harder.

"Well?" Regulus snaps. "Are we going, then?"

"Mm, breakfast first," Sirius tells him, gesturing lazily to the ground before reaching in his supply back to bring out water and something to eat. "Most important meal of the day, you know, or so the saying goes."

Regulus somehow gets more scowl-y, and Sirius resists the urge to tell him to fix his face. Instead, he points to the ground again and arches an eyebrow at Regulus, who continues to scowl but does nonetheless sit right back down.

They have breakfast.

It's not great.

It is something, though, and going into the day that's sure to be shit with food and water for energy is very important. He wonders how the others are getting on, if they found food or not, because while the rain keeps them hydrated, they have to be hungry by now on day three with no food in them.

The silence between him and Regulus is vaguely annoying, but Sirius refuses to be the one to break it. He has spent a better portion of the night swinging between utter fury at Regulus and some other unnameable, unfathomable emotion that still, even now, pulses tender and bright beneath his ribs.

Just. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fucking hell. He knows—okay, so he truly *does* know that Regulus is pretty fucked up. He also knows that he himself is fucked up as well. Maybe it's the family they come from, or the turns their lives have taken, or possibly how they influence each

other, how they go round and round in circles, two waves crashing against either side of a ship, tipping it back and forth and waiting for it to sink.

All they want, really, is for the ship to sink.

Just so they can meet in the middle again.

Just so the weltering waters can calm.

It's probably a tangled mixture of childhood trauma and arena trauma and so many other things as well, all things they had actually managed to find a balance with before the reaping. That's where the ship rolled in, and they've been waging war on it ever since. *Go away, go away, go away.*

It won't. It's here to stay, and there's nothing either of them can do about it. They've been trying anyway. Trying the same fucking thing, for the same fucking reasons, and fucking ruining each other and themselves in the process. They're parasitic and symbiotic all in one, an unstoppable force and an immovable object, planning to lose so they won't lose at all.

Sirius thinks of that fable of the scorpion and the frog. The one where, to cross the river, the scorpion rides on the frog's back. Halfway over, the scorpion stings the frog, despite the fact that it's going to drown as well, simply because that is its nature. Sirius thinks about it, and he can't figure out, between him and Regulus, who's the scorpion and who's the frog.

But, either way, they're drowning.

"Look, do we—" Regulus huffs and grimaces, reaching out to stuff the water bottle back in Sirius' bag. He's not quite looking Sirius in the eye. "Do we need to—talk?"

"I don't know, Reggie, do we?" Sirius asks, arching an eyebrow at him. "What do *you* think?"

"Well, I don't want to," Regulus mumbles.

Sirius shrugs. "Fine. Whatever. Live with your regrets, then."

"I *said* I was—I apologized, didn't I?" Regulus says, strained.

"I don't know, it seemed sort of insincere, if you ask me."

"Sirius, come on."

"What's that?" Sirius asks, cupping his ear and turning his head to Regulus. "You were saying?"

Regulus exhales sharply through his nose, then very slowly and very painstakingly grits out, "I'm…sorry…"

"Well, that wasn't very convincing at all," Sirius muses.

"Oh, fuck off," Regulus snaps, pushing to his feet and glaring down at him. Sirius remains in place, aloof and unbothered, just raising his eyebrows at him. "Where's my apology?"

"I'm sorry," Sirius says.

"Exactly, so fu—" Regulus stops and stares at him, then frowns at him. "Wait. For what?"

Sirius clears his throat. "For volunteering for you when I promised not to. I—you know, I didn't mean to. It was—of course I wanted to every time I thought about it, but I knew how

much it meant to you that I wouldn't, so I—I planned not to, but I just…" He blows out a deep breath, giving a weak shrug of his shoulders. "I heard your name, and I was sixteen again. It was instinct, you know? A reflex. Like breathing."

Regulus swallows harshly, but can't seem to speak.

"And I'm sorry I'm going to die," Sirius continues bluntly, his stomach cramping when Regulus visibly flinches a bit, his eyes drifting shut. "I'm sorry I have to leave you behind again, and if it wasn't a requirement for you to live, I wouldn't."

"Don't," Regulus whispers, eyes fluttering open. "Don't, okay? For me? Not—I'm not even asking for James or anyone else at this point. Just me. Can't you just let me go?"

"Yeah," Sirius replies easily. "Go home. I can do that."

Regulus' expression falls flat. "You're not funny."

"I'm hilarious," Sirius counters, lazily pushing himself to his feet with a sigh. "We can't keep talking about this, and we're not. Let's just…do this one day at a time, yeah? Me and you."

"Me and you," Regulus repeats, staring at him for a long moment, then heaving a sigh and shaking his head. "Fine."

"Good. Let's go."

"Sirius?"

"Hm?" Sirius asks as he grabs his bag to put on.

"I'm sorry, too. Genuinely," Regulus murmurs, his voice weighted with sincerity now, and simple remorse.

Sirius goes still for a moment, then lifts his head and looks at Regulus, lips pursed. "For what?"

"For trying to get you to kill me," Regulus admits, looking appropriately sheepish about the whole thing, as if saying it out loud makes him aware of how fucking *insane* that was for him to do. "And also, um, saying…all the things I said."

"Did you mean any of it?"

"Did you?"

They stare at each other. Unstoppable force, immovable object. Scorpion, frog. *Yes,* Sirius thinks. *No, not a fucking word,* Sirius thinks. The horrible, hideous truth is—he doesn't know. What he does know is that he loves his little brother to *death,* literally, and his little brother loves him, too.

Maybe that's all he needs to know.

"I don't want you to feel responsible for anything that I've gone through, or anything that happens to me," Sirius says.

Regulus holds his gaze and whispers, "I don't want you to feel responsible for *me."*

"I—" Sirius opens and closes his mouth, because he does, and he always has, and maybe he always will. He can't change that. It's in his fucking blood, circulating from his heart with every stubborn clench and release. He can see how it's damaging, how it gets them stuck in a loop neither of them can escape, but he can't do a damn thing to break them free other than let his heart stop. So, in the end, he just rasps, "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Regulus says. "Yeah, Sirius, me too."

~•~

"Already?" James asks, perhaps in a bit of a panic.

Frank is gripping his arm tight. "We're starting off strong on day three, apparently."

"Fucking hell," Rodolphus hisses as he watches Rabastan swing his mace at the strange creature chasing after him and Asher. The creature is very big, has red leather-like skin, hooves, and claws. It doesn't have eyes, and the nose is just slitted like a snake, while the lipless mouth is wide with spiky teeth spilling out all over. There's at least three more running behind the one that Rabastan hits, which sails to the side with the head dented in and busted open like a rotted peach.

James does a double-take when he realizes that Lestrange and Dolohov are standing next to him and Frank to watch the screens, leaving Malfoy alone with a few sponsors. Okay, so clearly they're *very* pissed at him. Fair enough.

"Mum, don't you *dare,"* Frank chokes out, and James' gaze snaps back to the screen to see Augusta stumble through the corridor of the maze that closes in on her and Alice from either side. Alice dives out, but Augusta doesn't make it, other than her hand, and the maze closes up around the rest of her.

Helplessly, James can only reach out and grab Frank's wrist, listening to him muffle a weak sound of pure panic. On the screen, Alice curses harshly and reaches out to grasp Augusta's hand, using their machete to hack at the hedges to create an opening as they desperately yank Augusta through.

Augusta comes falling out, gasping for air, shaky and dazed as she leans on Alice, who steadies her and snatches them both back into a desperate run.

Frank's hand eases on James' arm as he exhales.

The camera cuts to show Marlene and Eli taking a corner and slamming directly into each other, both running from different things. Marlene cries out when she falls on her arm, and Eli stutters out helpless apologies as he grabs her with shaking hands and tugs her back to her feet. *I'm sorry, girl, I'm so sorry, but we have to run,* he keeps saying, and Marlene grits her teeth through the pain to follow him.

Emmeline was separated from Eli and is standing at the very end of a closed passage in the maze, shooting bolt after bolt as creatures crawl on the ground and on the walls of the hedges towards her. They're spider-like in the way they seem to just scuttle along and defy gravity, but they look like fucking mannequins. Their cheeks are high, arcing inwards, and when they blink, it's exactly like a mannequin coming to life, confused as to why it's awake. The whites of their eyes are a little too visible. They hold their faces like those dolls with no eyelids, and their eyelashes look like stitches against skin.

It's *creepy.* How Emmeline is so stoic as a whole mass of them come barreling towards her all at once, James doesn't know. A bolt to the face does seem to stop them, but there's more of them than she has bolts to shoot them with. She will run out, and then she'll be overtaken, because she's at the end of the passage with nowhere to run.

Everyone else is alone, running in their own parts of the maze, running from hands or creatures or the green fog. Some of them are closer to others, from what James can see on the map of their positions. Bellatrix is quite close to Alice and Augusta, and there's a good chance she might run into them. Narcissa and Dixon aren't too far from Sirius and Regulus, which is rather nerve-wracking for James.

At the moment, Sirius and Regulus are—fine. They're alert and moving through the maze with no issue. Sirius is currently complaining about the fact that he can't see the moon at night, tipping his head back and boldly requesting McGonagall personally to hang it in the sky just for him. Regulus rolls his eyes but ultimately leaves Sirius to his whining.

James is…not pleased with either of them, at the moment. Having to watch them quite literally beat the shit out of each other had been *very* distressing. Not once throughout did James doubt Regulus, though. Not for a *second.* He knew Regulus wouldn't kill Sirius, and he

also knew Sirius wouldn't kill Regulus. They may have been angry enough in the moment to want to, but James didn't believe for a second that either of them could actually see through any attempt of what they were doing in that moment. So, to him, they were essentially just hurting each other for no fucking reason in the middle of the death arena where everyone else, in some way or another, wants them *dead.* And yeah, he's not pleased that they're both so fucking desperate to die for each other while using him as an excuse to mix in with the truth, which is that, deep down, they're both utterly terrified to lose the other.

It was purposeful not to send them a message after their fight, because he was angry and he knew his silence would convey that. Angry for them both, angry for himself, angry for every single person in that arena and all their families and the people who will have to go in the following year and just—just angry at so many things. He regrets it now, not taking that opportunity to send some kind of message to let them know, despite everything, he still loves them both. But yesterday? The fighting and the attempted sacrifice? He doesn't want it.

What James wants is for them both to fight to live, not just for other people, but for themselves. And he wants them both to live. Both of them. He'd do quite literally *anything* if there was some way they could both make it out, because as of now, his brain just can't accept that only one can. He still hasn't come to terms with it. He's not sure he ever will.

Dolohov grunts, and they all turn their attention to Alecto on the screen, who just so happens to be running right past the opening to the passage where Emmeline is stuck and under attack. The sight of the creatures seem to stun Alecto enough that she actually stops and stares at them in what seems to be pure disbelief. It's obvious that she sees Emmeline at the end, but she doesn't assist. She just turns and keeps running.

"Well, she's down," Dolohov mutters, jerking his chin at Emmeline, who releases her last bolt with a sharp curse.

Frank clenches his jaw, gritting out, "I wouldn't be too sure of that, Dolohov. Just wait."

They wait.

Emmeline grips her crossbow, eyes narrowing, and then she starts marching right down the passage without a stutter in her stride, meeting the creatures halfway. They immediately begin to swarm her, and she—

James blinks rapidly, watching her bust in the heads of the creatures with her crossbow, always moving, never staying still long enough for them to actually get ahold of her. She just keeps *going,* not seeming scared in the slightest, and the creatures begin to thin out, laying broken and discarded at her feet. She had to have gone into a swarm of at least ten, and yet she walks right back out with a trail of twitching, dismembered creatures behind her.

"Okay," Dolohov grumbles, "I stand corrected."

"Damn right you do," Frank says, smirking.

James huffs out a slightly hysterical laugh and shakes his head in amazement as he watches each and every single one of these people strive to survive, some just stubbornly *refusing* to die.

Helplessly, James' eyes crawl to two of the most stubborn people he knows, staring at Regulus and Sirius and selfishly hoping that they're more stubborn than the rest.

~•~

"You know," Sirius muses, "if James were here, he'd be beat-boxing right now."

Regulus sighs. Looking back, he did perhaps take for granted the levity James brought to the first arena, especially in the beginning. Somehow, James found ways to make even *that* whole situation better, and Regulus knows this, because he's in it again and, comparatively, Sirius is shit at it.

To put it simply, Sirius is an idiot who never shuts up, and there isn't even the benefit of him having a voice Regulus actually enjoys hearing. James has such a lovely voice. Regulus misses it. But *nooo,* he's stuck listening to his brother's inane chatter and his stupid, smug voice that generally always seems to have a grin in it, somehow.

Regulus kind of wants to punch him again.

Regulus kind of wants to hug him again.

Regulus does neither of these things and, instead, feels a surge of guilt and distress tangle like knots in his chest when he realizes there's a good chance that, in a few days, he'll never hear Sirius speak again. Suddenly, Regulus wants to listen to every word he says and beg him to never, ever shut up.

"James," Sirius says, addressing the sky, "I want you to know that, unlike *some* people, I would appreciate you beat-boxing in stressful situations, and I would gladly provide backup vocals to bring it all together."

"Oh, excuse me for being *normal,"* Regulus mutters defensively, and then almost instantly realizes what he's just said and what's about to happen, because Sirius is going to—

That. He's going to do that. Sirius busts out laughing at him, wheezing, "Normal? You think you're *normal?"*

"Compared to you and James? Yes, by far," Regulus insists, because he has to see it through now. "Just—when it comes to heavy, dangerous situations, I mean. Because I'm not cracking jokes and laughing at things."

"Reggie, you *never* crack jokes or laugh at things."

"I—yes, I do. I…do. I have before."

"Name one time," Sirius says, lips twitching.

Regulus opens his mouth, then closes it, then frowns. He sits on that for a second, then says, "James thinks I'm funny."

"James is blinded by love, is what he is," Sirius tells him, clearly exasperated. "He is not an unbiased opinion."

"Before you volunteered," Regulus states finally, and Sirius blinks at him. "The first time, I mean. I know you don't really remember a lot of things from back then, but I—I would *occasionally* make jokes, and I did laugh a lot more."

Sirius clicks his tongue. "Well, that's tragic."

"Isn't it just?" Regulus agrees dryly.

"I bet you were shit at it even then."

"I wasn't. James laughed, and he didn't even like me before my fifteenth birthday."

"Mm, no, I don't believe you," Sirius says. "I will simply always see you as not funny. You've never told a good joke in your life, I just *know* this. James." He looks up at the sky again, his eyes dancing with amusement. "If you happen to send us anything again, do let me know if I'm right. Well, you'll side with me even if I'm wrong, but still."

"Why would he side with you over me?" Regulus asks in disbelief, eyes narrowing slightly.

"He's my best friend," Sirius announces slowly, like Regulus is an idiot who can't understand basic concepts.

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "He's *my* fiancé."

"He's—" Sirius stops. He comes to a screeching halt, which makes Regulus stop and turn to blink at him. "Wait. Wait, no, because you weren't lying just then. Your fiancé?"

"Yes," Regulus says, his lips curling up at the corners rather against his will, and he can't help it. He can't stifle the warmth of pride in his voice, or how he goes a little breathless with giddy joy and excitement. It'd probably embarrass him if he had any space in him to be anything other than delighted.

Sirius gasps. Legitimately gasps. It's very dramatic. "Oh, shit, you're getting *married?* Reggie!"

"What?"

"When was this?! When did he ask? I mean, you know, *properly.* Not just, um, talking about the wedding in the Hallow or whatever. I mean, when did he *really* ask?"

Regulus can see that Sirius is walking a fine line here, talking in half-truths to get the message across. He gets what Sirius is saying well enough. "Why do you assume *he* asked?"

"Because he's James." Sirius stares at him, waiting with some sort of eager, earnest patience for more details, and then his eyes widen. *"You* asked? You?!"

"Yes," Regulus admits.

Sirius gapes at him. "Oh, fuck. He cried, didn't he? I bet he cried. Why didn't you tell me?! Why didn't *he* tell me?!"

"There wasn't really time," Regulus explains. "It was the last night before we came into the arena. Properly, I mean."

"Oh. Wait, you asked then? Wait…" Sirius squints at him, lips pursing like he's trying to fight a smile. "Did you—did you actually, *properly* ask him?"

"Yes! I just said so, Sirius."

"What did you say? What *exactly* did you say?"

Regulus huffs and rolls his eyes to the sky, literally begging for patience. "I said: would you marry me? He said: yes. Very simple. Asked, answered, engaged."

"You—" Sirius abruptly starts giggling, and Regulus stares at him blankly. "Oh, Regulus. *Regulus.* That's not—it's—okay, so you do realize that agreeing that you *would* get married is not the same as agreeing *to* get married, yeah?"

"No, I'm pretty sure they're the same," Regulus replies.

Sirius wheezes with laughter, tucking his lips in as he leans on his spear like he might fall over if he doesn't. When he calms, he breathes out, "It's…not at all the same. The intent really matters. Did either of you even talk about how the wedding would happen? Start making plans?"

"Well, no, obviously we couldn't," Regulus snaps, gesturing pointedly around them. "Seeing as there would be no point."

"You…" Sirius is no longer laughing. His eyebrows tug together as he regards Regulus in confusion. "Wait, why would you do that if you planned to die?"

"I wanted him to have that. I—I couldn't give him anything else, because of all this." Regulus once again gestures around them, this time with dejection. "But I could give him that. And—well, selfishly, I wanted it, too. It made me happy. It still makes me happy. I wanted to have that all the way up to the end. And he gave it to me."

"Right," Sirius says quietly, and then he swallows and gives Regulus a tight smile. "I know I said we wouldn't talk about it, but you do realize that this only makes me more determined to

get you home, yeah? I—I mean, come *on,* Reggie, you could get married! You—you could —"

Regulus shakes his head. "We wouldn't. Not without you there. It wouldn't feel right to either of us, I don't think."

"While I'd genuinely kill to be there, and I do mean *genuinely,* it shouldn't stop just because I *won't* be there. I—I want you to. And, really, I will be there. Just, you know, not physically. But I'll be there. I wouldn't miss it." Sirius tilts his head back to address the sky again. "James, I mean it. I'm not joking. Convince him however you have to, but do it. You both want to, and so you will. Please."

"I won't go. I'll leave him at the altar."

"No you won't."

"It's not happening, Sirius," Regulus bites out, a harsh clench in his chest. "We'll just be engaged forever, I guess, because we're not getting married if you can't *physically* be there."

"Don't put that on me. Don't make me responsible for holding you back," Sirius murmurs.

"Well, now you know how I feel," Regulus declares sharply.

Sirius sighs. "You're so spiteful."

"Yes, I'm fucking spiteful, because I don't want you to die! I don't *want* you to be dead!" Regulus bursts out. "I want you to keep being an idiot until you're old and ugly, and I want you to come to my fucking wedding!"

"First of all, I would be old and *beautiful,"* Sirius states firmly, holding up a finger. "I am going to be sexy until the day I die, even if I could live until a hundred. Second of all, I *will*

be at the wedding. In spirit. Have it at night under my star. Or just—I don't know, slap a picture of me on a chair and—"

"You're so stupid," Regulus interrupts, then swivels on the spot and stomps off, scowling as he goes.

"James, how *do* you put up with him?" Sirius groans from behind him. "The chair idea is a good idea, isn't it? You get it. See, now you have to. It's funny! It would be—"

"Stop talking to my fiancé!" Regulus snaps as he continues on, and Sirius doesn't, but he does lower his voice as he follows along, which will just have to do.

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"Congratulations, by the way," Frank says.

Despite everything, James breaks out into a goofy grin. Did he know he was engaged prior to Regulus announcing it when he sent the bagel? No. Is he going to protest it? Also no.

James beams over at Frank and chirps, "Thanks!"

~•~

Things are fine, until they aren't.

Regulus is walking ahead in a clear tiff, and Sirius leaves him to it, grumbling to James under his breath. He doesn't get why they can't just get married without him. Yes, the idea of them having a wedding without him there wants to make him curl up in a ball and cry, but that doesn't mean they *shouldn't.*

He wants them to be happy, even when he's gone. He needs them to be. And Remus. He needs Remus to be okay. Ideally, he would be free, but Sirius knows this isn't an ideal world. He'd die willingly if it meant Remus *could* be free, though. When he said he would live for Remus, he meant it, but he would also give his life in a heartbeat if that's all it would take to give Remus a chance at a better one.

Sirius is finding this whole dying business a chore, honestly. You'd think it would be easier; you're here one day, then gone the next. Simple enough, right? As it turns out, no, not so simple, because it affects more than just you.

Yeah, well, Sirius would *love* to live, actually. Has everyone forgotten that part? Obviously he doesn't *want* to die and never see Remus again, and never go to his brother and best friend's wedding, and never get to keep going in life and see what comes next. He'd do anything to keep living, anything except let his little brother die to make it possible.

So, grumpy as he is about the whole ordeal, Sirius glares at Regulus' back up ahead and thinks rude thoughts at him as he mumbles to James that he'd be *his* best man, not Regulus', because Regulus is currently being a little shit, so James is very ahead in the race of who would get him. Sirius finds the thought of them fighting over him as a best man mildly amusing and wonders, idly, who would win.

Before he can think of a proper answer, the sound of the shuddering hedges gets louder, and Sirius' face falls slack as the walls of the maze in between him and Regulus start to grow together, closing in between them.

Regulus whips around, eyes wide, and they look at each other through the gap for a beat before Sirius immediately takes off running, trying to catch up and jump through.

He doesn't make it.

"Regulus? *Regulus!"* Sirius calls through the hedge, his heart beating hard as he shoves one hand into the wall of leaves and sticks that jab at him and don't let him get through. It's so thick that he doesn't think he reaches in even halfway.

"Sirius?" Regulus calls back, his voice faint and muffled.

"Hey, are you okay?" Sirius asks, voice raised.

"Yeah, I'm—" Regulus cuts himself off, and Sirius ducks his head to listen better, but he can't hear much of anything through the barrier. And then, suddenly, Regulus' voice gets louder, tinged with panic. "Sirius! *Sirius!"*

Sirius' breath catches at the sheer fucking distress and audible terror in Regulus' voice. Immediately, Sirius' heart kicks into overdrive as he starts frantically yanking at the hedges, trying to cut a path with his spear, but it's no use. "Reggie? What is it? Regulus? Hey! I need you to talk to me! *Regulus!"*

There's no reply.

~•~

Regulus is frozen, his back to the hedge where Sirius is trapped on the other side, still yelling, though Regulus has no idea what's being said past the loud ringing in his ears.

The passage has been split in half, blocked right down the middle with Regulus on one side and Sirius on the other, a barrier too thick to break through in between them. At the end of the passage Regulus is facing, it's blocked off, nowhere to run forward, no turns to take.

He can only stand there, every muscle in his body locked up as he watches the steady trickle of blood pour down the length of the passage. It's a crimson river, making its way right for him.

Regulus doesn't move, doesn't even *breathe,* because he can't, at least not until the river reaches the tread of his boots, blood lapping against the soles. He instinctively heaves out a harsh breath and stumbles back as far as he can go, until he's pressed right up against the wall

of greenery behind him, pushing himself backwards steadily, desperately and fitfully trying to outrun the blood. He gets nowhere.

There's nowhere to go.

"Please," Regulus chokes out. "Not this. Not like this. Anything else. *Anything,* please, just—just—"

The river of blood rushes at him faster, rapids and red foam, the sound of it sending a surge of panic through him. It starts to rise, splattering up against the hedges and rocking over the top of his boots, almost reaching his ankles just that quickly.

"No, no, no," Regulus chants, his breath stuttering out of him as he twists around and ducks his head, squeezing his eyes shut tight just so he won't have to see it. He trembles and traps a whimper behind his clenched teeth, tears pricking at his eyes as he feels the river wrap around his calves. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry. I'm—I won't—I shouldn't have said anything. I shouldn't have—I—I'm sorry. *Please.* You want to kill me? Fine, *fine,* but not—please not this way."

Sirius is still shouting, muffled and frantic. "Regulus? Regulus, what's happening? Regulus, what's—"

The crimson river clings to the back of Regulus' knees.

"Sirius," Regulus weeps, because he is weeping now, fully just sobbing—a hoarse, teary mess that he knows Sirius likely can't even hear, but Regulus can't catch his breath to raise his voice over the rushing blood. "Sirius, I'm going to die."

He is. He knows he is.

And the insane thing is, he doesn't want to.

It hits him now, like this, that he doesn't *want* to die, and more than that, he doesn't *deserve* to. Not now. Not like this. Not here. He doesn't, and Sirius doesn't, and none of them do.

It's on the edge of death that it becomes clear how desperate one is to live. No one wants to die, not really. It's one thing to say it, to think it, to *feel* it—but humans are creatures of endurance. They endure, and endure, and endure. It's instinct. It's the fear of the unknown and the desire for more.

People are born to live, and destined to die.

Regulus doesn't care about destiny. What he cares about is Sirius, and James, and so many others who are watching him in this moment, so many people he's realizing that he impacts just by living, and being who he is. People he doesn't want to leave yet. People he wants more time with. People he means something to. People who love him. He doesn't want to waste a second he could spend with his brother; he doesn't want to waste a moment he could spend knowing James is his, and alive, and loves him with every breath he takes.

Regulus wants to live for so many people, and deep down, he wants to live for himself. Because he was growing. Because he was learning to turn a house into a home. Because he was ready to let love in, and let love out. Because he was trying, and it doesn't matter that he's tired, and it doesn't matter that trying seems pointless, because he wants to *keep* trying.

The crimson river ensnares his waist.

Gasping out a harsh breath, Regulus' eyes flutter open as he stares at the hedge in front of him, barely hearing Sirius call out to him over the buzzing in his ears. His eyes are full, vision blurred from the tears constantly spilling over. The blood that laps at him makes him rock, but he can feel himself trembling so hard that his teeth are chattering. The river is so cold. So fucking cold, just like before, and Regulus—

The last time Regulus was lost in a crimson river, he tipped himself into it for James, and for Sirius. He chose to do it for them. A sacrifice.

This time, when Regulus is lost in yet another crimson river, he chooses to find his way out for himself. A rebirth.

Slowly, Regulus looks at the hedge in front of him, and carefully, he tilts his head back, because what drifts through his head is *no one thinks to look up.*

Regulus does.

He always thinks to look up now.

"Sirius," Regulus croaks, then clears his throat violently and blinks tears out of his eyes. He raises his voice to shout over Sirius, who is also shouting. "Sirius! Sirius, shut *up* and listen to me, okay? I need you to listen!"

"Don't you fucking dare give some sort of goodbye speech, Regulus, or I swear I'll—"

"I'm not giving a goodbye speech! I need *help!"*

There's a beat of a silence, and then Sirius blurts out a strained and muffled, "Anything. Anything you need. What is it?"

"I need you to climb to the top of the hedge and drop down the rope from your bag!" Regulus calls out, then whines helplessly as the river knocks against his ribs.

Sirius doesn't respond, and Regulus' panic and distress starts spreading to everything, to worrying about Sirius, too. Why hasn't he replied? Why hasn't he said okay? Why hasn't he—

A choked wheeze from up above catches Regulus' attention, his head falling back so he can stare wide-eyed at Sirius, who apparently scaled the hedge in record time and is now perched on the very top, staring down at him in horror, very pale.

"Oh, what the *fuck,* Reggie?" Sirius hisses, his hands flying around as he rushes to unravel the rope and drop it down. It doesn't reach where Regulus is, still too high. "Come on. You have to move right *now.* You have to climb."

That's the thing. Regulus can't climb. Every time he has tried since leaving the arena, he has failed. Every time, he freezes up and can't make himself move. Every time, he stays right there on the ground, never making it to the top.

If I cannot climb, I will grow. And he did. He has. He still is, even now. Growing doesn't stop. But, the thing is, to live right now, he's going to have to do both.

"Regulus!" Sirius bursts out, eyes wild, his voice tinged with panic and pure desperation. He has leaned forward as far as he can go, holding the rope down as far as it will reach. "Just keep going and don't look down!"

The crimson river drapes over Regulus' shoulders.

To grow is to climb, to climb is to grow. Either way, he's going up. Slowly but surely, he's making his way to the top.

Regulus gasps out a deep, shaky breath and reaches up as high as he can, fisting his hand into the hedge until he has a sure grip. Underneath, he swings his foot forward through the thick blood to embed his boot into the foothold he creates, and then he feels the river wrap around his neck like a noose just before he clenches his jaw and climbs.

His other hand flies up to bury in the wall of leaves and vines, clinging as he muffles a weak sound in the back of his throat and pulls, and keeps pulling, and yanks himself out of the river one handful at a time. The blood cascades off of him, inch by fucking inch, weighing him down, trying to drag him down. He thinks he's sobbing, but he isn't stopping. Despite the strain, the *effort,* the fear—he keeps climbing.

Regulus' chest heaves as he feels the river still lapping at his legs, still rising as he does the same, but he doesn't look down. He doesn't look at anything. He keeps going, feeling his arms shake, feeling the world shift around him and fall apart and somehow, inexplicably, build anew again.

To some, this would be simple. To some, climbing to escape a river of blood would seem like the sane course of action. To some, this wouldn't be very much of a feat at all.

But to Regulus? It's the fight of his life.

It's the fight for his life.

And he wins.

He fucking *wins*.

Regulus hears it when Sirius shouts to grab the rope, finally getting high enough to reach it, and so Regulus clamps down on it and starts yanking himself up almost desperately at the same time that Sirius starts frantically pulling, his hands flying along the rope, palms eating the length of it as he puts all his strength behind helping Regulus reach the top.

Regulus does. He folds over the top of the hedge and feels Sirius' hand ball into the back of his shirt tight, clenching and yanking so hard that the stitches make ripping noises. Regulus scrambles up until he's there, until he's gasping and shivering and immediately being tugged right into Sirius' arms.

"Okay, okay, you're okay," Sirius chokes out, clinging to Regulus as hard as Regulus clings to him, blood and all.

"I know," Regulus wheezes. "I know I am."

"You're okay, right? You're okay," Sirius chants, hands flying up to grasp Regulus' shoulders and push him back, shaking fingers patting him down, checking him over. "Yeah, you're okay. You're fine. You're—"

"Sirius," Regulus rasps.

"You're *fine,"* Sirius insists, gasping for air more than Regulus is, at this point.

"Sirius," Regulus says firmly, shockingly steady as he darts his hands out to grip Sirius' wrists, stilling his hands. Sirius stares at him, wide-eyed, all the color drained from his face. "I'm okay. I'm really okay."

"Okay," Sirius whispers, his fingers still trembling.

"No more trying to die," Regulus states, holding Sirius' gaze, his racing heart slowly starting to calm. "No more. Not me, not you, not anyone. We try to live, okay? We have so much to live for, even just ourselves, so we try to live. Me and you."

Sirius stares at him for a long moment, then blows out a deep breath. "Fucking hell, Reggie, did you just have some sort of revelation or something?"

"Yeah," Regulus says with a mildly hysterical laugh, blinking rapidly. "Yeah, I think I did."

"Oh, well, fair enough," Sirius replies, equally hysterical.

Regulus swallows. "Did you hear me? We try to live. We—"

"You know we can't *both—"*

"I don't care. I don't *care* what we aren't supposed to be able to do, Sirius. Fuck them. Fuck them all. We can do anything. We can do whatever we decide to, and so let's live. Let's try to live, okay? Whatever it takes. *Me and you."*

Sirius holds his gaze, and he seems to hold his breath, and he's better than Regulus—he always has been—so it makes sense that he's better at hoping, too. A spark enters his eyes, and he laughs, choked up and carefree simultaneously, utterly exhilarated as he nods and breathes out, "Me and you."

A helpless, hysterical laugh spills out of Regulus' mouth, and he tips himself backwards out of Sirius' grip to lay back against the top of the hedge, gazing hazily up at the burnt orange and soft pink of the sun dancing across the sky, and he laughs softly, quietly, relaxing into the rush of adrenaline and finding the view to be entirely worth the climb.

"You hear that?!" Sirius shouts at the audience. "Me and him! Both of us! Fuck you! Fuck *all* of you! We're going to *live!"*

Regulus wheezes out another laugh and lifts his head to see Sirius grinning like a madman as he flips off the sky with both hands. Regulus drops his head back and lifts his hands to lazily join Sirius in flipping the sky off, too.

Slowly, the rush fades, and Regulus eases his arms down, letting them land over his stomach and chest with a wet smack, still shivering, still dripping blood. He hangs his hand over the side of the hedge and turns his head to look at it, watching the tiny crimson river run down his arm, over his scars, and slip through his fingers.

Regulus' gaze crawls past it to stare at the river of blood below. It's receding, calming, draining away to nowhere. It wanted him again. It wanted to keep him this time.

You can't have me, I'm not yours, Regulus thinks, and then he turns his face back towards the sun and smiles.

Chapter End Notes

this was, in my opinion, a...lighter chapter? especially compared to the last one. it's also one of my favorites (as was the last one), just because it's such a huge, huge turning point for regulus—and not only regulus, but also sirius!!!

so, starting from the top.

remus and james' friendship is so special to me 😭 ahhh, i adore them so much. just like, that whole conversation they had was really important for a variety of reasons, and just them taking care of each other (and pandora) as much as they can. also this hit me unexpectedly: "we can't make people love themselves just by loving them enough" ITS A ROUGH DAY FOR THOSE WHO RELATE TO JAMES, ISN'T IT?

also that moment with pandora. oh pandora my beloved ☹️☹️☹️ she is so special to me. I NEED TO HUG HER RIGHT NOW

and then the plot twist that is lestrange and dolohov being petty and staying near james and frank because they're mad at lucius 😭 HELP JAMES REALLY RUINED THAT MAN'S WHOLE REPUTATION GOODBYE. james baby i love you mwah

sirius and regulus. ☹️ no because regulus actually getting a whole night of rest bc he felt safe. but also lmaoooo sirius is so funny. that whole sibling thing of making them apologize over and over PLS. sirius thinking about remus through the night 😭 AHHH HE'S SO IN LOVE WITH THAT MAN

and just like, the whole complexities of sirius and regulus' relationship as brothers really hits so hard every time. because they both apologized, and yet, neither of them ever got anywhere (until the end). nothing changed and they can't change anything or themselves and it's just gut-wrenching.

meanwhile, the rest of the maze is in a fucking DISASTER. not gonna lie, making up creatures out of my brain was fun! the creepy doll things, personally, seems scariest to me. mannequins freak me out, though. they have no business being Like That, so i just decided to make it worse! emmeline is so badass!

what's that tt sound where it's like that chaotic sound and then it switches to the upbeat sound? do you know what im talking about? well, if you do, then that's what it was like. literally just: *everyone in the maze fighting for their lives* cut to: *sirius and regulus strolling around and talking about a wedding*

lmaoooo sirius literally losing his shit the second he realizes regulus misinterpreted the whole engagement thing HELP 😭 and then there's james who's just like: year we're engaged 🥰 did i know this before? no, but we are! and no one can take that from me!!! HES SO VALID. he claimed that energy and MATCHED it.

but sirius just being like "have your wedding under my star, slap a picture of me somewhere" GOODBYE WHY IS HE LIKE THIS IM CRYING 😭 however, if this was mcd and sirius died, james and regulus would indeed get married under sirius' star so he could be there with them ☹️ oh. i just hurt my own feelings.

anyway, this whole chapter was like this push-and-pull of regulus and sirius not being able to find common ground between them, and the source was the both of them trying to die for each other. being stubborn. and like, the solution is right there—it's literally so obvious, but it's like. well, it's not as if it's a solution that can actually work, but it is one that would make them coexist easier and work together in the arena. that being, the whole agreeing to fight to live thing. BOTH of them.

agreeing to fight to live—not an endgame solution, even if they'd like to believe it, and even if they're letting themselves. but fortunately for them, they won't have to get to that endgame! so this is good, a very good development for both of them.

oh, the river scene... yes, the second crimson river has arrived. is it the last? could be. we shall see. it was a huge breakthrough for regulus tho, and no, his aquaphobia and issues with blood isn't just cured btw, like this was just adrenaline and him having an "oh my life has meaning" revelation.

and the climbing!!! CRYING HE ALWAYS THINKS TO LOOK UP!!! evan just technically saved his life. i was so proud of regulus in that moment, that's insane, but i was just genuinely thinking of like, evan watching from somewhere like GO LITTLE ROCKSTAR 😭😭😭

Boggarts

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!!!

warnings:

-graphic depictions of violence
-graphic depictions/mentions of blood
-graphic depictions of murder/death
-references to murder/death
-references to child death
-psychological torture (in the sense that people are Very Much Fucked With, psychologically; please refer to the chapter title)
-references/vague depictions of the effects of alcoholism/withdrawals
-brief mention of vomiting
-descriptions of like. needles? it's literally not needles, but needles are used to describe something??? the needle mention is not needles, but needles are mentioned. i also wish i made sense 😔
-brief depiction of dissociative amnesia
-um, cannabilisitic metaphors? there's some mentions of eating a heart, but not Actually. it's all for the prose, besties, just trust the process
-death. did i mention that? there's A Lot of that in this one, so you know, it's worth mentioning twice

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"My brother. Louie," Huey says, looking skittish. "I need to know that he's going to be okay. Will he be okay?"

"Does he have anywhere he can go?" Dorcas murmurs, keeping her voice quiet. "Anyone he can lie low with?"

Huey hesitates, then mumbles, "He has an old flame who would take him in and keep him safe in a heartbeat. It's a little complicated, but…"

"Call him, tell him to go there, and he should be fine," Dorcas says. "It's—I do want you to be aware of the risk, though. For him and for you. I'm not going to lie to you, Huey. This is

going to be a war. *No one* is going to be okay."

"Right," Huey whispers. "Right, okay, and if I refuse?"

Dorcas stares at him. "Whether you are here, or elsewhere, you won't be safe from the war, nor will anyone else. And, let me be very fucking clear, if you intend to in *any* way jeopardize what I'm doing, I will kill you before you ever get the chance."

Huey swallows thickly. "Right. Yeah, okay. I'll go call him."

"Good," Dorcas tells him.

Huey nods and walks off, his hand slipping into his pocket to pull out his phone. Dorcas sighs quietly and feels the tight clench of anticipation and worry gnaw on the inside of her chest some more. She'd been so eager to get to what's coming, and yet, the closer she gets, the less prepared she feels.

There's still more time, but Dorcas has *a lot* to do, on top of balancing her desperate need to keep an eye on Marlene in the arena. She's so distracted worrying about her that it's very difficult to manage much of anything else.

"Ms. Meadowes, I find myself curious about why you, of all people, would be talking to a sponsor."

Lips thinning out, Dorcas swings around to see Lucius Malfoy standing in front of her, his gaze trailing after Huey before settling back on her. He arches an eyebrow.

"You're aware, I'm sure, that only mentors are meant to network on the behalf of their tributes," Lucius continues, and Dorcas finds his voice very, very grating. *"Not* handlers. *Not* stylists. To interfere on the behalf of—"

"Malfoy, I literally do not have time for this, or you," Dorcas cuts in, and then can't even be bothered to stick around and listen to him sputter in offense. Dorcas doesn't waste her time on people who aren't worth it.

Dorcas sweeps off without a word, surveying the room to find either James or Frank. She locates James first, who is leaning against a wall. He seems to be recovering after Regulus nearly died, pressing one his hand flat to his chest as he breathes in and out. It's his first year as a mentor—hopefully his last—and he doesn't know how to save face yet. Other people are attempting to fawn over him and offer comfort, except James is *not* having it. He keeps sweeping out his cane to force people to give him a wide berth, not trying to hit anyone, but being sure that they won't come too close.

Alright, Dorcas can respect that. She swivels on her heel and decides to come back to him later. He's practically a sure thing anyway. Frank, however, is not.

"Dorcas," Frank greets in mild, distracted surprise when she comes to a stop next to him. He's Marlene's friend, and Dorcas wonders if Marlene ever talked about her to him. He seems quite caught up in watching Alice and Augusta to fully focus on her at the moment, which is fair.

"Hey, Frank, how are you holding up?" Dorcas murmurs.

Frank sighs. "Managing, mostly. You?"

"Oh, I'm—fine," Dorcas says haltingly, and Frank does turn his head to raise his eyebrows at her then, and yeah, okay, he knows she's involved with Marlene. Right, well, this should be a little easier, in that case. "Actually, not that fine."

"Yes, well, when someone you care about is in the arena, it's always harder," Frank announces, holding her gaze. He seems to be searching her eyes. "You love her, don't you?"

"I do, yeah," Dorcas admits quietly, and Frank's face softens immediately. "You have no idea just how far I'll go for her."

"Unfortunately, there's not very much you can do from your position," Frank says softly.

Dorcas clears her throat. "Yeah, uh, about that…"

"What?" Frank asks, eyebrows wrinkling together.

"What if I said—" Dorcas cuts herself off when multiple people gasp throughout the room, drawing her attention, as well as Frank's, who sucks in a sharp breath and goes still.

Rita is on one screen, leaning forward in clear interest as she shows the scene of Augusta and Alice taking a corner and both coming to a screeching halt at the sight of Frank laying in the middle of a passage, a hole in his head from a bullet wound, clearly dead. Dorcas blinks and glances over at Frank, then back to his dead body on the screen.

"Ah, yes, this is exciting," Rita states. "A new creation by Head Gamemaker Minerva McGonagall herself, something called a *boggart.* It's a creature that takes the form of the tributes' greatest fear, and it's interactive. It can and *will* attack, and as we can see here, it seems Augusta and Alice share the same fear. Of course, they have no way of knowing it's not real…"

Frank makes a quiet sound, staring at the screen with wide eyes, and Dorcas swallows thickly, her stomach churning to think that Minerva created this. Of course she did. Minerva is brilliant, even to a terrifying point, and she knows as well as everyone within the Order that Riddle has an odd obsession with fears and such. He finds it fascinating, especially since he's essentially immune, seeing as it's rumored he fears nothing and doesn't experience fear at all. That's why he loves Horcrux Hornets so much, or so Slughorn has said.

On the screen, Frank's corpse turns its head and stares at Alice and Augusta with dead eyes. "Why, Mum? Why did you take my place when it doesn't even matter?" The corpse drags itself up on creaking limbs. "Alice, how could you let me die the same way your parents did? How could you—"

Alice whimpers and stumbles back into Augusta, who exhales harshly and steadies them before rasping, "It's not real. Alice, it's not real. That's not Frank. He's not—my son isn't dead. It's a trick. Come on. *Come on!"*

Augusta turns away from the corpse and yanks on Alice, who seems to be hyperventilating through tears, but they dutifully start running away when Augusta forces them to. As they go, Augusta just keeps chanting *it's not real, it's not real, it's not real.*

Once Alice and Augusta take a corner, out of sight, the boggart dissolves into mist and drifts along like wisps of smoke, traveling through the maze.

"Sorry," Frank croaks, blinking rapidly. "Um, you were—you were saying something before."

"Right," Dorcas whispers, swallowing past the lump in her throat. "Yeah, I was. Frank, I need you to hear me out, okay?"

Frank turns and looks at her, and then he does.

~•~

When blood dries in cloth, it makes it stiff. Regulus feels like he's wearing boards, which is very uncomfortable, but there is literally nowhere to clean his clothes. Sirius helped him wring out what he could, making sure to keep the dripping portions of Regulus' shirt away from his skin so he wouldn't have to feel it, which Regulus appreciates. It was damp for a while, wet and sticky against his skin, which he hated, but now it's dry and rough. It's still an improvement, in his opinion.

Either way, it's a small price to pay to not be dead.

"You don't have to walk so close, you know," Regulus mutters, exasperated because Sirius is walking beside him, *right* beside him in perfect step, their elbows bumping over and over.

Sirius grunts. "No, but I do, though. *Apparently—"* He shoots a glare up at the sky, "—they feel the need to separate us."

"Sirius, we probably *will* be separated, realistically speaking," Regulus tells him, and Sirius purses his lips in visible distaste at this notion. "This maze is a fucking mess, so there's a good chance we will be. And, if we are, then we just—we keep going and try to find each other again. Stay alive until we do."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm not going to make it *easy* for them," Sirius declares firmly.

Regulus hums. "Fair enough. Me neither."

Abruptly, Sirius snaps his hand out to clamp down on Regulus' arm, and Regulus instantly stops, tensing up as he looks over to see how serious Sirius is. He cocks his head a little, eyes narrowing, and Regulus strains his ears and darts his gaze around, trying to hear what Sirius is hearing and see what Sirius is seeing. It takes a moment, and then Regulus picks up the faint sound of footsteps pounding against the ground.

"You hear that, right?"

"I hear that."

"Someone's com—"

Sirius never finishes before a form bursts through the opening up ahead, tripping a little as they take the corner. Regulus gets to make out that it's Lester only seconds before he's coming right for them, raising his spear.

Before Regulus even thinks about it, he shoves Sirius to the side forcefully and stumbles back, watching the spear fly through the air where Sirius just was.

"Don't you fucking *dare!"* Regulus bursts out, utterly furious in just a split second, and Sirius ducks yet again when Lester attempts to wrap hands around his throat.

"It's not going to stop!" Lester roars, panting, utterly wild-eyed and frantic. "Don't you get it?! The maze isn't going to stop throwing shit at us until we're all *dead!* We have to kill! I have to kill you! I have to!"

In seconds, Regulus is whirling behind Lester to grab him by the back of his hair, slamming his boot into the back of Lester's knee and shoving him forward at the same time that Sirius swings out with his spear. It's so precise, so *quick,* that Lester barely even gurgles when the spear slits his throat, open and uncovered where Regulus wrenches his head back.

Regulus sees the blood immediately begin to pour down Lester's front, but he doesn't let go until Lester's hands go slack, no longer trying to reach Sirius, who is perfectly fine. He's already cleaning off his spear lazily, watching dispassionately as Lester falls forward in a puddle of his own blood and continues to bleed out.

"Are you alright?" Sirius asks, swiping the spearhead off and eyeing Regulus carefully.

Regulus is doing his level best not to gag, honestly. None of the blood got on him, but he can *smell* it, and he saw it, and after the crimson river, he's so fucking queasy that death is genuinely just making him feel in danger of being sick.

"Yep, fine," Regulus manages to say, and then ruins it by flinching slightly when the cannon sounds. Sirius raises his eyebrows at him, and Regulus huffs. "Oh, shut up. It's the blood, alright? It fucking *stinks.* How are you so—so—"

"Calm?" Sirius asks.

"Yeah, that," Regulus mutters grudgingly.

Sirius sighs and twirls his spear over his wrist. "Reggie, I'm not exactly—I mean, I've… I've had my moments, alright? But it's the arena. In here, this can't—I can't think about it. I can't focus on what I'm doing, or what I have to do. I just do it."

"Don't you think I'm trying to do the same?" Regulus snaps, taking another step back from Lester, breathing through his mouth. The blood-stiff clothes he's wearing is making his skin itch. "Fucking hell, Sirius, you've killed *four* people without even hesitating. Didn't even blink. And Camilla—I mean, you seemed to be alright with her, and then—"

"And then she tried to kill you," Sirius cuts in bluntly. He holds Regulus' gaze. "Look, I knew exactly what I was getting into by coming back here. I've already murdered twelve people. What's sixteen, *especially* to keep me and you alive? If I live, I'll live with it. If I don't, well, I guess I won't have to. Either way, I do what I have to do, same as you. It's not easy, but I don't have the same issues with blood that you do, for one thing. And I wasn't just here *last year,* for another."

"What if I fuck it up? Or I'm too late to help you? Or I'm not fast enough?" Regulus whispers, and his stomach churns even worse at the mere thought.

"Is that what you're worrying about now?" Sirius asks wearily, heaving a sigh. "Honestly, you have some major anxiety issues going on, you know that? Listen to me, okay? Me and you, whatever it takes. We agreed to that, didn't we?"

"Yes," Regulus mumbles.

"So, that's that," Sirius says simply. "That means we're both trying our best, and that *is* enough, Reggie. No matter what happens, it's enough. We're doing enough."

Regulus swallows harshly, then nods. "Okay."

"Okay, good," Sirius murmurs. "Now, let's go."

~•~

They take one corner, and Sirius immediately sees what Lester was running from in the first place, and why he was so frantic by the time he reached them.

Frankly, if Sirius had been chased relentlessly by these creatures, he'd be a fucking mess, too.

"Sirius," Regulus whispers, reaching out slowly and tapping Sirius against the chest with the back of his hand, never taking his eyes off the creatures in front of them. "Dagger. Give me my dagger. Now is the time to give me my dagger."

Sirius wordlessly passes him his dagger.

The creatures are about half the size of an average human, but the massive amount of them is what's off-putting. Their arms are longer than their bodies, branching off into sharp points that dig into the grounds like life-size needles. From what Sirius can tell, there's no feet on them at all, just a humanoid chest that stops into an open ribcage, no organs on display. Where the head is, there's a slick, bulbous mouth with tentacles splitting free, except the tentacles seem to have teeth. Not human teeth, no. Sharp, curved teeth that look like fucking hooks made of bone.

Naturally, the opening behind them that they just turned down has already shuddered closed, so they're trapped with nowhere to go. There has to be at least twenty creatures waiting at the other end of the passage. They're very silent and very still.

"Okay," Sirius says. "Okay, so."

"So?" Regulus asks.

"So," Sirius repeats, and has no idea what comes next.

Regulus clears his throat. "Sirius, what's the plan here?"

"Climb again?" Sirius suggests weakly.

"Ah," Regulus replies, releasing a punched-out breath, his head swiveling to look at the hedge beside them. Sirius glances at him to see him looking wary, but he seems to set his shoulders. "Right. Right, okay. Climb again. I can—I mean, I already did it once. I can probably do it again."

The second they edge closer to the wall of greenery beside them, the rustling gets louder and hands burst free from it, swiping for them. Sirius snatches Regulus back and watches the hands slowly recede back again. "Okay, so that's…not going to happen, apparently. Um. Shit."

"No climbing," Regulus mumbles, sounding both relieved and upset about this, somehow.

"Guess not." Sirius flexes his fingers around his spear and squints at the creatures ahead. "So, it looks like the only way to go is *through.* Fighting it is."

"For fuck's sake," Regulus grumbles, his face dropping into a scowl, but he gives a swift little twirl of his dagger and puts one foot back, standing at the ready.

"Hey, Reggie?"

"Yeah?"

"I bet I can take down more than you can," Sirius teases, broadening his stance and letting a grin grow on his face.

There's a pause, then Regulus snorts and says, "You're on," before promptly tearing off down the passage, running right for the creatures without a beat of hesitation.

"Hey!" Sirius blurts out. "That's *cheating,* you little shit!"

He thinks he hears Regulus laugh, but if he does, it's lost among the rush that fills Sirius' head as he takes off running, too. The moment they get halfway down the passage, the crowd of creatures at the end are a sudden burst of motion, quite fast on their needle-arms as they rush to meet them.

Sirius and Regulus are severely outnumbered, and there's also a lot of appendages to contend with between the pointy arms and the ridiculous amount of tentacles flying at them. Sirius finds out very quickly that the ribcage on the creatures break open and tries to ensnare whatever comes too close, so that's yet another thing to worry about.

And yet, they blitz through like they were made for it.

If Sirius and Regulus are weapons in their own right, then they're dual blades, easily working in tandem like extensions of each other. Dangerous on their own, even more dangerous together. They never have to speak, never have to even look at one another; they flow as if they're in the middle of a dance they've known the steps to since birth.

Sirius skewers one creature through the face and slams it into another, sweeping out with his spear to knock at least four to the ground at once. Regulus stomps on the heads as he goes by, like they practiced it. Just the same, when Regulus slams his dagger into the head of one, Sirius kicks it through the spine to make it easier for Regulus to snatch his dagger back out, flip it, and slam it into the head of the next.

It's fluid the way they shift and move around one another, focused and intent, dropping one creature right after the next. Sirius finds his whole world narrowing down to the fight, the thrill of it, not thinking of it as a competition, but rather something they're handling *together.* He's bolder than Regulus is, unafraid to reach out and grip the creatures by the outside of their tentacles, where their teeth *aren't,* just to raise them up and slam them to the ground. At some point, Sirius quite literally has a creature-kebab lined up along his spear, dangling where he pierced them through their faces.

The mass of creatures thin out, and then the last does down when Sirius shoves his spear up through the cracked open ribcage so hard that the spearhead bursts through top of the creature's head. The tentacles instantly fall slack, no longer trying to wrap around his face.

Panting, Sirius tips his spear down and puts his boot against the ribs to kick the creature off. There's a squelch, then a very gross splat, and that's it.

"Well," Sirius wheezes, "I definitely won."

"What? No you didn't. You can't prove it," Regulus sputters instantly, which tells Sirius he did, in fact, win.

"Don't be a sore loser," Sirius teases, wrinkling his nose as he inspects his spear. It's *covered* in gunk. The creatures didn't seem to bleed, but they were very…goopy.

"What are you doing?" Regulus asks.

Sirius continues to pull off his bag, reaching inside to find the cloth he needs. "Cleaning my spear. It's disgusting."

"You have a bit of…" Regulus coughs and gestures to his own hair, then Sirius'.

"What?!" Sirius chokes out, instantly dropping his spear and cloth, hands flying up to his hair in horror.

Regulus' shoulders start shaking, and then Sirius realizes he's *laughing,* because he's fucking awful, is what he is. Sirius glares at him, but can't stop himself from patting at his hair, running his fingers through it as Regulus continues to laugh at him.

"Ah, you're too easy," Regulus sighs out, sounding rather pleased with himself as he moves over to smugly scoop up the cloth and clean off his dagger.

Sirius huffs at him. "Clean my spear, why don't you?"

"No," Regulus says blandly, then drops the cloth back on the ground once he's done with it.

"Prick," Sirius grumbles, but gives in and leaves his hair alone once he's sure that it's clean. He grabs his spear and cloth to turn his attention to that instead. "So much for loving me."

Regulus frowns. "I do lo—" He stops, then squints when Sirius grins triumphantly at him.

"You're too easy," Sirius corrects, cackling when Regulus scoffs and looks away. After Sirius finishes with his spear, he stands again and puts his bag back on. "You know, that wasn't so bad, actually. I mean, whatever those things were, they were disgusting, but we did alright. We're really—"

"Sirius," Regulus interrupts, his tone making Sirius' spine snap up straight as he whips around to see what Regulus is staring at with such intensity. All of Sirius' pride drains away to be replaced by intense fear the moment he sees the green fog spilling out up ahead. "That's not good, is it?"

"Nope," Sirius confirms. "Time to go."

~•~

Dorcas watches Eli go down and knows, somehow, that he's not going to get back up.

Marlene doesn't seem to know this.

"Come on , old man, keep *moving!"* Marlene orders harshly, stabbing her sword into the ground to go back and hook her uninjured hand under Eli's arm.

Eli is wheezing, and though he tries to stumble back to his feet, he hits his knees and is promptly sick on the ground. He groans and shakes his head, gasping out, "Can't. I can't."

"Yes, you *can,"* Marlene insists, snatching him around his own sick and dragging him along, but again, he tumbles right back down and coughs as he clutches his chest, hacking so hard that it *sounds* painful. "If you stay here, Eli, you will *die."*

"Girl, if I keep running, I will die," Eli manages to say, his voice wry. He tips his head back to stare at her. "My heart's going to give out. I—I can't outrun this shit, but *you* can."

Marlene throws a desperate look towards the green fog that's steadily drawing closer to them. "Look, throw a pity party to someone who cares. I don't have *time* for this. Get *up!"*

"You remind me of my Alphard," Eli rasps, giving her a sad smile. "He cared so much it killed him."

"Eli, now is *not* the time to—"

"You need to leave me now, girl. I know what I can take, and I can't take any more. I'm tired. So tired."

"Well, too bad, because I'm *not* leaving you here," Marlene declares in clear distress. She tries to help him, but she can barely manage it with only one arm, especially with how tired she is. She does manage to get him back to his feet, crying out as she ducks under his arm and takes his weight, only for his legs to give out almost instantly and jostle her shoulder. "Eli, please. *Please,* please just get up. Please—"

"Go," Eli whispers hoarsely, and then he reaches out to shove at her hard enough that she stumbles back a few steps. The fog has almost reached them. "I said *go!"*

"Eli," Marlene croaks, her eyes shimmering on the screen as she stares at him in horror.

"You made me proud," Eli tells her. "Really proud. And I didn't do right by you, didn't do a damn thing for you, didn't even try. But you didn't need me, and you still don't, so *go."*

"I'm *sorry,"* Marlene chokes out, the tears spilling out of her eyes and trailing down her cheeks. Dorcas feels her chest clench, her palms itching with the desire to reach out and gently brush those tears away.

"What're you sorry for, Marlene McKinnon? I'm gonna see my Alphard again." Eli gives her a toothy grin, one that shows a glimpse of how charming his smile must have been when he was younger. Still charming now, even like this. "I'd do anything for Alphard. Even live. And I did, as best as I could. I hope you find that someday."

She already has, Dorcas thinks. *Anything, anything, anything.*

Dorcas' eyes burn as she watches Marlene's shoulders heave, still frozen in place as the fog reaches Eli's feet. It travels up the length of his body, and Marlene doesn't move, can't seem to. Eli curls up on the ground and closes his eyes with a serene smile, but the moment the fog reaches his head and he breathes it in, he starts screaming.

It's absolutely *devastating.* The entire room goes silent just listening to it, utterly horrified by the raw scream of agony that escapes the man who could run no longer and go no further. Dorcas feels the very tips of her fingers prickle, her eyes wide and her mouth dry. The green fog. Biological warfare. Horcrux Hornet venom turned into this.

She knew there was a chance it could be used in the games, but she never *saw* it, and she didn't connect it all together until this moment. This is what most of district six experienced, and this is a weapon Riddle has at his disposal to use against those that defy him. Eli is screaming like he's suffering the worst torment any human could ever feel. It's the peak of torture, gripped in death throes, simply *suffering.*

Dorcas' skin crawls. All that she has seen, all that she knows of, and nothing could have prepared her for *this*.

There are no good people in war, but there are terrified ones, and as Dorcas watches this, she's strangled by such an intense fear that she can barely breathe.

That? she thinks. *We have to beat that? No one can beat that.*

As if to prove her point, Eli's screams cut out, and only seconds later, the cannon sounds.

Marlene hasn't moved. She's frozen, eyes wide and teary, lips parted as if she's breathless, utterly stunned and horrified by what she just witnessed. The fog hasn't stopped moving, still crawling right towards her, so close now she'd only have to take a step forward and reach out to touch it.

"Go," Dorcas breathes out, gaze fixed on the screen. Her whole body is trembling. "Come on, Marlene. Come on, come on, come on. Go. Please go. You have to—"

Choking out a harsh breath, Marlene proceeds to go, as if maybe she's heard Dorcas, or just felt the utter desperation winding around Dorcas' bones, her very blood, where her love flows and cements into her; surely Marlene can feel it, as big and relentless as it is, even while trapped there. Can't she?

Whether she feels it or not, Marlene snatches up her sword and *runs,* and Dorcas thinks she's crying as she goes, but she's still going. Still here. Still surviving.

On the screen, Marlene sprints down one passage and whips around the corner of the next, not even slowing down as she leaves the fog behind. It stops advancing, and Dorcas is at first confused why, but then her heart drops when the camera pans to the white mist at the end of the passage Marlene is running down. She doesn't seem to see it, even as she looks right at it, and the moment she glances away, it begins to take shape.

Dorcas' heart *drops,* the blood in her veins turning to ice when she sees…Marlene. Another one. A different one. She looks so different from what Dorcas is used to. Long hair in perfect, delicate curls down her back and over her shoulders; eyes bright and warm, a spark of innocence in them that Dorcas has never seen before; wearing a pale cream-colored dress that shows her arms and legs, completely scar-free. She looks young; no, she looks *youthful,* something sweet and shy draped over her, all the way down to her bare feet. There's something innocent about bare feet, and the way she walks like she's not scared of one step she takes, unafraid of the world around her.

This is a Marlene *no one* has ever seen before. She didn't even look like this in her first games. To the Hallows, even then, Marlene was rather plain and unremarkable. But this Marlene? She's the flutter of fairy wings and wisps of cotton candy, and Dorcas knows—she just *knows* in her heart—that if this is how Marlene was presented to the Hallow, they would have cared for her so much more than they ever have.

The Marlene that Dorcas *does* know, the one that's real, the one that she's deeply, unapologetically in love with, the one that is ripped nails and bloody teeth and scars that reach farther than just skin deep—that Marlene stumbles to a stop the moment the other one comes closer.

"Who are you?" the boggart asks softly.

Marlene stares, seeming genuinely startled out of her own grief by the sight of—herself. Or no, that's not her. It's not, and Dorcas doubts it ever was. So…what is Marlene afraid of? Why is *this* her biggest fear?

"What the hell is this?" Marlene croaks, her fingers flexing around her sword. She only has one hand to grip her weapon, but her gaze is hard like she isn't afraid to fucking use it.

"What are you?" the boggart whispers, face contorting with horror and—and fear. Dorcas swallows harshly, her gaze darting back and forth between them. "You're a *monster."*

Marlene goes still, then repeats through clenched teeth, "What the *hell* is this?"

"You're the monster that got our parents killed," the boggart chokes out, seeming genuinely frightened. "You killed them, and what? You—you take comfort by the fact that they got to see you as you are before they died? They never *wanted* you as you are. They wanted *this!* They wanted me!"

"Shut up. Shut up, shut up, *shut up,"* Marlene chants, her chest stuttering on a sharp inhale. "What the fuck are you? What—"

"It should have been me, not *you,* not the monster that you are, that you became," the boggart insists. It steps forward, and Marlene immediately swings her sword up, her breathing erratic. "Look at what you became."

"Shut *up!"* Marlene bursts out.

The mist swirls off the boggart, down by bare feet, and in the next second, Hodge and Vanity are stepping out of the darkness to walk up beside the Marlene that's not real. The sight of them steals Dorcas' breath, only more so because they're dead. Corpses. Empty-eyed, the both of them; Vanity's throat slit; Hodge soaking wet, dripping red. As they walk forward, they're holding hands between them.

From somewhere in the room, someone releases a choked noise, and Dorcas recognizes it. James.

"We needed her," Vanity murmurs, "but we got stuck with a monster. Fancy that, a monster trying to save children for once, and all you succeeded in was failing to."

"If you were *her,"* Hodge gurgles, a stream of red spilling out of his mouth as he speaks, "you could have done more. But you're not. You're just *you,* and that's all you can ever be. All you'll ever be is this, a monster who can't save *anyone."*

"This is what they all needed," the boggart hisses, suddenly not seeming as innocent as before as it starts advancing on Marlene, who's clearly struggling to breathe. "Our mother. Our father. Every tribute we've ever had. Our family. *Eli.* They all need me, and they got stuck with you, and look where it got them. And what about your lover? What about her?"

Dorcas sucks in a deep breath and holds it, her heart hammering hard in her chest. Marlene shakes her head and backs up, eyes wide and wet.

"How could she *ever* love you?" the boggart spits out.

"Shut up," Marlene says weakly.

"Do you think she looks at you and sees anything other than the monster you are?" the boggart demands, continuously moving forward, getting too close. "All you're fighting for, trying so hard to survive, and for what? To get back to *her?* She doesn't *want* you. She never wanted you, and you knew it, and then she felt *sorry* for you. What she really wants is *me,* and you can't give that to her, can you? *Can you?!"*

Marlene heaves out a deep breath that seems to turn into a scream and a sob all in one, and she swings out with her sword with what seems to be all her might, the blade slashing right through the boggart. There's a moment, just one, and then Marlene and everyone else watches as the distorted mirror of Marlene is split in two, decapitated. The boggart's head rolls right off its neck, hitting the ground first before the rest of the body falls. Marlene stares, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

"Why didn't you do more?" Vanity asks, because she's still there. It's still the boggart, still advancing, not yet defeated. Marlene's head snaps up. "My family needed me. They needed you to do better for me, and you couldn't."

"My mum's all alone now," Hodge says through a mouthful of crimson river. "I didn't want to leave her alone. You were supposed to help me so I wouldn't leave her alone."

"I'm—I'm sorry. Please, I'm so sorry," Marlene weeps, a whimper falling out of her mouth as they walk towards her steadily, hand-in-hand.

"You're a monster," they tell her, chanting it as they continue to draw closer. "You're a monster. You're a monster."

Dorcas reaches up to cover her mouth, trying to muffle the sound crawling up the walls of her constricted throat. Marlene doesn't raise her sword against them, and she won't. Dorcas knows she won't. Knows she can't.

All Marlene does is stumble back when they reach for her with small hands. She keeps backing up, hyperventilating and seeming unable to tear her eyes away from them as she goes.

She moves swiftly in her panic, backing up all the way out of the passage to the opposite hedge wall before the opening. She stops there, frozen in place, not running left or right, no longer going anywhere. Her sword clatters to the ground.

"Go," Dorcas pleads through her fingers. "Please, Marlene, just—just *go.* You have to go."

This time, Marlene doesn't seem to feel the love crying out from every cell in Dorcas' body, and she doesn't move.

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Sirius found Regulus, kept him for a day, then lost him again.

He *hates* this fucking maze.

It's not either of their fault, really, because it seems the gamemakers are bound and determined to separate them, and with all the shit they have at their disposal in the maze, it wasn't impossible for them to do. Between the hands, the fog, even the fucking twists and turns and the hedges that open and close, somewhere along the way, they got split up.

Sirius wants to rip his fucking hair out, or maybe rip the whole damn world in half, but all he can do is run. He's still running.

Did he ever stop?

What's worse is that the unexpected sound of a distant scream triggered him, and he slipped away without even knowing it, so he has no idea *where* he lost Regulus. He just came back to himself, *still fucking running,* to find Regulus gone.

So, as you can guess, he is *not* in a good mood at the moment, quite literally cursing up a storm as he tears down one passage after the next, and that means he outright *snarls* when he takes a corner and slams into someone who *isn't* Regulus, or any of his allies, or anyone he could be pleased to see.

Sirius perhaps shoves Dixon away roughly, and between that and the snarl, it's no surprise that a fight instantly breaks out between them. Dixon, predictably, is very strong. He's also older and wiser, so he stays out of range as they clash, sword to spear. Even still, Sirius isn't too worried until Dixon somehow manages to disarm him, the spear rolling away.

There's sort of these levels to Sirius, when it comes to the threat he poses. Most of the time, he does the bare minimum, just what he has to so he can win and win quickly. But, every now and again, he'll get into a fight with someone he has to dig deep into himself to get the upper hand against.

Like the person he fought in his last games where he quite literally bit their finger off. A whole finger. Blood and muscle and bone. He bit right through and spit it out. Didn't choke, didn't gag, didn't even slow down.

So, yes, he's no stranger to going the lengths it takes to survive, and oh, Sirius is *fixated* on survival now. Especially now. As long as he can. Whatever it takes.

Generally, what it takes to activate this need to dig deep is a very hard opponent to beat, or having someone to protect, or noticing that he's losing the advantage he has just by being as good as he is. He knows he's good, but he also knows he's not indestructible, or infallible. Perhaps the reminder of his own fragile mortality in a place it can so easily be crushed drives him over the edge. Perhaps he's just insane.

Either way, when Dixon comes at him *fast,* Sirius fights back *dirty.* He digs his nails into Dixon's wrist and twists, whirling back and slamming his boot forward into the side of his knee so hard that he cries out and goes down. The sword tumbles to the ground, but Dixon still lashes out hard enough that Sirius has to let him go and back out of the way.

Dixon does little hops to get back on his feet—well, his foot. He's very carefully staying off the leg that Sirius just kicked, so Sirius naturally kicks it again, ruthlessly, even harder. This time, there's a sickening crunch, and Dixon's leg bends in at the knee in a way it absolutely should not. He starts to crumble again, shouting and cursing, and Sirius has all intentions of stomping his knee into dust and then, possibly, his skull, but Dixon is not faint-hearted. He's a resilient, hardy bastard, clearly, which Sirius can't help but respect.

Somehow, Dixon balances on one leg and brings his hands up, breathing hard before promptly swinging out at Sirius, quick enough that Sirius has to dodge. As he goes back, Dixon tips forward to scoop up his sword, and Sirius is still in range, unable to move in time, so he quite literally *sees* his life flash before his eyes in the glint of the blade.

And then, without warning, there's a sharp *zing* through the air, and Sirius feels his hair rustle by his face, as well as a stinging sensation across his cheek seconds before he watches an arrow bury itself right in Dixon's eye. It lands so hard that his head snaps back as he falls, and the cannon sounds before his body ever hits the ground.

Slowly, Sirius reaches up to touch the slice on his cheek, fingers meeting the blood that bubbles up. It's not deep, or a genuine issue, but it burns a little. He turns around to find Narcissa standing at the other end of the passage behind him, lowering her bow as she meets his eyes.

Her aim is deadly. Sirius has never known her to miss, which means she killed Dixon on purpose, her own ally, and it also means she gave him a little cut for funsies.

Narcissa's lips twitch as he breaks out into a helpless grin, and she winks at him before turning and darting off without looking back, without a word spoken between them.

"This fucking family," Sirius mutters wryly, shaking his head as he dips to pick up his spear and back up steadily. An incredulous huff of laughter escapes him before he turns and takes off at a light jog, his chest oddly, inexplicably warm.

Just for a moment.

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Regulus is not at all pleased with how this is going, but really, he never is. If it's not one thing, it's another. This whole arena is shit, even in ways he could have never expected.

He thought that it would be similar to all the arenas before, in that at least allies would be given the chance to stay with each other, but that's clearly not the case. As far as he knows, the death eaters are all broken up, and Sirius' allies are, too. It's like the arena is taking every bit of anything anyone has ever relied on away. No resources, no solidarity, no way to ground themselves or find a sense of security. It's all a mess.

The sound of a cannon nearly causes him to trip, and he curses sharply under his breath as he rounds a corner, glancing frantically over his shoulder as he outruns those fucking *hands.* He swears if he never sees a clawed, corpse-like disembodied hand again in his life, it'll be too soon.

There are no hands in the passage he turns down, though, which he takes as a vast improvement until he sees what *is* in the passageway. He comes to a halt so hard that he skids, his eyes bulging at the sight of—Vanity? Hodge?

It takes a second for Regulus' brain to make out what he's actually seeing. Vanity and Hodge, *clearly* dead, wrapping their hands around Marlene's throat and *squeezing.* She's fighting, weakly, but mostly just wheezing and sinking down to the ground, slowly going limp.

Regulus' stomach drops out from under him, and before he even thinks about it, he snaps his hand out and watches his dagger fly through the air. It embeds itself into the side of Hodge's head, which surprisingly does seem to help Marlene a little. The boy is dead already, and yet

his hands go slack as he drops to the ground like a stone. Little rivers of red trickle out of the corners of his mouth, his gaze unseeing and glassy.

Vanity doesn't stop, though. Marlene's eyes flutter shut.

"Shit," Regulus whispers, and he's not thinking past anything other than the fact that Marlene is Sirius' friend, and according to James, Dorcas'...lover, possibly?

Not only that, but just Marlene herself. Regulus respects her, and he's only just realizing it right now. He thought he didn't care about Sirius' allies, planned to kill them if he could so Sirius didn't have to, even, but the thing is. Well, what Marlene did in her interview was moving. She's just—she *is* someone to respect, and no one deserves to die like this.

Not like this.

It's as repellent and horrid as being trapped in a crimson river, in Regulus' mind. For fuck's sake, Vanity and Hodge's *families* could be watching right now. James surely is.

Oh, James. There's no doubt in Regulus' mind that seeing this, seeing these two again, has hurt him. Regulus instinctively wants to stop James from hurting further, and Marlene dying at the hands of the corpses of these two would be worse.

Regulus quite literally slams into Vanity's corpse to rip it away from Marlene, who releases a choked, hoarse noise before slumping to the side, her breathing worryingly shallow. Vanity's corpse is in his arms one second, then gone the next. Just poof. Mist. She dissolves, gone, and when Regulus turns, Hodge's body is also gone. Regulus exhales in relief.

The dagger was left behind, thankfully. Regulus scoops it up as he moves over to crouch down at Marlene's side. The arm she's laying on is fine, but the other one… Regulus grimaces just looking at it, swollen and visibly broken as it is. He doesn't touch it, but reaches out to press his fingers to the side of her throat, checking her pulse.

She has one. It's faint and a little slow, but it's there. Marks are already forming on her neck from where she was strangled, shaped like four hands. Regulus draws his hand back and stares down at her, considering her.

As horrible as it is, a part of Regulus wishes he had let her die. It would have been easier, wouldn't it? Because she's going to have to die at some point anyway, and putting off the inevitable isn't going to change much in the end.

Yet, Regulus just—can't. He can't bring himself to regret it, giving her more time, because it was—that was good, wasn't it? Even here, even in this rot-infested fucking maze where the sun doesn't even really reach them, there's the warm glow of humanity to be found. Even in him. Even after everything.

Regulus blows out a deep breath, then reaches out with his free hand and begins gently tapping Marlene on her cheek with the back of his hand, trying to rouse her. She's alive, just seems to have passed out. He'd give her water if he had any, but Sirius has all the fucking supplies.

Marlene's face twitches, just a little, and so he pulls his hand back with the intention of tapping her a little harder, except he goes still when he hears footsteps behind him.

Swiftly, Regulus twists and whirls to his feet as he flips his dagger and has it against the throat of the person behind him in mere seconds. He freezes the moment he sees who it is.

"Hey, love," James greets softly.

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The moment James sees himself on the screen, he feels his heart sink right to his feet. He moves forward as swiftly as he can with his cane, his breathing erratic as he comes to a halt in between Dorcas and Frank, staring at the boggart version of himself and Regulus frozen in place, eyes wide.

"No," James chokes out, and he jolts when Dorcas reaches out to take his hand, gently squeezing it. She looks queasy, her whole body threaded through with tension, face twisted with strain. "Not me. Fuck. He won't—he won't kill me. He always hesitates. He'll hesitate. He—"

"James," Frank says firmly, *"breathe.* Just breathe. We don't—we have no way of knowing what will happen, and he just has to hold on for a little longer, okay?"

"What?" James rasps, glancing over to see Dorcas and Frank trade a quick look. "What does that mean?"

"James?" Regulus whispers on the screen, and so Dorcas and Frank do not elaborate. James wouldn't hear if they did. He focuses back on the scene in front of him. "You're—how are you here? Why are you—"

"All you did to keep me out, and here I am anyway," the boggart says lightly, making it seem like a joke.

Regulus doesn't seem to find that funny. "How the *fuck—"*

"Oh, come off it, Reg," the boggart teases, and James *instantly* hates anyone else, *anything* else, calling him that. He doesn't care if it's his mouth shaping around the nickname; it's not *him* speaking it, which James finds out very quickly he does *not* like, especially in these circumstances. "Don't act like you're not pleased, even secretly. I know you want me here. It's selfish, but you're *glad* I'm here, aren't you?"

"What?" Regulus croaks, all the color draining out of his face at once. "No, James, I—I don't want—"

"Yes, you do. Don't lie. You're *always* lying," the boggart mutters, frowning at him. "You're a liar. All you do is—"

"No, that's not—I—I mean, I *do* want you here, but not—not in danger, James. Just—just—" Regulus swallows harshly, his fingers trembling around his dagger. He seems to become aware of it then, where it is, still pressed to the boggart's throat. He instantly snatches it back, looking horrified, and James almost *whines* in pure distress. "Sorry. Fuck, I'm sorry. It's—yes, okay? Yes, I want you around, always, but I don't want you to be hurt, and this—you can't *be here.* How—"

"Well, you fucked that up, too," the boggart says, and Regulus flinches back, visibly stung. "Why do you think I'm here, hm? Because of *you.* Who else?"

"They—what? I don't understand. I don't—"

"This is what you do, you know. You drag everyone you love down. You fail, and fail, and fail. Why do you even bother to try? Sacrifice yourself for your brother, which was better for everyone—nope, you couldn't even do that. Keep me safe and out of the arena—well, you fucked that up, too. And what? You want to live now? You think *you* deserve to as much as anyone else? After all that you've done, all the pain you've caused, all the ways you've ruined everyone's life?"

"What?" Regulus says, staring at him with wide eyes, his voice wobbling precariously. "You—what? You're… This isn't—this isn't you. It's not. You would *never* say that to me."

The boggart scoffs and takes a step forward. "Are you fucking delusional? I have *every* right to say that to you! Think about everything you've put me through! And not just me, but *Sirius,* too. And Evan—he's dead because of you. What about your parents, Regulus? *I* did everything right, but you? It's like you malfunction every time you dare to *try.* Did you honestly not expect this to happen someday? You thought I'd never wake up and see you for who you really are? You're everything I hate in this world, aren't you? We're complete opposites. I try, try, try—and you never do, because every time, all you do is fail. I care about the world and the people in it, but you *don't,* not really. I'm honest, and you're a liar. I do as much as I can for everyone, and you're selfish. I know how to heal, and you're just *broken,* fucking irreparable. Why should I have to be stuck with that, with *you?* Do you know how exhausting you are? Do you know how much you *drain* me?"

"No," Regulus chokes out, stumbling back like a reflex as the boggart starts advancing, steadily backing him away from Marlene. "James, just—just wait, okay? I know I'm—I know, but I—I—"

"What? You *what?!"* the boggart roars, and Regulus heaves out a harsh breath that hitches on a sob. James clamps down on Dorcas' hand, his eyes stinging. "You love me? No you *don't!* You call this love?! You wouldn't know how to love right if you had a step-by-step guide. What you do is *rot.* You're the epitome of rot, Regulus. You take everything good in this world and invent ways to deteriorate it, because you're so fucking scared of being alone that you'll cling until there's nothing left to cling *to.* Everything you selfishly touch comes away with claw marks on it. You're no different than the corpses in the crimson river you should have *died* in!"

Regulus makes a quiet, whimpering noise that pierces James right in the fucking heart, and this—honestly, James thinks this is his biggest fear, too. Seeing himself like this. Becoming a person who hurts those he loves. He wants to dive through the screen and snap the neck of his mirror image, then wrap his arms around Regulus and take back everything that was just said with his mouth. Hold him. Kiss him. Promise him that it's not true, that James *already* sees him as he is, and it's not any of that, none of it, and James loves him so much. He loves him so fucking much. With everything in him.

"I know you've thought about it, because I sure have," the boggart hisses. "I've thought about how much better off I would be without you, how much better off Sirius would be, how much better off the whole fucking world would be. So, you know what? Let *me* do it."

"Don't!" Regulus bursts out, sounding nearly hysterical, his hand striking out quickly like a snake, tucking the dagger up under the boggart's chin.

Everything stops.

Do it, James thinks, internally begging, holding his breath. *Kill it. Just kill it. Come on, love, it's not real. It's not me. You have to know that, deep down. Please, please, please, please, please—*

"Oh, what's the matter?" the boggart mocks, James' eyes glinting cruelly, a grin of pure malice on his face that James is sickened by. "Look at you. You're *hesitating,* love."

Regulus swallows harshly, visibly, and he's shaking. James can *see* him trembling like he's about to fall apart. Tears aren't falling, but they're there, glimmering.

"We both know you're not going to do anything to me. Does that *scare* you, Reg? Hm? Knowing that you're completely defenseless to someone else. Weak for someone else." The boggart reaches up and wraps fingers around Regulus', peeling them off the handle of his dagger. Regulus watches it happen, lips trembling, and then the tears fall at the same time that his hand does. The boggart smiles. "See? There you go, failing again. And the pathetic part is—some part of you is actually grateful that at least I'll be the last thing you see. But I want you to know, you're not looking at someone who still thinks you're beautiful. You're not dying at the hands of a man who loves you, Regulus. Just a man who isn't yours."

With that, the boggart raises the dagger and places the point right over Regulus' heart, resting it there. James knows it. He knows that spot, that scar, after all the times he's pressed his mouth to it reverently, cherishing the continued beat beneath the bone. Regulus stands there, and he does nothing.

"No," James whispers. "No, no, no. Please wait. Please—"

"James!" Dorcas bursts out, strangling his hand as she points to the map, and he glances at it desperately, choking on a harsh breath at the quick approach of Marlene.

"Come on, come on, come on," James chants, genuinely clinging to the last hope he has, because she *knows* it's not real.

Sure enough, the camera pans out to show Marlene sprinting down the length of the passage as fast as she can go, and she doesn't hesitate at all. The moment she makes it, Marlene shoves her sword right through the boggart's back, piercing all the way through the front, the tip nearly reaching Regulus.

The dagger drops to the ground.

Regulus chokes, staring at the sword with wide eyes, and then his gaze flicks back up to look at the boggart's face. In an awful, grief-stricken croak, he whispers, "James?"

"See?" the boggart gasps out. "This is what you do."

Marlene flexes her fingers around the handle of her sword and rips it right back out with a harsh breath, eyes bright and blazing, chest heaving. The boggart goes to its knees, and in a split second, Regulus joins it. His hands fly up to the boggart's face, and his expression—James' heart clenches violently in his chest just looking at it.

James doesn't think he's ever before seen someone look as shattered as Regulus does in this moment. Regulus doesn't very often emote strongly through his expression; generally, it's all in the eyes with him. But this? It's like the floodgates have been opened. There's no hiding the pure, all-consuming wash of pain and *fear* that crashes down over Regulus' features. James has never seen him look like this before.

He's devastated. Utterly, completely wrecked. The moment the boggart slumps into his arms, in the form of a dead James, a raw noise spills out of Regulus' mouth. He tries desperately to lift the boggart's head back up, a weak whimper escaping him, not like a wounded animal but a dying one.

"No, no, James, no," Regulus whines, sounding so young, so terrified, so fucking heartbroken that James' vision blurs with the building tears that burn his eyes. "Don't—please don't do this to me, baby. Please, please, please. Come on, don't—"

"Regulus," Marlene croaks, her voice shredded, barely able to raise her voice past a breath. From her wince, James would guess that it hurts to talk, which is fair, considering she was just nearly strangled to death.

Regulus doesn't acknowledge her. Doesn't do anything other than cling to James' dead body and weep. He's tender, so very tender, when brushing hair back from the boggart's forehead and straightening the glasses with trembling fingers.

This sort of destructive, cataclysmic event is usually reserved for leveling cities, or natural disasters, or unspeakable horrors that no one can bear to stomach, let alone witness. It's not something people see every day, and yet, there it is. Laid out on the screen for everyone to look at. A great, big tragedy.

James swears that he has, in this moment, swallowed Regulus' heart. Somehow, inexplicably and wondrously and horribly, it throws itself against the walls of his teeth, and James has bitten into it like the first taste of knowledge, swallowing down free-will and choking on it. Fruitlessly, it tries to crawl free, but James doesn't simply have it; he doesn't just own it, and hold it in warm hands; no, he has consumed it and made it a part of himself, a drumbeat echo from chest-to-chest and blood-to-blood and breath-to-breath.

It's not just touching Regulus, it's digging his hands inside and cupping all that Regulus is into palms that only wish to cradle, and yet, here James is, crushing. He doesn't choose to. This is not his choice. He wanted to keep Regulus' heart, not eat it, but it has been shoved down his throat against his will.

He wishes he didn't like the taste.

James is chewing, chewing, chewing. Watching Regulus wrap around his corpse like he'll never let it go and feeling something from within keen with want, a selfish want that, perhaps, has been festering for years of wishing to be loved so wholly, so violently, that no one can come out of it unscathed. He wants to be ripped apart, and he aches, oh how he aches, with how good it feels, in this moment, to be torn to pieces from the depth that Regulus loves him.

A love like that, a love like this, a love so undeniable and unending and unstoppable; James swallows blood for it, and muscle, and life. He swallows and feels full, sated, and hungry for more immediately after. Hedonistic in his desire to blaze as bright as the sun, bright enough to scorch, and have someone burn for him anyway. Regulus does. Regulus is.

And it's horrible, hideous, so very human—not good, deep down, he doesn't think—but there is a part of him watching the man he loves fall apart over his dead body that feels it wash over him like a soft kiss to his forehead, tender and sweet with proof, just how loved, loved, loved he is.

Just the same, a war wages on in which he burns with Regulus, gagging on the heart he never wanted in his mouth, never once wanting to rip it from the chest it should safely reside in. It's scary, almost, to face it. To see it. To witness how easily, how effortlessly, he could bring ruin to someone he loves. To be loved like this is his greatest shame and his guiltiest pleasure.

Love is supposed to be simple. Love is supposed to be safe.

It's not.

And yet, and yet, James would not, could not, give it up for anything in this world. He will take it, and take it, and take it. He will let Regulus cling and cling just as hard, and he will wear whatever marks that are left with pride. And, when there is nothing left to hold onto, he will reach for more.

He can be gentle. They can be. James wants, one day, to live in a world where they'll get the chance.

But, for now, there's just this.

~•~

Regulus has seen unimaginable horrors and felt indescribable pain, but nothing will ever compare to this. Nothing, ever, could compare to this.

It's here, like this, that Regulus feels the deep, burning desire to scream at the sky, at the world, at the universe and any force listening, because this cannot be happening to him. Because it is happening to *him,* because James is his, his, his; *mine, mine, mine,* he thinks desperately, *my James, my baby, my love, mine and not yours, he is not yours to take, give him back.*

"Regulus."

He's mine.

"Regulus."

He's not yours.

"Regulus."

Please give him back to me.

There is a pressure on his shoulder, a hand, and Regulus realizes that he is rocking, and speaking out loud, begging and pleading to anything that will listen, except nothing does.

James remains dead in his arms.

Marlene is staring down at him, and he looks at her, and their eyes only meet for a second before Regulus is a burst of motion. He comes off the ground fast, and Marlene skips back like she was anticipating it, like it makes complete sense that his whole world has narrowed down to slitting her throat.

She killed him. She killed him, and Regulus is going to kill her. He is going to drag his dagger across her bruised neck and *relish* in the blood that flows out, until every drop is gone, and he will not flinch. He will wash his hands in her blood and carry the stains with him like a badge of honor.

The only issue is that Marlene—well, she's not easy to kill, even one-handed. She has a sword, and she can fight, and she does. It's messy and ugly between them. Regulus hits her broken arm. Marlene knees him between his legs. They kick, and punch, and snarl at each other with enough feral energy that neither of them seem to have much humanity left in them at the moment. It's just violence. *They're* just violence.

Regulus doesn't stop, and then he does when Marlene *makes* him, when she slams the hilt of her sword into his face and kicks out with her foot to knock him flat on his back. Without

even hesitating, she drives her sword down through the top of his shirt, over his shoulder, slicing fabric pin him there so he can't get up. She could have put it through his chest.

He wishes she did.

It would have hurt less than losing James.

"It's…not…real," Marlene croaks, pressing her boot down on his wrist to keep him from raising his dagger. "James…is…fine. That…wasn't…him. He's *alive."*

Regulus freezes, staring up at her, waiting. He waits, and waits, and waits for that to be true, needing it to be true, wanting it to be true so badly that he can't breathe.

Marlene swallows with effort, grimacing as she does it, clearly in pain. She jerks her chin forward to where Regulus left James' body. "Look. An…illusion. Not…real."

Slowly, Regulus cranes his head back to find James' corpse dissolving into mist the same way Vanity's did. He watches, fixated, until the form of James fades away. The mist swirls up and drifts off, fading into the darkness.

An illusion.

Not real.

Like—okay, so. Okay, so not James. That wasn't James. It's not James. He's fine. He's alive. Regulus is just insane.

Okay.

Yeah, okay.

Regulus slumps back against the ground and makes some sort of noise that could be labeled as a the lead into a fucking mental breakdown, because he is both laughing and crying and falling apart and mending, all at once.

And, the thing is, Regulus *knew* deep down that whatever that was couldn't have been James, not really, because James—he would never say those things to Regulus, not for any reason, not even if he actually believed it. Even when he *did* think he hated Regulus, he never took it that far.

James isn't the kind of man who does things like that. Who says things like that. Who destroys people, just because he can, just because he has the power to. He can destroy Regulus, easy, no problem; it was just proven, and it wasn't even *him.*

It's possibly crazy, but after all of that, Regulus just wants to curl up in James' arms and go to sleep. He wants oblivion and safety. He wants to go home.

Marlene's boot lifts away from his wrist, and she tugs her sword from his shirt, which now has a hole in it and slips over his shoulder a bit. He doesn't care. He doesn't lift his dagger, doesn't stop crying or laughing, doesn't do anything other than lay there on the ground and try to cling to all the personal progress he's made recently, which was very nearly yanked right out from under him yet again.

Yet, somehow, he manages to keep it. It's either just him being too stubborn for his own good, or maybe his revelation was one worth believing in, because he keeps it close to his chest, warm and secure like James would be, if he were here.

I do deserve to live, Regulus thinks. *I deserve to try.*

"James," Regulus mumbles once he somehow manages to calm down. His eyes drift shut. "You better be okay. You better be perfectly fucking alright, because if you have so much as a bruise from bumping into a wall, I am going to lose my mind."

James, of course, cannot respond to him. Not because he's dead, though. He's not. He isn't. He isn't, he isn't, he *isn't.*

Perhaps James will send him something. That would be nice, simply to know that he's alive, that's all. But, really, here on the other side of it, Regulus feels deeply sure that he is, and he tells himself it's not denial. That—that *thing* was just another nightmare concocted by the maze, and Regulus refuses to fall for it again. James would—if he *did* somehow find his way into the arena, then he'd definitely kiss Regulus first, speak second.

Regulus knows James. He knows his fiancé, and whatever the fuck that thing was *wasn't* him. So, okay, it just looked like him, and it got into Regulus' head, and it played with Regulus' emotions. Kind of embarrassing now, really.

However, there's no space or time for embarrassment, because there's a forceful nudge of a boot against his arm that has him peeling open his eyes to glare at Marlene, but she's not even looking at him. She's already backing up, making a quiet, muffled noise of urgency that has him quickly getting to his feet. When he swivels, he outright *groans* at the sight of green fog spilling out down the passageway.

That's another thing, there's barely any time to rest in this arena. People aren't meant to be pushed to limits like these; yes, humans are creatures of endurance, but they can only endure for so long before they give out.

For fuck's sake, Regulus is *exhausted.* By the looks of things, so is Marlene, and yet they both share a brief look before they turn and take off running. Marlene is ahead of him, and she takes a corner into an open passageway, but by the time he reaches it, the opening has closed.

And, just like that, Regulus is alone again.

~•~

The way the camera cuts sharply brings James a mounting sense of discomfort. It fixes itself very abruptly on Bellatrix, who darts past a corner that just so happens to lead into a passage where Alice and Augusta are running down.

Ideally, Bellatrix would not stop.

Ideally, she would keep running.

Ideally, she would leave them be.

This is not an ideal world, and Bellatrix does stop. She doesn't keep running. She stands in place for a moment, breathing heavily, and then she starts backing up.

"Shit," Frank rasps. "Shit, shit, *shit.* Wait—"

There is no waiting. The moment Bellatrix reaches the opening again, she turns to see the other two outrunning the green fog. Augusta and Alice are quite busy trying to survive, and neither of them see Bellatrix until it's too late, until she's lifting her dagger with a grin spreading across her face.

It's Alice. That's all James can think. The dagger whips through the air quickly, but Alice is clearly the target, the one Bellatrix has chosen to kill, so James only has one second to tense himself in preparation for—

Augusta blocks it.

With herself.

It happens so fast that James hardly even makes sense of it at first, but Frank… Oh, Frank seems to get it immediately. A low, punched-out noise escapes him, breathless, something that hooks in James' chest and drags out a deep swell of sympathy from him. That's his

mother. It's Frank's *mother* standing there, a dagger sticking out of her chest where she stumbled in front of it, in front of Alice, on purpose.

Bellatrix laughs. She laughs and wiggles her fingers in a mocking wave when Alice skids to a stop and sucks in a sharp breath, their gaze flicking from Augusta, then to Bellatrix.

Still laughing, Bellatrix skips off, carrying on like she never even stopped, still on the run from hands that burst free from the hedges behind her.

"Ah," Augusta chokes out, trying to take a step forward, even managing to make it a little further, and then she crumbles to her knees, wheezing. She cups her hand around the dagger and falls back on her hip, blinking rapidly, looking dazed.

"Augusta," Alice whispers, tripping a little in their haste to crouch down beside Augusta, reaching out with a shaking hand to touch her shoulder. "Let me see. Just—hold on, let me look, okay? Don't—don't pull it out."

"Fatal," Frank croaks. James looks over to see him staring at his mum blankly, his face slack with shock. "It's—it's fatal. The wound—she's not—she can't survive that. It's—"

"Frank," James says very carefully, tugging his hand free from Dorcas' to reach out and gently put it on Frank's arm. He means to say something else, but his mouth hangs open, because he doesn't know what to say. Not about this.

Augusta coughs and immediately spits up blood. She shakes her head, squeezing her eyes shut tight for a moment, then looks up to meet Alice's gaze. Wheezing, she says, "Kid, it's nothing to look at. You—you need to go."

"Frank," Alice declares, their voice rising in pitch. "Frank can send a—something. He can—he'll be able to—"

"Nothing is going to help, and it'd be a waste on me, especially so early. He knows that," Augusta tells them firmly, heaving out a harsh breath and flexing her fingers around the handle of the dagger. "The fog—is it still…?"

Alice glances quickly behind them, then grimaces. "Yeah, it's still coming. Augusta, we have to go."

"We can't. *You—"*

"Shut up. Don't even try it."

"Kid," Augusta starts.

"I'm *not* a kid, certainly not yours!" Alice bursts out, seeming quite hysterical. "But you know who is? *Frank.* And I'll be damned if I let you die here, because it'll break his fucking heart, so *we* are going. Now."

Augusta coughs again, hanging her head forward to spit blood on the ground. It seems to take effort to lift her head and focus on Alice once more. "No. No, we're not."

"Augusta—" Alice cuts themselves off with a harsh noise low in their throat when Augusta proceeds to yank the dagger out of her chest, crying out and crumbling forward. "No! No, what are you doing?! Why would you—"

"No use in dragging it out," Augusta gasps out, still stern and no-nonsense even now, like this. "Only one of us could make it back to him anyway, and it was always going to be you. He loves you, you know. Can't imagine why, but he does."

"Oh, you—you *stupid* old bitty," Alice hisses, their face twisting as they slump down next to Augusta and try to cover her wound with their hand. "How many times have Frank and I told you? It's not like *that.* We're not—"

"It doesn't have to be," Augusta whispers, her gaze latching onto Alice. "You think loving someone like that is the only thing that matters? It doesn't matter how my son loves you; the point is that he loves you."

"He loves you, too," Alice says.

"I'm his mother. He's the only person in this world I love, but I'm not the only person in this world *he* loves," Augusta confesses hoarsely. "I'm not the only person who loves him. You do, too, so you've got to go now. For him."

"I won't," Alice announces with a harsh sniffle, blinking rapidly. "I'm—I'm not your child. You can't just tell me what the fuck to do, and I'm *not* leaving you like this."

"I know that losing your parents in the riot hurt you, Alice, but staying with me now won't make it hurt less."

"Shut up. Don't talk about my parents."

"Defiant, insolent child," Augusta scolds, her eyes fluttering shut. "You want to know why I never liked you?"

"Because I took your son away from you."

"Mm, no. Because he was better off with you. I couldn't treat him right. I tried, but I didn't know how to let go. To do right by him, I had to let him go, and I couldn't figure out how."

Alice is silent for a second, and then they reach down with their free hand to grab Augusta's bloodstained one, and they both hold on tight as Augusta rattles out another cough, blood on her teeth. "I'm—I'm sorry I said you were a bad mother."

"I wasn't always," Augusta rasps, "but that's what I became."

"Mum," Frank breathes out, stepping forward, tears shining in his eyes. All eyes are on him, and James can't help but watch him with a pang in his chest. Frank lifts his hand to reach towards the screen like he can reach out and touch his mother one last time, and it's quite possibly some of the most heartbreaking shit James has ever seen.

"It's okay," Alice whispers, and when they blink, the tears spill out of their eyes. "It's okay, Augusta. He forgives you for it, for all of it. You did your best. You can—you can let go now."

"You've got him?" Augusta slurs out.

Alice's expression collapses as they draw Augusta's limp hand to their chest, whimpering, "I've got him."

Augusta doesn't respond. She lays there, bleeding out slowly, inching closer to death by the second as the fog inches closer to them both, and Alice doesn't move. Alice cradles Augusta's hand in their own and sits there with her, quietly weeping over her while, right here, Frank does, too.

~•~

Sirius hears her before he sees her. The maniacal laughter is his warning, and then Bellatrix is darting out of an opening up ahead in the passage in front of him, dancing on light feet to skip out of range of the hands reaching from the hedges.

When she pops out, the hedge shudders closed, and Bellatrix turns with another breathless laugh, only for her breath to hitch when her eyes land on him. She's empty-handed, but Sirius tenses up at the sight of her anyway, because he knows that she—out of everyone—poses a proper threat, weapon or no weapon. Her eyes positively *gleam.*

"There you are," Bellatrix declares gleefully, as if genuinely delighted to see him. "I've been looking for you for *ages."*

"Have you?" Sirius asks flatly, holding still as he tracks every move she makes with his gaze. She's coming closer leisurely, hand lazily draped over her belt, a wicked smile on her face.

"You would not *believe* the troubles I've had to face on my journey to you," Bellatrix complains. "First, I lost Narcissa, which—can you believe that shit? You wouldn't have happened to run into her lately, would you?"

"Nope," Sirius lies cheerfully. "Hey, maybe she's dead."

Bellatrix stills briefly, and then she laughs. "Well, that'd make things simpler, wouldn't it? All these cannons today—hey, maybe *Regulus* is dead. Poor little munchkin, all alone, only a year out from his arena and facing the physical manifestation of all the ugliest little reminders. I mean, the hands? Can't imagine he'd handle that well. What do *you* think?"

"I think you better shut your fucking mouth before I feed you this spear," Sirius snaps.

"Well, that's no way to talk to family, Sirius," Bellatrix chides, easing closer to him. "But, well, our family has never been particularly proper, has it? Why break the tradition?"

"My thoughts exactly," Sirius agrees, and then she's flinging herself at him with a snarl while he meets her halfway.

Now, this—oh, *this* is fucking brutal, and Sirius *relishes* in it. He's at full-throttle, giving it his all, no concern for holding himself back or maintaining some inner measurement of sanity he can hold onto when the shame creeps in. She is in many ways his equal; the eldest sibling, the one with the most kills under her belt, the biggest threat; ruthless and willing to do whatever it takes to survive. She's one to lose her collective shit more easily than most, like him, the both of them always one little push away from going too far to come back from; the only difference is that Sirius does everything he can to keep his balance, and Bellatrix laughs before she leaps.

Bellatrix is *fast.* She's so quick it's hard to keep up with her, but Sirius does. She has him disarmed in seconds, kicking his spear away as she digs her nails into the side of his throat and spits right in his face. He grabs her by the back of her hair and *yanks,* slamming his knee up into her pelvis and making her stumble back with a gasp.

Sirius doesn't give her time to recover. He tackles her right to the ground, then instantly gets shoved onto his back with a thud. Bellatrix punches him, full-on decks him in the face so hard that his head snaps to the side. Her nails dig into his scalp when she grabs *him* by the hair and slams his head back into the ground. Cursing sharply, Sirius swings out with his elbow to clip her in the side of the head, shoving her to the side. She uses the momentum to scramble forward, trying to get to his discarded spear on the ground.

Hand darting out, Sirius grabs her by the ankle and drags her back, hissing, "Oh, no you don't."

"You selfish little *brat!"* Bellatrix shrieks, the rest of her words muffled as he braces his hands against the back of her head to grind her face in the ground. She spits out dirt and grass when her head comes back up, and he slams it forward again, satisfied by the *crunch* he hears.

Sirius slams her face into the ground again, quite smug by the whole thing until she jerks her foot up behind him and kicks him with the heel of her boot *hard,* right on his spine. His back bows on as he lurches forward with a groan, and the moment Bellatrix is free, she's crawling frantically for the spear.

Well, great. Just great. There she goes, and—yep, she has it. Lovely. Sirius grumbles under his breath as he pushes to his feet at the same time that she hops to hers and swivels towards him. Her nose is visibly broken, blood gushing, staining her teeth as she grins at him, wide and malicious.

Huffing out a laugh, Sirius shakes his head and lazily holds his arms out only a bit and lets them clap back to his sides. He dips his head at her, arching an eyebrow as he gives her a half-grin and says, "Well? Come on."

"This isn't the first time I tried to kill you," Bellatrix informs him, tossing the spear from hand-to-hand, eyes bright.

"What happened last time?" Sirius coos. "Did you miss?"

Bellatrix instantly scowls. "No. I pushed you down the stairs. You just got back up."

"Yeah," Sirius says with a hum. "I tend to do that."

"Not this time," Bellatrix hisses, then proceeds to launch the spear at him with a grunt.

The thing is, Sirius has spent over a decade being prepared for situations just like this, and whether he remembers it all or not, most of it is motion-memory. Bellatrix is fast, and she's strong, but Sirius sees it coming. He anticipates it, so he's already leaning to the side as the spear hurdles through the air at him, and it's insane even to him as he does it, the quick snap of his hand as he reaches out and catches it.

Sirius catches it.

Bellatrix hisses like a cat being dunked in water. Sirius of course takes this opportunity to smirk at her and straighten up, giving the spear a lazy twirl. It's not her weapon, not one she knows the way she knows daggers. While it's not exactly difficult to use, there is a difference between the way a novice handles one and the way an expert does. Sirius is the expert.

To prove so, he doesn't throw it, and he keeps it close to his body as she runs right for him. He's steady, waiting, watching her come closer, closer, too close—

Sirius dips and hooks the handle of the spear at her ankles, then sweeps her right off her feet. She hits her back with a thud, gasping, and he brings the spear up, preparing to drive it right back down. Bellatrix gives a truly animalistic shriek and flings herself back, scrambling up against the hedge.

Hands immediately burst free to grab onto her, which only makes her screech more. She rips herself free, still screaming, and Sirius blinks—

Sirius blinks—

Sirius—

~•~

Regulus knows the instant that he hears Bellatrix screaming that he has to get to her, because there's only one person in this arena who can make her sound like *that.* Utterly furious, seething with rage, pushed completely over the edge. Only Sirius has ever been able to get her to that point.

So, Regulus runs, because he—well, honestly, he doesn't think Bellatrix could beat Sirius, not really. In his mind, no one can beat Sirius, because Sirius is—he's the best. At everything. Maybe he thinks that way because he's the little brother, or maybe because it fills him with this safe, bittersweet nostalgia for when he was a child trailing after Sirius with wide eyes full of wonder at absolutely anything he did, no matter how simple or how foolish. Sirius did a cartwheel when he was nine, and Regulus thought he was the coolest person in the whole world.

Maybe he thinks that way because it's true, because Sirius has always been capable of doing absolutely anything he puts his mind to. Regulus' admiration for that had soured when they drifted apart, and then it just infuriated him, but he always believed it. He still believes it after all this time.

So, you can imagine how it feels for him to take a corner and jerk to a breathless halt as he watches Bellatrix shove an unmoving Sirius in the chest, and then he does move. He does. He tips right back into the hedge behind him, into the hands reaching, and Regulus watches them wrap around him and drag him back into it. Sirius is yanked into the hedge by the hands, disappearing, and then the cannon sounds.

Regulus' whole body goes cold instantly.

Bellatrix *crows* with delight, throwing her hands up in the air and cackling as she does a little dance, hopping up and down in a sure sign of victory.

"I killed Sirius Black! I killed Sirius Black!" Bellatrix chants, sing-song, and then she swivels to see him. Her face absolutely lights up. "Munchkin! Did you see? *I killed Sirius Black!"*

She comes skipping right towards him, utterly triumphant, bloodied and bruised and glowing despite it all. Regulus stares at her blankly, not moving, not doing anything as she reaches him and immediately snatches him close with a laugh. She jostles him and ruffles his hair, beaming.

"I said—" Regulus' mouth is dry, and he swallows, feeling cold. He feels so—he feels—he doesn't feel anything. He can't feel anything. "I said only I could. I said—"

"Oh, I know, but you weren't around," Bellatrix tells him, clicking her tongue. "Oh well. All's well that ends well, I say. That's done now, yeah? He had it coming."

"I said," Regulus repeats in a rasp, and he can't—he isn't sure what comes next. What does he do now? His tongue feels too big in his mouth, and his chest feels too tight for his lungs, and suddenly, inexplicably, he doesn't know who he is.

"Hey, have you seen Cissy? I lost her yesterday, so I'm still looking for—" Bellatrix stops, her mouth hanging open. A strangled exhale escapes her, and she blinks violently before slowly looking down. Regulus does, too, staring at where he has buried his dagger between the high point of her ribs, angled up to drive into her heart. Her head lifts, and their eyes meet. Confused, she whispers, "Munchkin?"

Regulus' vision blurs, and he's not entirely sure why. A choked noise falls from Bellatrix's mouth as he shoves his dagger forward and *twists,* repeating, "I said," and then snatching the dagger back out, only to drive it in again while falling into the pattern of, "I said," stab, "I said," stab, "I said—"

Bellatrix eventually falls.

Another cannon sounds.

Regulus' ears ring.

It's like gravity, yeah? Because, your whole life, gravity is a constant. You depend on it. You can't really exist in this world without it, because what happens without it? No gravity, nothing to tie you to this world, and then you're gone. You float away, up and up and up, weightless and lonely and lost amongst the stars, but the brightest has gone out, and the sky is dark, and there's no gravity, and where are you, how do you get back down, who are you, how do you get back home?

Slowly, Regulus sits down. Well, he just sort of finds his legs folding beneath him, and then he's there on the ground, staring impassively at his blood-covered dagger in his bloodstained hands. He doesn't feel sick.

He doesn't feel anything.

What about *me and you?* What about that? What about the fact that Regulus doesn't know who he is, all of a sudden? He's never lived in a world that didn't have Sirius in it. He's always been Sirius' little brother. Always his little brother. Always that. And now, now what, he—he doesn't get to be that? He can't be that? Does he stop being that if Sirius—if Sirius is —

Then who the fuck is he? *What* is he? Regulus' very sense of identity is stamped with Sirius' signature. He is who he is because of Sirius, and he can never be anything else, and he doesn't even really want to be. Whatever this is—whatever it is—whatever it may be, it's an alien concept to him. It's like trying to visualize nothing. You can't. He can't. He is that now, just nothing, a blank canvas. Empty.

There's a rustle, the sound of boots hitting the ground, then a warm hand pressing into Regulus' shoulder.

Regulus looks up, blinks, is dead probably. Has to be. Surely the saccharine flood of relief in his clementine-brittle bones is just the fluff-cloud security of the afterlife taking the shape of his brother peering down at him almost curiously. Regulus doesn't even remember dying. It didn't even hurt.

"Hey," Sirius says, and no, the heat is still sticky and thick, and the underbelly of the maze is getting dimmer as the echo of the sun asks them to say their goodbyes; it has a journey to go on, and will return tomorrow. *Hey,* like hello; *Hey,* like the instinctive greeting from one human to another; *Hey,* like life, still alive, still here and breathing and—

"Hey? *Hey?!"* Regulus bursts out, sounding quite shrill, and Sirius jolts in place, rearing back, visibly startled by Regulus scrambling off the ground to slam his hands against his chest. His own chest heaves, and he can't breathe, and he feels—he feels—he can feel again, somehow, inexplicably, and he is little brother and alive and the world makes sense now. "I thought you fucking *died,* and all you say is *hey?!"*

"You did? What? Wait, what happened?" Sirius asks, looking supremely confused.

"You—you fucking idiot," Regulus chokes out, shoving him again, and then immediately and helplessly reeling him into a hug that likely does nothing to clear up his confusion.

Sirius has always been more readily affectionate than Regulus, even when they were just kids. But, when they were just kids, Regulus would hug Sirius, and hang off his arm, and slam into his back until he fell over, just to climb all over him and wrestle on the ground, then fall silent and go still and hold their breaths when they heard the creak of weight on the stairs, knowing and dreading the approach of their parents; either one, both, the shadow that befell them and frowned upon any sign of two brothers daring to have *fun.*

Regulus doesn't think he's stepped up to hug Sirius first since he was fourteen years old, maybe even before that, maybe it's been fourteen years since the last, fourteen years and fourteen seconds and countless deaths. It doesn't matter when he found the place to stop for whatever reason; it matters that, despite that and after all this time with every single fucked up thing in between, he finds himself crossing the distance to do it again.

"Oh, you *really* thought I died," Sirius notes with a weary sort of chuckle. His voice gets smaller. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to scare you."

"I'm not scared of anything," Regulus croaks, because he is scared of too many things to even count, because is scared of everything and everything itself.

Sirius ruffles the back of his hair, releasing a fond sort of noise, and then he grabs the lobe of Regulus' ear and twists it, gently tugging on it like he used to when they were kids and he wanted to make Regulus groan and swat at him. "Sure you're not. Come on, get it together, Reggie. You're giving me all sorts of blackmail material right now, literally as we speak. I'll tell you to do something, and you won't, and I'll say, *oh, but don't you remember that time we were in the hunger games, and you thought I died, and then you hugged me and refused to let me go,* and you'll say, *that didn't happen,* and so then I will have no choice but to pull up the live footage, because just to remind you, this *will* exist as video evidence, which I am not afraid to resort to pulling out to win arguments, despite the—"

"And I'm over it," Regulus cuts in gruffly, finally, though he isn't entirely sure it's true. He is sure that Sirius would have rambled as long as Regulus needed him to, just to stay like that, but that's not feasible for either of them now, not here.

"There he is," Sirius says, voice warm with amusement, and he claps Regulus on the shoulder, squeezing briefly before shifting aside to tilt his head down at Bellatrix. She's slumped over on her front. "What happened to her? Did I do that?"

"Um," Regulus mumbles, clearing his throat.

"I—I had a bit of a moment. I think really loud screams sort of… Well, anyway, I'm noticing a pattern." Sirius clicks his tongue in disapproval, then reaches out with his boot to nudge Bellatrix over. He goes still, then looks at Regulus, gaze trailing down to where he dropped the bloody dagger as he frantically stood up before. "Oh. You, um."

Regulus coughs. "I…also had a bit of a moment."

"Right."

"I wasn't—"

"No, no, it's—fine. Really, Reggie, it's…" Sirius trails off, gaze flicking to Bellatrix again.

"I didn't mean to," Regulus whispers.

Sirius' gaze snaps back to him. "I know. You were—I mean, you thought I was dead. Trust me, I wouldn't be any better. I probably would have been…much worse. I just—I guess I—"

"It's not your fault," Regulus offers, because Sirius seems to be struggling to articulate what he's feeling at the moment, but the thing is, Regulus has been feeling like that since he was fifteen. He knows the burden of being someone's reason to fight. To kill. He knows. And now, on the other side of it, he knows it's not that simple.

"How many times did you…?" Sirius falters yet again.

Regulus can't bear to look at Bellatrix, and he can't remember how many times he stabbed her. All he knows is that, in the moment, he wasn't sure how to stop. But, here and now, he's suddenly struck with this deep sense of—grief. For Bella. For his cousin, his favorite, his past where he could have never imagined that he would actually, sincerely kill her. Or anyone.

Maybe she was insane. Maybe she was in a fucked up world just like the rest of them. Either way, regardless of motives or mental facilities, she was family.

Oh. Oh no.

"Cissa," Regulus croaks, his eyes going wide.

"Regulus," Sirius says very carefully.

"Oh, fucking hell, *Andy,"* Regulus chokes out, taking a sharp step back and pressing a shaking hand to his stomach. He just killed his own cousin, and it hurts him, because in the same way he will always, always carry the harsh sting of loving his parents, he has love for her, too. But he didn't just kill his favorite cousin. He killed *their* sister. Narcissa's. Andromeda's. While Narcissa may not know now, may never know, there's a good chance that Andromeda just *watched it happen.*

And it was brutal. It was bloody. It was betrayal.

"Don't. Don't do that, okay?" Sirius tells him, his voice strained. "This is—it's the fucking hunger games, Regulus. I was going to kill her. I *was.* I would have. Can you blame me?"

"It wasn't you. It was me."

"I don't blame you."

"But they might," Regulus whispers.

Sirius sits on that for a second, and then says, "Well, okay. Fine. They can blame you, and blame me too, but they're blaming the wrong people. Maybe it was your dagger and my influence, but who put her here in the first place? Who put her here, and put us here, and put the dagger in your hand?"

"It was still my dagger, and my hand, and that—I can never change that," Regulus murmurs. "We can blame the world's problems on the beat of a butterfly's wings, but that doesn't help make the world a better place, Sirius. Maybe I'm not the beginning of what got her here, but I was the end of *her."*

"She was trying to *kill* me. She nearly did. She would have tried to kill you, too, if she knew you weren't her ally." Sirius sighs wearily. "Look, I know what you're saying, okay? I do, and

it's good—it's really good to do the sort of self-reflection that seeks out your own sense of morality, but here? Regulus, *here?* Things like that don't exist here. You can't find it, and trying is only going to tear you apart, and there's no *time* for that. You have to keep going, and then you can fall apart after. Just like me. Just like all of us. We worry about all of that when we have the time and the space for it, but here and now? We *don't."*

Regulus swallows harshly and drops his hand, staring at Sirius with this growing pit in his stomach, the insides of himself feeling cavernous. Slowly, his gaze crawls to Bellatrix, and the mere sight of her makes his eyes sting immediately.

He remembers burying his face into her hair when he was young and laughing, laughing, laughing as she whispered rude things about Sirius in his ear, making Sirius pout and huff and go to Narcissa for attention. He remembers the way she rolled her eyes, the effortless way she swung her own dagger between her fingers, the tiny snarl at the corner of her mouth when Andromeda talked about Ted. He remembers the way she danced in the rain, arms held out, face tilted to the sky.

Sirius doesn't have the benefit of remembering, and Regulus is burdened with the memories. What a difference the curse of recollection can make.

"Regulus," Sirius insists. When Regulus glances back at him, he looks sad. Slowly, he shakes his head. "Now isn't the time. We have to go. We have to keep going. Me and you, remember?"

Regulus breathes in, then out, then gives a sharp nod before reaching down to pick up his dagger. When he stands back up, he meets Sirius' eyes steadily. "Me and you."

With that, Sirius goes to pick up his spear, and together, they walk away, falling into perfect step as they go, leaving the body of their eldest cousin behind.

As they go, Regulus can't resist glancing back, feeling a sharp pulse in his chest.

Bellatrix died with tears on her cheeks.

~•~

"I'm sorry," James whispers, squeezing Frank's shoulder as he and Dorcas crowd him in a secluded corner, having saved him from sympathetic sponsors and hollow condolences.

Augusta died the same moment Sirius was snatched into the hedge. There wasn't even a second of confusion for anyone here, because it was displayed on the screen, and they saw it happen. Alice had continuously dragged her back away from the fog as she bled out, crying and screaming through clenched teeth, but when the cannon sounded, they collapsed on the ground next to her body and wept.

It was devastating to witness. It was even more devastating seeing Frank's expression crumble as he inhaled a choked breath and exhaled a sob, reaching up to cover his mouth as his shoulders shook. The sound of him crying had seemed to fill the whole room and everyone—every single person—had been silent with sympathy or discomfort. No one thrived on it. Not one damn person found it the least bit entertaining.

In the end, Alice had no choice but to get up and run, and that's what they're doing now. As they go, they just repeatedly chant, "I'm sorry, Frank, I'm so sorry."

It's a chilling moment for all, but for Frank, it's something beyond that. It's the loss of his mother, and regardless of the relationship, that's never easy. Saying sorry can't fix it. Saying sorry can't bring her back. Saying sorry can't do anything.

Yet, that's all they can do.

But, apparently not, because Dorcas swivels to cup Frank's cheek in her hand and tilt his face up, making him look her in the eyes as she whispers, "Alice. They're still in this, Frank. Alice is still there, okay? I—I know it's unfair, and I know it's fucked up, but you can't do this now. Not here."

"You said—" James swallows and ducks his head forward as he lowers his voice, dragging his hand down to rub soothing circles on Frank's back. "You said this is an arena for us just as much as it is for them, remember? The day is almost over now. Just a few more hours and then night will fall, and I'll—I'll go back to your suite with you, yeah? I'll stay with you, whatever you need, I promise. Can I do that?"

"No," Dorcas answers, and James blinks at her. "I haven't had the chance to talk to you yet, but you'll be busy tonight, and so will Frank. Right, Frank?"

There's a pause, and then Frank heaves out a harsh breath, squeezing his eyes shut. His face twitches through multiple expressions before he reaches up to swipe his tears away. When his hands drop, his eyes are open, locked onto Dorcas, and his jaw is set. "Yeah," he rasps. "Yeah, I will."

"Er," James says, "what exactly are we doing tonight?"

Dorcas glances around, then leans in so close their noses are almost touching before she whispers, "Starting a war."

Chapter End Notes

let's get into it!

sirius and regulus... they are Everything to me. no, you don't understand, i would die for them. just!!! ahhh their little fight in the beginning, and them fighting TOGETHER. it's so. it's literally insane. they!!!

anyway, regulus and sirius being playful with each other is so special to me. regulus actually laughing and smiling, despite everything! that's what we call growth, people!!! he's come so far 😭

and then cut to marlene. oooooh, marlene my beloved. yall have no IDEA just how much i love her, okay? no, shhh, don't look at all those close calls to death she has, look at me, look into my eyes, believe me when i say i love her so, so much.

let's talk about boggarts:

alice and augusta very much Not Liking Each Other, and yet they share the same fear. well, mostly. it blended together. augusta just feared her son dead; alice feared frank dead by being shot in the head, due to losing their parents the same way.

marlene's boggart was very interesting imo, bc it's her facing vastly 2 different fears that mix very, very well. her fear of being a "monster" who can't save the people she sets out to, a "monster" she became after her first games, versus seeing a version of herself she was terrified to become—not who she was before her first games, but who the hallows would have wanted her to be, who they would have loved, and the person she COULDN'T be, but the person who could have done better than her; a better mentor, more beloved by the hallows, less of a strain on her family, who struggled with who she DID become. so like, her greatest fear is who she is and also who she thinks everyone wanted/needed her to become. she fears being herself and being anyone else. its—yeah, that kind of introspection makes me FERAL.

and then regulus' boggart being james. less so james himself (though, a little bit james, because james makes him weak/defenseless, and that's a scary thing) and more so that whole journey james as the boggart went on. showing up and being in danger -> calling out regulus on all his insecurities/fears -> wanting to kill regulus -> dying in front of regulus. like, that was literally regulus' worst nightmare, so this poor man can't catch a break 😭

now let's talk about deaths:

rip eli, you're gone but never forgotten. lester and dixon messed with the wrong family; not narcissa sliding in and betraying her own allies to save sirius, she's an icon!!! and augusta... oh, that one was ROUGH. augusta and alice lowkey being a distorted version of mags and finnick 😭 poor frank :(

be honest, how many of you thought for a second that sirius died when he went into the hedge? well, if you weren't fooled, regulus sure was. like i said, this man can't catch a break. that whole moment of like, how regulus just Loses It. like sirius has been his whole world since he was a little baby, and then he thinks sirius is dead and it's like his world just. Ends. 😭

that whole bit with bellatrix. rough stuff. because like, bellatrix was taken by surprise. she didn't see that coming. and like, regulus being so upset about it... VERY ROUGH STUFF!!!

did i cover everything? idek bc there's so much. i know that next chapter, things get—wild, that's for sure. it's the last you'll ever see of the arena, so get ready to say your goodbyes now!!!

anyway we've reached the point where it's easier for me to list who is alive than who's dead, so...

tributes remaining: 10
marlene
majesty

narcissa
alecto
emmeline
alice
rabastan
asher
regulus
sirius

right, yeah, that about covers it, ig.

The Breakout

Chapter Notes

hello, all!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-mentions of guns/gun violence
-brief mention of aquaphobia
-references to past death
-references to past violence
-depictions of violence
-mentions of blood
-brief mentions of having to cut people (it's necessary, not for violence, you'll see what i mean)
-depictions of injuries/wounds
-implied dissociating? (not sirius, and it's not said or even really described, but it's—definitely happening)

i do believe that's all. this one is another heavy one, folks. take care, everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You don't have to stay, you know," Pandora murmurs.

Remus swallows harshly and tears his eyes away from the screen. Sirius and Regulus have gotten separated again. Everyone else has been mixed up and twisted all around, so now Emmeline is with Alice, Marlene is still alone, Narcissa and Alecto have found each other, Rabastan and Asher have not lost each other because they've refused to let each other's hands go while not fighting (rather genius if you ask Remus; everyone should be operating under the laws of the buddy system), and Majesty literally won't stop moving, even though it's growing dark inside the maze.

Poor Asher is suffering some rather gruesome wounds from the creatures she and Rabastan were fighting, and now it doesn't look like she's going to make it through the night, but Rabastan has food and water for them, so there's that. Alice had a complete breakdown when telling Emmeline what happened to Augusta, and they apologized to Frank over and over while hyperventilating until Emmeline cupped their face firmly and made them stop, and breathe, and settle down; Alice is silent now, not speaking or doing anything at all, but they

both came across a cache in the maze with water and food, so they also got to eat and stock up a little.

Narcissa did not inform Alecto that she killed Dixon, but the tribute banners have played in the sky, so they all know who is dead. Narcissa knows her sister is dead; she didn't cry, didn't speak, just swallowed harshly and stepped away from Alecto, who actually seemed to reach for her as if to comfort her. She didn't try after that. Like Rabastan, Narcissa has food and water in her bag, so she and Alecto also get to eat tonight. Majesty has come across a cache as well, the third and last according to Rita. Remus thinks it's just a set up for the next few days of the tributes being pushed to the limit.

The only person who hasn't gotten food or water after all that transpired throughout the day is Marlene. It's night three, and she's only had water from rain both nights, but no food otherwise. She's… Well, Remus doesn't know her very well, but he watched the highlights of her games just like everyone else, and she's clearly being pushed to that point of survival again, starving and thirsty and in pain. Her arm is really bad, her throat is swollen and bruised, and she looks fucking *exhausted.* Out of everyone, she didn't get one moment of peace today.

Regulus also has no supplies and hasn't been led to a cache, but he had breakfast with Sirius, at least. Sirius, of course, has his bag of supplies, so he's fine in that regard.

They are, however, separated once more, and Remus is not comforted by how far away they are from one another. They've been led to opposite sides of the maze, and Sirius, worryingly, has been isolated far from everyone else. He's okay, as far as physical means. He has food and water and isn't in danger.

He was, though. For a second, for a moment, he was…he…

It's been a long fucking day full of hit after hit after hit. First, there was the crimson river that nearly took Regulus a second time, and it had been really fucked up to watch. Remus' chest had been tight, his breath held as he watched Regulus and Sirius call for each other. He thought then and there that Regulus was going to die, and honestly, no part of him had wanted it, even as a guilty thought. He'd been *repulsed* by what he saw, sitting there clinging to Pandora's hand as she wept.

But Regulus—oh, it was amazing, like James said. Because it was like watching something shift. Remus could see it on his face, not just survival, but the desire to live. To try. To hope. And Sirius, too. It was messy and beautiful, watching them decide to try, together, both of them. No more of that nonsense of who deserves to live more, who is needed more, because they both deserve to live and they're both needed.

Now, obviously, Remus has no fucking clue how it would be possible for both of them to manage that, and it was blatant defiance, so some part of him had waited for them both to be struck down immediately. But they weren't. They're still here, still trying, even now. Remus doesn't know what will come, but he does know, if anyone can pull it off, it'll be them.

The hits didn't stop after that, however. Eli. The green fog that doesn't just hurt, but kills, so how the fuck is Remus here right now? What was the point of the experimentation? He doesn't have the answers and didn't have the time to figure it out, because there was more. Boggarts. Augusta. Bellatrix. Sirius…

Oh, Sirius fighting Bellatrix. That was—Remus didn't enjoy it, exactly. He was on edge the entire time, but there was a moment. Just that fucking moment where Sirius caught the spear. He *caught* it. Remus nearly folded in half, then hated himself a little for the reaction. But then—but then Sirius went away. Bellatrix screamed, and Sirius slipped away.

Remus is pretty sure he died for a second. It felt like… He doesn't even know how to describe it. The world stopped. Sirius slipped away, was yanked into the wall of the maze, there was a cannon, and the world stopped.

It had lasted only a second, only one where Remus didn't even get to fully grasp what he was feeling, and he's still sure that it was the worst second of his life.

Immediately after, the camera cut away, and Rita showed up on the screen to reveal that it was Augusta who died. When it did cut back to Bellatrix, it was to show Regulus killing her.

And then Sirius was there. Remus has no idea how. He suspects Sirius doesn't even know, due to his memory issues. Was he spit out the other side of the maze? Did he climb over? Was he held inside the hedge, then just pushed back out again? There wasn't one scratch on him, other than the few bruises and tiny cuts from previous fights, but not from the hands. It's—well, obviously Remus doesn't want Sirius to get hurt or die, but it didn't make *sense.*

There was no time to think about it, and really, Remus doesn't even care. He genuinely doesn't care, because Sirius is still here, still alive, still surviving. That's what matters.

It is growing darker in the maze now, as well as in the Hallow. Usually, James would be back by this point, but he hasn't returned, and Remus… Remus is so fucking tired. It's not long before he has no choice but to go back to his cell, and he sort of just wants to go now, so he can curl up and cry in peace and deal with all of this alone, because it's weighing on him really fucking heavy, and he's stuck in this habitual need to keep it together in front of everyone else and break apart alone.

Pandora must know this, because she's giving him the out he needs. *You don't have to stay, you know.* Doesn't he? Shouldn't he? Just to check on James, at least.

"I can—I should wait for James," Remus mumbles.

"Remus, you don't have to do that if it's better for you to go. I can check on James. You can check on him in the morning. If you need to just—be done tonight, and get some rest, and recover alone, that's fine. I'm here, too."

"I know that, but I promised Sirius—"

"Sirius wouldn't want you to tear yourself apart trying to take care of everyone else," Pandora murmurs with a tired smile. She's been crying a lot, and she looks weary, sounds weary, clearly feels as weary as all of them. "You've been helping me so much, even just tonight, and it's okay to need to be alone. It's okay. I'll check in with James when he comes in, then send him off to bed; you can get a hold of him in the morning. It's one night. Honestly, what difference can one night make?"

Remus hesitates, because he knows things can change in a blink, in less than one night even, but in the end, he relents. He relents because it's all the same, it's one day full of nightmares after the next, and they have to choke on it over and over with no reprieve, just like Sirius said to him once. *We swallow it. We choke on it, year after year after year, because what else can we do? That's all we can do.*

What else can Remus do?

"Thanks, Pandora," Remus whispers, reaching out to squeeze her hand, then eases away to grab his mask, put it on, and leave as he grants himself the space he needs to choke alone.

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"Wait, so it's—it's just empty?" James blurts out, sitting on the edge of his seat in Dorcas' small suite, his hands buried into his hair as he stares at her incredulously. "Where did—what happened to everyone else?"

Dorcas gives him a pained look as she drops off a black crate on the coffee table in between them. "James…"

"No," James whispers. "They—my whole district? My home?"

"Some people got out," Dorcas murmurs. "I don't know all the numbers, but Lily did say your parents are safe."

"Fuck," James chokes out, reaching up to cover his face with both hands, his shoulders hunched.

District six. People he's known his whole life. A fucking ghost town now, because of Riddle. What about Mary? Bingley? Their family. What about Sirius and Regulus' family, too? Andromeda, Ted, little Dora. What about Barty and his family? What about Mayor Aberforth, and Dotty from down the street, and Quiverlee who sold muffins at the market for as long as James can remember? What about—

"Uh, what—why—why do you have those?" Huey speaks up, his voice strained enough that James lifts his head.

Oh.

Guns.

Dorcas has guns.

"Well, what did you think?" Dorcas snaps, holding out a gun to Frank, who takes it with his jaw clenched. "Did you think we'd just break people out of the arena without any trouble? Don't be naive, Huey. It doesn't help."

"You said we wouldn't be breaking them out!"

"No, I said we wouldn't be going to the arena. We are absolutely helping break them out. Now, take a fucking gun."

Huey bites his lip, then awkwardly reaches out to grab the gun, eyebrows furrowed. "I have no idea how to use this."

"Point, shoot, hope you don't miss," Dorcas informs him, her voice clipped. She holds the next gun out to James, who takes it with a frown. It feels—odd. He's never held a gun before. It's cold. Heavy. "Now, we will obviously be doing our best to get through this as quietly as possible, but I can't promise that we won't have to fight at some point. And, well, the guns are necessary for an intimidation tactic, too."

"When we get to the gamemaker room," Frank says, and Dorcas nods. "Just one thing. McGonagall."

Dorcas snorts. "Let me handle Minerva."

"Sirius said she's not easily intimidated," James mumbles.

"I know Minerva," Dorcas tells him, taking her own gun and holding it much more comfortably than they all do. James can't help but stare at her, not entirely sure he's not looking at a stranger. She's a part of a secret, underground organization for rebels and a revolution; yesterday, she was just his stylist and friend. "She's in the Order, too, believe it or not."

Frank hisses between his teeth and spits out, "What?! So, what the fuck is she doing with the arena?! She—"

"Frank," Dorcas cuts in, "I know it's hard for you to see it, but what has happened in the arena isn't something separate from the war. You don't even realize, but the state of the world right now is…very precarious, and Minerva is just—" She swallows, then sighs. "Look, I obviously don't like it any more than you do, but it's something that—that—"

"Would work," James says softly, and everyone turns to stare at him. "It would work. It *is* working. She's dismantling the games from the inside. Making them all hate it. She's—she's using this to bring war here, where Riddle is."

Dorcas hesitates, then nods tentatively. "Yes. It's not her. She's not—she's just following orders, doing what needs to be done, doing what it'll take to get to a better world. Sometimes, we have to go through war to get there. And we're about to, so now is the time to set aside morals and personal feelings, because—because there are no good people in war."

"That's statistically impossible," Huey argues.

"Actually, it's not," Dorcas corrects, sweeping her gaze over them as she shoves her bullets into the gun handle with a sharp click. "All the good people die. If you live long enough to see the end of the war, trust me, you're not coming back out the other side with your hands clean."

"Like, literally?" Huey asks, eyes wide.

"Well, probably, but also figuratively. Hands, souls, whatever. The point is, you may as well accept it now," Dorcas says.

James turns the gun over in his hand, his stomach sort of falling out from underneath him. The thing is, he'll do anything to get Sirius and Regulus out of the arena. Anything. Whatever it takes. He's so—he can barely stop shaking from how eager he is to do this, all of it, any of it. He doesn't need any further motivation than getting them out, but especially now that he knows his parents aren't home, he's more than willing. The Phoenix sounds like a whole other world. A safer world than this. They need to get there. All of them.

Abruptly, James' head snaps up with a sharp inhale that has everyone looking at him. "Shit. Pandora. R—"

"We'll go by and get her on the way," Dorcas interrupts.

"And Remus," James states firmly.

Dorcas blinks. "Who?"

"Remus," James repeats. "He's, ah, Sirius' moon? He's my friend. He's—he's coming with us."

"Is he a Hallow? A sponsor? A—"

"A servant."

"A—sorry, what?" Dorcas says, so startled that it's almost comical. Huey's eyes bulge. Even Frank's eyebrows fly up his forehead. "Sirius is in love with a servant?"

James scowls. "Sirius is in love with *Remus*. He's a person. You fucking Hallows, you do this, you know. You never—"

"Okay, sorry," Dorcas murmurs, lifting one hand in a placating gesture. "That's—yes, you make a good point. Remus, then. I assume he's the servant assigned to your suite?"

"Yes."

"So, he'll be there."

"Should be," James says, flicking his gaze towards the clock, his lips tipping down. "Well, it's getting late now. We don't have much time. Dorcas, I'm not joking, I won't leave him."

Dorcas bites her lip, then clears her throat. "It's just… James, servants have trackers in their thighs. If we bring him with us, they'll be able to find us. All of us."

"Then I'll cut it out," James declares simply, and Dorcas blinks at him again. "What? You said it's war, right? Life or death. Well, no time for anything other than what it takes, so get me a knife, and I'll cut it out and carry him out on my back if I have to, because I'm not leaving him."

"Oh, his poor leg," Huey mutters.

James cuts him a glare and pointedly taps the cane resting in between his spread legs. "He'll survive. Trust me, an injured leg isn't a death sentence."

"Shouldn't he get to make that choice, though?" Huey insists, his eyebrows furrowed. "Like, sorry, but it's going to hurt. I don't mean anything about future complications. I literally mean the pain of having the tracker *sliced from his body."*

"You are so not cut out for war, or the arena, or—basically any harsh realities in life," Frank tells him with a sigh. He reaches out and claps Huey on the shoulder. "You'll learn."

"Remus would probably cut it out himself, honestly," James admits, lips twitching fondly. "Either way, it's his thigh, and if the tracker isn't too deep and I keep a steady hand, his leg should heal up just fine. It will be his choice, I promise, but I already know what he'll choose, so Dorcas… Knife?"

"Coming right up," Dorcas states, "and then we go."

James blows out a deep breath. Right, because that's what's next—and then they'll go, and then they're off to start a war.

~•~

Euphemia smooths her hand over the letter in her pocket, still in her pocket even now, her heart thumping hard in her chest as she walks beside Lily Evans, who is funny and kind to her outside of a warzone, but also unafraid to ask for help from those she knows will readily give it.

"Now, remember, the patrol switches over on the hour, so you two have a ten minute window to get those doors open manually and get out," Lily explains, her voice low as she swings her head between Fleamont and Euphemia both. "I have taken out the eyes in the sky, thanks to Wren, who fixed a loop for the surveillance cameras. Ember broke the back exit open that hasn't been used in ages, so if you're looking for a quick place to hide, go there. *If* you get caught out of bounds on your way back to your room, claim you got lost since you're new, or just let them catch you making out."

"You're fun. I like you." Fleamont leans forward to grin at Euphemia. "I like her."

"Yes, dear, I have ears," Euphemia says, amused.

"Thanks, Monty," Lily murmurs, an undercurrent of warmth in her tone and something sort of sad underneath at the same time that Euphemia doesn't think she realizes is there.

It makes her wonder what happened to Lily's family. She's all alone and seems to wear that like armor. Young as she is, she's often seen chasing women and just one more cigarette, but there's this sort of shadow that sits in her eyes at all times, only noticeable when she thinks no one is looking. Like one of those chocolates shaped into something, but it's just a shell; it seems structurally sound, and then you *press,* and the chocolate breaks open to reveal nothing inside at all.

"Lily, there's something…" Euphemia hesitates, flicking her thumb over the corner of the letter in her pocket, a nervous habit by now. She never had nervous habits before she saw her home destroyed, along with most of the people in it. These days, her hands shake more often than they don't. It scares her, being so scared. "Well, I have a request to make."

Lily's face twitches as she slows down, her eyebrows furrowed. The thing is, with Lily, she's an entirely different person when not in the middle of a mission. It had surprised Euphemia a bit to see her tease and crack jokes and respond kindly seemingly by instinct, especially when she was so harsh and efficient on the mission to retrieve them, and then acted unaffected by the whole ordeal entirely. But, outside of the mission, she checked on Euphemia personally, as well as all the other people who were injured that she helped along the way. She assisted people in anything they needed without having to be asked, one of the few who actually got some of the kids saved from the district to laugh and smile for the very first time.

On the mission, though? Lily is tenacious. She doesn't slow down, and she doesn't stop, and she doesn't flinch. She acts like a machine, honestly, and it is both admirable and quite worrying. Euphemia herself knows what it is to do what needs to be done, but she also knows the importance of letting yourself feel in the aftermath. She has spent *days* mourning with her people, leaning on Fleamont, letting Fleamont lean on her, talking to him in the safety of their shared room about how scared she is about all of this, and for their children, and for everyone they love. She doesn't let these things fester in her and build up with no release, and perhaps she has the benefit of age to grant her the wisdom of knowing how necessary it is to give yourself that, but Lily? She doesn't.

So, Euphemia knows that this is a rather far-fetched request to make, and yet, she can't stop herself. Sirius… She has to try, at least for him. She has to.

Euphemia takes a deep breath. "I understand that this is a very daunting undertaking already, as well as rather time-sensitive, but I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

Lily clears her throat. "You can ask, but—"

"There's a servant," Effie says, and Lily raises her eyebrows in clear disbelief. "He's really important to Sirius, to James, to Regulus, to all of them. He's—I know that's not really the point to all of this, but if there's *any* way you could—"

"Effie," Lily interrupts firmly, "I'm sorry, I really am, but this isn't my mission. I'm not the one running things, okay? It's Dorcas, and I have one priority target, Marlene McKinnon. Not Sirius, not Regulus, but *her*. It's her first, and then I can worry about saving the rest of those in the arena. Besides, I won't even be on that side of things. Dorcas is worrying about getting people out of there, not me."

Euphemia struggles not to grit her teeth, and Fleamont reaches out to rub her back, making her take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. "Fine. Can you pass the message along for me then, at least?"

"I can," Lily tells her. "The servant Sirius loves. Got it." She starts backing up, grimacing. "Just don't expect anything, yeah? It's cruel, but saving some servant Sirius just so happens to love isn't going to be high on the list of priorities."

"James will insist on it," Fleamont says, and Euphemia doesn't doubt it either. They know their son. Of course he will.

"Then let's hope James works to make sure no one gets left behind," Lily replies simply. "Unfortunately, I have other work to do, and so do the both of you. Be careful, yeah?"

Euphemia and Fleamont call after her to do the same, but she's already gone, as tenacious as ever. Sighing, Euphemia glances over at Fleamont, who gifts her with a tiny, reassuring smile.

"Less than a week, and we're already breaking all the rules," Fleamont says lightly. "Probably best we don't mention this to the kids. They'll never let us live it down."

"Our secret," Euphemia murmurs, giving him a playful nose-scrunch before grabbing his hand and tugging him along, the both of them off to do whatever they can to help bring the rest of their family home to them, and anyone else who may be fortunate enough to be picked up along the way.

Euphemia passes her thumb over the letter in her pocket and really, *really* hopes that Remus is included in that.

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Lily takes a corner and runs directly into Mary, who has her arms crossed and her eyebrows raised. Oh, great, just what Lily needs. Now is *not* the time to be distracted, so Lily is going to need Mary to get out of her immediate vicinity.

"Ah, Mary, what are you—" Hm, no. Not important. Lily needs her to go away. "Doesn't matter. Lovely to see you, as always. The brightest part of my day, really. A true gift. Now, if you don't mind too terribly much, I'll just slide by you and—"

"What are you doing?" Mary interrupts, eyes narrowing with suspicion already.

"Walking. You know, as humans tend to do when they're trying to go from one place to the next. You take one foot—"

"No, don't play with me. I'm not joking. I saw you earlier, you know, talking to Effie and Monty in the Big Hall—"

"Great Hall," Lily mumbles.

Mary waves a hand carelessly. "Whatever. You were talking to them, and whatever you said got them to stop watching the games early, so you're obviously doing something."

"Look, Mary, I would *love* to stand around and have this lovely little verbal spar we always do," Lily says wearily, because it's true; their rooms are next to each other, so they see each other quite a bit, and Lily doesn't think they've had one genuinely civil conversation in the last week. "It breaks my heart, truly, but I'm a little busy at the moment so, if you could—"

"Don't even try it," Mary says flatly. "Seriously, what are you up to, and what does it have to do with Effie and Monty? I can't find them. Where are they?"

Lily resists the urge to huff. Anyone else, and she could probably talk her way out of this, but Lily has noticed Mary is a force to be reckoned with, *especially* when it comes to people she cares about. In the aftermath of what happened in district six, Mary has taken to checking on Effie and Monty a lot, along with Andromeda and Barty, if she can actually find him. People who matter to Sirius, and James, and Regulus. And there's Bingley, of course, who she barely let out of her sight to start with and is still wary to do so.

The fact that Mary is here now, rather than in her room with her little brother lets Lily know she's not budging, and if she thinks Lily is getting Effie and Monty caught up in something, she's *absolutely* not going to let it go.

Lily gets it, and she respects it, and she even likes it. Just…not so much when it's fucking with her plans. Lily honestly does *not* have time for this shit.

"Okay, I really need you to move," Lily says shortly, in no mood to keep messing around. She pushes past Mary, who immediately catches her arm, and Lily whips around to glare at her, nostrils flaring. "I don't have time for this, Macdonald."

"Well, that solidifies it," Mary declares decisively, following behind her when she marches off. "You're definitely doing something, and somehow this involves Effie and Monty."

Lily ignores her. Or, well, she pretends to. Ignoring Mary is pretty impossible. She's tall with bouncy, black curls framing her face, and her eyes are quite possibly the most piercing Lily

has ever seen in her life. At times, Lily is almost genuinely uneasy by the thought that Mary can see right through her. Also, she's frustratingly brilliant, which is doing Lily absolutely no favors currently.

Seeing as Lily has no idea how the fuck to make Mary leave, she just keeps going, because she genuinely doesn't have the time to stop. Thankfully, Sybill is already waiting for her in the place she promised she would, so things are coming together.

"Oh, there you are," Sybill whispers when Lily moves over to her. She flicks her gaze from Lily to Mary. "One more?"

"No, she's not involved. Ignore her, and maybe she'll go away," Lily grumbles.

"Not likely," Mary replies with a scoff.

"Right, well, are you ready?" Sybill asks Lily, twisting her fingers together. "Because I want to point out, yet again, that I am *not.* This—it doesn't feel like a good idea, Lily, and—and I hate lying to Kingsley. It makes my stomach all squirmy."

"You're not lying to him…exactly," Lily soothes. "You're just, you know, waiting to tell him until it's already done."

"Wait," Mary says, "is this—oh, for fuck's sake, is this a sex thing? This is a sex thing, isn't it?"

"What?" Sybill asks, blinking. "Who's having sex?"

"You two. You're sneaking around to have sex," Mary blurts out, staring between them in disbelief.

Sybill frowns. "No, we're not. We're sneaking around so we can abduct the tributes out of the hunger games."

"Sybill!" Lily hisses, eyes bulging.

"What? We *are,"* Sybill sputters.

Mary exhales sharply, her eyes lighting up, and then she's stepping forward to announce, "Oh, *absolutely.* Yes. This is so much better than a sex thing, and fuck you, Lily, I'm *definitely* involved. I'm coming with you."

"No." Lily clenches her jaw. "No, you're not."

"Sirius is in there. Yes the fuck I am."

"And what about Bingley, hm? Because this isn't going to be safe, Mary. It's *dangerous.* You could actually die."

"You know I'm a person, right? Not just a sister. I can make my own decisions, and Bingley is *safe,"* Mary retorts. "I'm not going to just stand by and do nothing if I could help my friends. So, you're not getting rid of me that easily. Look at that, you have an extra pair of hands."

"I mean…that *would* be helpful, Lily," Sybill points out.

Lily groans. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"No," Mary confirms.

"Fine. *Fine,* but if you're in this, then you're listening to *me.* No taking guns and shooting people and running off to do your own thing. You do *not* get off the heli-carrier for anything or anyone, alright?" Lily states, holding her gaze.

Mary doesn't look pleased, but she holds up her hands and dips her head. "Fair enough. Put me in, coach. What can I do?"

"Follow us. Or, follow Sybill." Lily swivels her head to look at the woman in question. "You picked, right?"

"Yeah, come on," Sybill says, leading them off further down the hall, then easing the entrance to the hangar bay open so they can slip inside. It's fairly deserted as always, large and cavernous and dim with only six different types of heli-carriers inside. Lily doesn't think any of them have ever actually been flown before. "I picked the one that closest resembles the simulation lessons I took in class to become a pilot, so that should help. It's right here down at the end."

"Wait, should help what?" Mary asks cautiously, her voice low as they move quietly through the room.

"Help me fly," Sybill whispers.

Mary makes an odd noise and wheezes, "You—you haven't flown anything before? I thought you were a pilot."

"I am," Sybill informs her. "Certified and everything. I've just never, um, had the opportunity to put it to the test."

"How long ago were your classes?"

"Seven years ago? Eight? Somewhere in there."

"Oh," Mary says solemnly, "we're going to die."

Lily sighs. "Don't listen to her, Sybill, you're going to do perfectly fine. Just like riding a bike, I'm sure."

"Bikes don't have buttons. Or wings. Or—"

"Sybill, really, I believe in you, okay? You can do this."

Grimacing, Sybill stops by the heli-carrier. "Let's hope you're right, because otherwise, we *are* going to die, and then Kingsley will be so upset."

"Kingsley's your boyfriend, right?" Mary asks.

"Yeah," Lily answers at the same time that Sybill shakes her head. They stop, blink, and stare at each other. "Sybill, you and Kingsley have been dating for months. You were literally just with him earlier. Did you two break up, or…?"

"We're *dating?"* Sybill blurts out. "Why didn't he tell me?!"

Lily struggles not to laugh. "What? How could you not know? You practically live together, Sybill! Everyone knows you've basically moved into his room."

"I just keep falling asleep there after we have sex, and he likes to cuddle, which is nice. He's really nice, honestly. Got me a toothbrush and let me bring some of my clothes over. Oh, and he lets me hide the blanket I'm knitting under his mattress because they never check his room anymore." Sybill pauses, her lips tipping down. "He never told *me* we were dating. I mean, I'm fine with it. More than fine, but he didn't say!"

"Oh, you two are so well-suited," Lily chokes out, her shoulders shaking with her laughter. "It's—yeah, you're dating. You should probably talk to him about it, but…well, he called you his girlfriend last week, so I'm pretty sure he's under the impression that you're together."

Sybill looks delighted. "Oh, lovely. Then *yes,* Mary, he's my boyfriend. I can't wait to tell him."

Clearly pleased by this news, Sybill is a bit bouncy as she moves over to yank open the side door on the heli-carrier with a sharp clang. She's swift when leaning in to pull out the ramp, then beams the entire way inside. Lily's lips curl up, and she shakes her head fondly as she follows Sybill inside with Mary right behind her, only for them to all bump into each other back-to-back like a line of dominoes that don't fall.

"Oh, what the fuck?" Lily blurts out incredulously, a headache forming so quickly that she has the strong impulse to take her skull between her hands and *squeeze.*

Amos and Barty are in the midst of separating and trying to straighten their clothes, but it's doing exactly nothing to hide what they were just doing. Amos at least has the decency to look sheepish, but Barty does not. In fact, Barty looks faintly amused about being caught with the buttons on his shirt all undone. Well, he looks amused if you ignore that his smile doesn't reach his eyes and his gaze is rather flat and empty.

"Lily," Amos says, fumbling for his glasses to slip them on and blink at her, red in the face. "Uh, hi. Hey. I—" He opens and closes his mouth, looking at Barty, then back at them. He coughs. "I don't have a good explanation."

"Fuck's sake, Amos, the poor man is *grieving,"* Lily scolds, tossing her hands up. Not that she really has much room to talk about how one copes with losing people. Still, it hasn't even been a *week,* and Amos perhaps should not be enabling the use of sex as problem avoidance, which Lily is aware makes her a bit of a hypocrite, but just because she does something doesn't mean she thinks others should, and Barty looks like *hell.* He looks like he hasn't slept in days. Amos should have been taking him to bed to *rest,* not—

"To be fair, it's not his fault. I'm *very* persuasive when I want to be," Barty says, "and trust me, I was *not* complaining."

"I—I was trying to comfort him," Amos stutters out, looking frazzled. "I wasn't going to do anything, but then he—I—I don't even know what happened. I don't even like men!"

"You do now, darling," Barty informs him, grinning.

"It's okay not to know things, Amos. Finding out can be fun," Sybill says. "I just found out Kinglsey is my boyfriend. Did you know that? Isn't that fun?"

Amos blinks at her. "Wait, you're *just* finding that out now? Sybill, you two have been dating for months."

"See? You learn something new every day," Sybill muses, smiling at him. "Congrats on your fun little discovery of the day, and while I support you wholeheartedly, I'm afraid I'm going to have to interrupt. We kind of need this."

"The heli-carrier?" Amos asks, his eyebrows rising as Sybill circles her finger to show what she means. Sybill nods, and he tilts his head. "Why do you need the heli-carrier?"

"We're taking it so we can abduct the tributes out of the hunger games," Sybill answers.

Lily wishes for the sweet release of death. "Sybill!"

"What? It's *true,"* Sybill replies.

"Secret mission! Se-cret!" Lily declares, smacking the back of one hand to her other palm for emphasis. "That means *we do not tell people about it."*

"Wait, sorry, what? You're doing *what?"* Amos hisses, his eyes wide. "Lily, are you fucking mental?! What—who—does Dumbledore know about this?"

"Obviously Dumbledore doesn't know about it," Lily snaps, her shoulders tense. "It's secret for a *reason,* Amos, and you better choose your next words wisely, because if you even *think* of fucking this up, I'll do what I must to make sure you don't."

Barty steps forward. "I'm coming."

"No," Lily grits out.

"Okay, let me rephrase. You can't *stop* me from coming," Barty corrects, and he looks dead serious. *"Regulus* is in there."

Lily rubs her temples, squeezing her eyes shut as she lowers her voice and chants, "Don't punch him, don't punch him, don't punch him, don't—"

"Why don't we all go?" Sybill asks. Everyone stops and stares at her. She shrugs. "What? We're all already here, and it's not like *more* help is a bad thing, really."

"Where's Kingsley?" Amos asks, glancing around like he expects Kingsley to pop out and start giving orders.

"Lily said we can't tell him until it's over," Sybill mutters, twisting the bottom of her shirt between her fingers. "She thinks he'd tell Dumbledore and stop it."

At this, Lily winces. Kingsley is a very good man, and he's damn good at missions, but he's in a high position, and Lily can't be sure that he wouldn't have ruined the plan in the endeavor to do what he feels is right. He's been Dumbledore's go-to for everything involving missions for years now, even when Lily came to the Phoenix, and he may not be willing to go against that. Lily has no way of knowing if Kingsley would go along with this, and she couldn't risk it.

Amos clears his throat. "Lily, this is not a cleared mission. I can't just stand by and—"

"Mm, can't you?" Barty asks, reaching over to touch Amos' shoulder, light, staring at him. His eyebrows raise slowly, and he tilts his head. "I think you can."

"I—" Amos opens and closes his mouth, looking lost, still seeming frazzled by Barty, or possibly what he was just *doing* with Barty. He likely saw Barty darting off as he always does these days and decided to follow, to give him some comfort, because after all, Amos was on the mission, too. And then, before he knew it, he was tucked away in an abandoned heli-carrier doing something he'd never done before. Lily almost pities the poor man, but in the end, Amos just deflates a little and nods. "Suppose I can, because it's not like I have much of a choice. I'm in this shit now."

"Good answer," Lily says. "Otherwise, I would have had to knock you out and tie you up to hide you somewhere until I got back, if I did at all."

"Charming as always, Evans," Amos replies flatly.

Lily smiles, all teeth. "I aim to please, Diggory."

"Look at us," Sybill declares warmly. She waves around at all five of them. "The rescue team. I decree we are called the Thunderbird Thieves."

"Why?" Mary asks, eyebrows raised.

"Well, we're stealing, technically," Sybill points out, then moves over to tap the inner panel of the heli-carrier, looking fond. "Besides, we'll be birds in the sky, and this baby was built to withstand any thunderstorm."

No one objects. For some reason, this is a unifying sort of moment for them. Alright, then.

Thunderbird Thieves it is.

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"Shit, shit, shit," James chants.

Dorcas watches James hang his head, then glances back at Pandora, who is just—staring at her. Staring like she's never seen her before. There's been a lot of that as of late.

It puts a tangle of knots in her stomach, even though she saw this coming. She gets it. She's known these people for a year now, a friend to them, and she lied to their faces more than once, all of them. While they're not entitled to every facet of her life, this reveal is shocking by a large margin. Not just a simple stylist who is a little too bold, not by a long shot.

Dorcas understands that it's an adjustment. She also gets that this is a lot of information being thrown at them at once. No, not just that she's more than a stylist, but also that there's a secret, underground bunker home to a brewing rebellion for her to be a part of at all, and also that she has decided to take it upon herself to kickstart the revolution by breaking into the arena within the hour to save everyone inside, and oh, they all have to leave the Hallow *tonight.*

Unfortunately for them, they're all on a time-crunch here, and there's no time to waste.

Dorcas stands up. "James, breathe. We have to go down to the basement level to get to the garage anyway for our great escape, so we'll just grab Remus on the go. Less of a smooth transition for him, but it's all we got. We need to go. *Now."*

"My dad," Pandora says softly.

Everyone stops and stares at her.

"He's dying," Pandora continues. She's staring at Dorcas blankly. "He's going to die, and I won't be here."

There's something fucking tragic about the way she says it, already knowing it, not even protesting it. She knows she's coming. She knows she has to, because if she stays, they will kill her just because she's their handler, because it would hurt them, because she apologized at the reaping and cried while reading off the names. She can't stay, and her father is dying, and it doesn't matter if he's not dead yet; he may as well be in this moment, for her, because she'll never see him again.

"Pandora," James whispers, stricken.

Blinking, Pandora gives a jerky shake of her head, and she meets Dorcas' eyes. "Well? Let's go."

They go.

It's a silent wait at the lift, a steady pulse of anticipation between the five of them. James is flexing his fingers around the handle of his cane, Frank is as blank-faced as Pandora, and Huey is chewing on his lip anxiously. They all have their guns hidden, put away. Pandora doesn't have one.

When the lift dings, the doors open to reveal that it's not empty. Rodolphus Lestrange blinks out at them, looking suitably startled by the eclectic group before him.

"Coming from a party?" Rodolphus asks, raising his eyebrows as he reaches out to hold the doors for everyone, though no one moves. "And I wasn't invited? Rude."

Dorcas realizes belatedly that everyone is stealing glances at her, waiting for her to lead. Here she stands, waiting for the person in charge to step up and take control of the situation, only to remember that it's her. She's in charge. She's leading.

Exhaling slowly, Dorcas enters the lift with the others filing in after her, because it would be more suspicious if they didn't. Dorcas doesn't know very much about Rodolphus, other than the fact that his little brother is still in the arena, alive, and yet another person Dorcas hopes to save.

"A bit of an odd group," Rodolphus comments.

He's fishing, Dorcas can tell. He sounds curious. Not exactly suspicious, but he knows something is up.

"It's been a rough day," James replies, looking over to offer Rodolphus a tight smile. "Huey here is planning on taking us out for drinks to, ah, unwind a bit."

James is smart. Very smart. Dorcas knows that, but it's moments like this when he really shines. He's *socially* smart as well, and that's a weapon in its own right. Huey, the sponsor, footing the bill. Frank, in mourning, likely desperate to get so drunk he blacks out. James, aching in the aftermath of all he witnessed today. Pandora, the handler. Dorcas, the friend.

It works. Rodolphus nods, because it does work, and it's easy to believe. "Yeah, that it has. Suspect tomorrow won't be much better, so a word to the wise, don't get too sloshed tonight."

"Thanks," James mumbles.

Things are quiet for a bit as the lift continues to rise. Dorcas watches the buttons light up slowly, one at a time, with each floor they pass. Closer. Closer. So close. Almost there.

"Oh," Rodolphus says softly.

Dorcas flicks her gaze over to see him staring down at Huey's hip, at the line of the gun under his shirt, revealed by how he shifts his arm. For a second, no one moves. No one breathes.

And then, swiftly, Dorcas has her gun out and pressed up under Rodolphus' chin as she backs him up against the wall of the lift. Huey yelps, and James curses under his breath. Rodolphus tilts his head up, holding very still.

"You see what's on the end of my gun, Lestrange?" Dorcas asks coldly. "That's a silencer. That means, if I happen to blow your fucking head open, it'll be much quieter than a normal gunshot, and I'll be free to dump your body in the first supply closet I come across. By the time they find you, I'll be gone."

The column of Rodolphus' throat rises, then falls. His voice is a hoarse rasp when says, "Yeah, yup, got it."

"Dorcas," James warns, sounding wary. She doesn't look away from Rodolphus, her mind running a mile a minute with so many possibilities. She's never killed anyone before, but she's too close now. Too close to have this fucked up. Not now. She won't let anyone ruin this. "Dorcas, hey, just—just wait, okay? He's—he might… He could help us."

"He's a liability, James," Dorcas snaps.

"No, no, he's—a brother. An older brother, who loves his little brother," James argues carefully. "Think about it, okay? He hasn't hidden how much he cares about Rabastan. It's his brother, yeah? Look at Sirius and Regulus. You see how they are, especially when it comes to the games. You saw how Sirius was last year; he was willing to do anything for me, and also for Regulus. Just—give him the chance, at least."

"If it was Louie, I'd do it," Huey agrees, his voice shaking.

Dorcas exhales sharply through her nose and pulls her gun away, but she keeps her free hand against Rodolphus' shoulder to hold him there, holding his gaze. "We're breaking into the arena to get the tributes out and get them somewhere safe, and that *includes* your little brother, if we can."

"How the fuck are you going to do that?" Rodolphus blurts out, his eyes bulging.

"Doesn't matter," Dorcas says shortly. "Are you in or not?"

"Oh, I'm in. It's my brother," Rodolphus replies simply, blinking at her. "Hell yeah I'm in. Do I get a gun, too?"

"If you make any sudden moves, the only part of the gun you'll get is a bullet," Dorcas informs him, clipped. She slides her gun away, eyeing him with distrust. "Now, shut up, I have to make a call. Everyone stay quiet."

When Lily answers the phone, she sounds like she's in a vacuum, and she's already talking. "—totally have this, I promise. You're doing great."

"WE ARE *TILTING!"* someone shrieks in the background. Dorcas doesn't recognize the voice.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm trying," Sybill sobs, voice muffled.

"It's—no, it's fine. You've got this. I—I don't think that was the right button, though, but—"

"WE HAVE A FUCKING GATLING GUN?!"

"Ah, that's—that'll be the weapons, I think, Sybill," Lily calls out, sounding strained.

"WHY CAN I SEE THE GROUND?! PULL UP! *PULL UP!"*

Dorcas coughs and winces as someone screams in the background, and then it's just pure chaos over the line. Everyone in the lift is staring. They can all hear it.

"Lily?" Dorcas asks tentatively, cringing at the background sound of something clattering, like metal on metal.

"Hi, Dorcas, a little busy here," Lily pants out. "We're, um."

"Problem?"

"What? No. Everything's f—hey! *No,* step away from the gatling gun! Barty, don't make me leave this cockpit!"

James straightens up. "Barty? Did—sorry, did she just say Barty? Is Barty there? He's alive?"

"Lily?" Dorcas tries again.

"We have this under control," Lily replies, and then there's a choked sob and the distant shout of *we're all gonna die!*

Dorcas sighs. "Right. Clearly."

"Just—oh, shut *up,* we are fine! *Barty! Stop fucking with the gun!"* Lily shouts. There's a pause, then, calmer, "Thank you. Okay, Sybill, talk to me. Well, no, breathe first. See? Look at that. We're all straightened out now, flying easy and smooth. You did that. You did great. You're doing great."

"Yeah," comes Sybill's muffled, shaky reply. "Y-Yeah, I've got it. I've got this. It's—it's all coming back to me. Okay."

The lift dings, the doors peeling open, and Dorcas waves everyone else out, keeping a sharp eye on Rodolphus. He doesn't do anything. Like everyone else, he seems rather invested in her phone at the moment. She holds up a finger to get them all to wait, and they do.

"You're on the way?" Dorcas asks.

Lily blows out a deep breath. "Yeah, uh, we're on the way. Sybill, do we have an ETA?"

"T-minus twelve minutes," Sybill replies.

Dorcas' heart jumps. "Okay, well, we're moving in. I'll have everything ready for when you get there, and you—you've got the tracker, right?"

"Yes. It'll pick up Marlene as soon as we're in range. We're going right for her first, Dorcas, I promise."

"Okay, good. Remember, as soon as you drop in, you'll have opposition incoming, so you'll have to be quick. I'll do what I can to get everyone as close as I can, but you won't have a lot of time. Lily, if—if you have to go, you *go,* do you hear me?"

"Alright," Lily murmurs. "Hey, um, Effie sort of—well, she asked about you maybe getting someone else out of the Hallow if it's at all possible. A servant. Uh, Sirius' moon?"

"Oh, yeah, that's already in the works," Dorcas assures her.

"Who is—" Lily cuts herself off with a groan. "Barty, for fuck's sake, it's not a toy! What did I *say?!"*

"Lily, I have to go," Dorcas tells her. "Be careful, okay?"

"Yeah, we'll do our best. You, too."

"See you soon, Evans."

"Real soon, Meadowes. Real soon," Lily replies, soft, and then she starts yelling again, and the line goes dead.

"Barty?" James asks immediately. "Is Barty alive?"

"I—James, I don't know if it was him for sure. She did say the name Barty, so maybe?" Dorcas offers cautiously. "I've never met another Barty at the Phoenix, so…it's a good chance. But, whoever it was, they wouldn't leave the gatling gun alone."

James huffs a weak laugh. "Yeah, that's Barty." He looks relieved, shaking his head as he exhales. "Okay, well, that's good. That's—yeah, that's good. Right, what next?"

"Alright, so right now, the Aurors on rotation won't reach this floor for another fifteen minutes, so that's all the time we've got to get in and get the hell out," Dorcas explains. "There will be a shift change after, which means when we leave, we should be bypassing the usual amount of Aurors."

"You timed this?" Frank asks.

"Of course I did." Dorcas slips her phone away. "Just the same, the gamemakers on the nightshift are already in place, so it's a lot less to deal with when we go in."

"You timed that, too?" Huey asks in disbelief.

Dorcas arches an eyebrow. "I timed everything. I memorized the patrol schedules. I know each route. I have the getaway vehicle already stashed in the garage. This isn't a thrown together plan by any means, no matter how little time I had to prepare, and as long as you all listen, we'll be fine."

"Well," Frank mutters, "that's enough for me."

"Now, when we go in," Dorcas explains, "I'm going right to Minerva. I need everyone else to round up the rest of the gamemakers. Use your guns. You don't have to shoot unless it's necessary. Situations in which it's necessary include if you have to defend yourself, if they try to run, or if you need to so no one disrupts the mission. Otherwise, it's your choice, you're the one who will have to live with it either way, but do *not,* under any circumstances, *fail* to shoot if it is necessary."

"Still don't have a gun, by the way," Rodolphus says.

"You'll be standing by the door, making sure no one gets out," Dorcas tells him. "If that door opens before it's time, I'm shooting whoever is at it. Keep in mind, that includes you."

"You're crazy," Rodolphus states. "I like crazy."

"I like women," Dorcas replies. "Only."

"Oh. Good for you, sad for me, but the next bit of crazy will come along, I suppose," Rodolphus says wistfully.

Dorcas rolls her eyes, then focuses on Pandora when she quietly announces, "I also don't have a gun."

"That's because you're going to be at the main control board, Pandora," Dorcas murmurs, more gentle with her. "To bring the protective perimeter down around the arena so the others can get in requires a password set by the Head Gamemaker."

Frank inhales sharply. "So, if—if we don't get the password…"

"We will," Dorcas assures him. "Now, everyone knows what they're doing and where they'll be, right?" She gets nods and low murmurs of agreement. "Okay, then let's go."

They go.

The gamemaker room isn't that heavily guarded at night, and with the Aurors on rotation, there's only one waiting by the door, no gun in hand. The Auror looks bored, and why wouldn't this be boring? Literally nothing ever goes wrong here. Dorcas scoped this entire building yesterday, and it's lax in an arrogant way, so comfortable in the years upon years of luxury and lack of pushback. This will be a rude awakening.

"What about that one?" Frank whispers as they approach.

"James," Dorcas murmurs, "can you knock him out with your cane and make it quick and quiet?"

There's a heartbeat of silence, and then James clears his throat. "Yeah. Frank, come catch the body?"

"Mhm," Frank hums.

They split off together, walking ahead. Dorcas watches the Auror turn his head, blinking, and then his head whips back to the side when met with the harsh impact of James' cane. There's a dangerous amount of force behind it, so much so that the Auror instantly knocks the fuck out, going slack as his body drops like a puppet with no strings. Frank catches him and eases him carefully to the floor.

"No gun," James comments softly as he rubs his hand over the handle of his cane, then plants it on the floor, leaning on it.

"You have to have a certain level of clearance to have a gun in this building," Dorcas explains. "Or just sneak them in like me, but—well, why would anyone want to?"

Frank side-eyes her. "You wanted to."

"I'm the exception," Dorcas says, "not the rule."

"So, do we just…go in?" Huey whispers, staring at the door.

Dorcas steps up to it and pulls out her gun, then raises her other hand. "Well, it'd be rude not to knock first."

She knocks.

"Can I help—" The person who opened the door cuts themselves off the moment Dorcas presses the gun to their head. They freeze, eyes wide.

"Yes, actually, you can." Dorcas presses her gun to their head harder, pushing them back. "Walk. I said *walk."*

They walk. Well, they stumble, making a quiet, whimpering noise as they go. The room is large, but very sparse. There are circular control boards around the room and various screens, as well as holograms and monitors. There's a large screen showing the vitals of all the tributes, and none have died since Dorcas last saw them, which is relieving. In the center is a smaller hologram of the whole layout of the arena and tagged positions of each tribute.

Slughorn didn't lie. Slughorn gave her absolutely every bit of information she could have needed, and had seemed eager to, and for the first time, Dorcas doesn't want to kill him when he happens to cross her mind. She can give credit where it's due.

In the room, there's only about twelve people, and the others file in and split off to immediately round them up. Before anyone even notices they're coming in, Dorcas shoves

aside the person in front of her and steps up behind Minerva just as she turns. Dorcas' gun settles against Minerva's forehead.

For a moment, nothing else matters outside of this. Just the sharp collision of their gazes, Minerva's shrewd eyes, and Dorcas' cold ones. A part of her wants to cry. No part of her wants to pull the trigger. She knows she will do the latter if she needs to, then give into the former if she has to.

She does neither, for now.

Minerva only looks surprised for a second, just one, and she never looks away from Dorcas' gaze, so Dorcas sees the way she wrangles her own feelings down and shutters them. She's good at that. You get good at that, in war.

But there are some things you can't hide. When you're being torn apart inside, the outside reflects it. That takes a toll on your body. Minerva has always been a very put-together woman. Now, she stands before Dorcas and looks every inch of her age and then some. She looks tired.

Yet, her gaze is sharp, and her mouth is set as stern as ever. Still the same Minerva. Dorcas knows her. Dorcas insists that she knows her, in her own mind, because her heart is sure and her anxiety is arguing. *Who are you?* Dorcas thinks, helplessly. *No, no, I know you,* Dorcas' heart thuds. A war within. She has no idea which will win, or which victory would be easier to rejoice in, or which loss would be easier to handle.

Dorcas looks at her, Minerva, and she thinks. She wonders. Has this changed her? Has she enjoyed the power? Has she given one thought, any thought, to how this might be affecting Dorcas, or anyone else? Has it affected her?

"What are you doing?" Minerva asks softly.

"What you should have," Dorcas whispers.

"Dorcas," Pandora calls out.

"What is it, Pandora?" Dorcas asks, never taking her eyes off of Minerva or her finger off the trigger. She can't look away. One split second of split attention, and Minerva could split her fucking skull open. Would she strike?

Dorcas doesn't know anymore.

"I'm at the control board," Pandora says, strained. Frank can be heard making the gamemakers lay on the ground, hands behind their head; many of them are weeping. Rodolphus remains by the door. Dorcas can make him out in her peripheral vision. "We have a problem."

"What's that?" Dorcas asks.

"The—the password is set to between five or seven letters, and there's only three attempts before it locks and sends out an alert," Pandora explains.

For a beat, there's just silence. Minerva doesn't move. She doesn't do anything. She just stares at Dorcas.

I know you, Dorcas thinks.

"Try Order," Dorcas replies stiffly.

A beat.

Keyboard noises.

Pandora inhales sharply. "Wrong. Two attempts left."

"What are you doing, Dorcas?" Minerva repeats.

I know you. I do know you, Dorcas thinks, staring at her. She knows her. She's known her for years now. Someone she has always, always, always looked up to and admired. Does she still? She doesn't know that. She can't know that, now.

"Try Phoenix," Dorcas says, her mouth dry.

Another beat.

More keyboard noises.

Pandora makes a high noise of distress. "One attempt left, Dorcas. You *have* to get this right, or that's it. We're fucked."

I know you. I know this, Dorcas thinks, holding her gaze. Something only Minerva would know. A secret, but not her biggest. No, no, something personal. Something she has to type in every day. Something that could never slip her mind.

A reminder. A reason. Her reason behind it all, and Dorcas knows her. Knows she wants to defeat Riddle.

Riddle—six letters. It's genius, really. A name. One that would display faux loyalty to anyone who saw it. A password floating in a server somewhere, easy to pick out if someone really tried, and it would make whoever found it think one thing while the truth of it would be something else entirely. Brilliant.

"Try—" Dorcas stops, and she looks at Minerva, and the war within pauses. Because she is not looking at Minerva and seeing anything other than a mirror of what she could have

become. *Me,* Dorcas thinks. *You're me, if things were just slightly different, if I'd stayed on the path I set out on at the start.*

"Dorcas?" Pandora asks.

"Poppy," Dorcas declares. "Try Poppy."

Five letters. A name. A reminder and a reason. Untraceable in the same exact way as Riddle would be, because Poppy is a flower, and Poppy is a person Minerva loves, and so few people know both. Poppy, because Dorcas would have chosen Marlene. Poppy, because Dorcas does know Minerva. There are no good people in war, but there is love.

That last beat.

Those final keyboard noises.

Pandora exhales a soft laugh and breathes out, "That's it."

And there, right there, that shift in Minerva's eyes. Not defeat, but pride, but benediction. There's praise there, unspoken, and a warmth unfiltered. Me, you, us. The student surpasses the teacher; teaching this old cat new tricks; wisdom passed down, then wielded like a weapon. All that Minerva ever hid from her, and she never hid this. The heart of her.

"What are you doing?" Minerva asks once more. There's the faint impression of a smile there at the corner of her wrinkled mouth, soft, motherly almost. She knows Dorcas, and surely she knows this, and she's just waiting. Simply waiting.

Dorcas swallows. "I'm getting her out. I'm getting them all out, Minerva. I'm starting the war a little early, and you—you aren't going to stop me."

"No," Minerva agrees, "I'm not."

"You're not?" Dorcas chokes out, and she nearly does cry then. She sounds small. Young. Fucking terrified. She is, really.

"It seems that I couldn't even if I wanted to, but I—don't want to," Minerva tells her rather simply.

And, the thing is, Dorcas did know this, deep down. She knew that Minerva was just following orders, and that it was about the war, and that she only didn't do this because she had no idea that she could. It's only through love that Dorcas knew that, and Minerva's love is waiting for her at home. Minerva's love stands before her with a gun pressed to her head, and now she has the idea that she can.

She does love Dorcas, and Dorcas knows that. She doesn't love Albus. She follows his orders and believes he will help bring upon the world Minerva wants for the people she loves, and herself, and he is the lesser of two evils. But it's love, at the core of everyone, that people turn to and follow. Minerva loves her like a mother, a mentor, and a friend. She loves her like a reflection. She loves her the way one loves their past self, just one that has a long way to go and different mistakes to make.

Dorcas lowers her gun. Minerva will not strike. Minerva, now that she knows her options, will help. All Dorcas has to do is ask. So she does. "Help me."

"How?" Minerva murmurs.

"I need to get the tributes closer to Marlene," Dorcas tells her on an exhale of relief. "As close as we can get."

Minerva hums, then turns and sweeps off without hesitation, stopping next to Pandora, who jolts and stares at her with wide eyes. "You, stay here. Press the buttons I point out when I tell you. Dorcas, watch the layout."

Dorcas swivels her head to check on the others. Rodolphus remains at the door, watchful, waiting. James, Huey, and Frank are handling all the gamemakers, keeping them down and quiet. Their sobs have softened. Some of them are peeking at Minerva in disbelief, or fury, or betrayal.

Exhaling, Dorcas steps up to survey the layout. Marlene is fairly secluded, farthest from Sirius and Regulus equally, who are on opposite ends of the maze from each other. Narcissa, Alecto, Rabastan, and Asher are closest to Marlene. Majesty next, and then Emmeline and Alice.

It's raining, and they're all stuck out in it. Each tribute is awake. Marlene is poking at the ground with her sword, her gaze blank and empty, swollen arm tucked close to her body. Sirius is—oh, he's talking to the moon. Not the real moon, but Remus, except not by name. *I miss the moon,* he says, *and I miss my moon. I miss you. I love you.* Meanwhile, Regulus is once again struggling with his aquaphobia, this time with no bag to cover himself with. He's alone, hunched in over on himself, clearly doing his best to breathe, to survive.

"That button there, the one that just lit up," Minera orders.

The rain in the arena cuts out very abruptly. It's pouring one second, then stopping the next. Regulus chokes out a harsh breath and dares to raise his head, looking up at the sky like a fucking miracle just happened. Sirius falls silent. Marlene blinks, then frowns. The other tributes look up as well, taking note, startled and unsure. It's a break in routine. Every other night, it has rained all the way until morning.

The change is enough to get the tributes up, and then Minerva is making Pandora press another button, which starts shifting the layout of the maze. Naturally, the movement gets the tributes to run, and then it's a game of getting each of them as close to Marlene as possible, guiding them like rats with hands and fog and whatever will get them to go.

"Wait, Minerva, keep Marlene in place," Dorcas says, watching as Marlene gets wary enough to start moving, which is only going to make it harder for people to get closer to her.

A few moments later, Minerva has Pandora pressing all sorts of buttons, and the hedges box Marlene in, keeping her trapped. Dorcas' heart clenches seeing her respond to it, paranoid and panicked, so fucking exhausted that her arm trembles as she holds up her sword.

"How do I make sure the hands won't harm them?" Pandora asks, and then she's directed to press another button. They all watch as Rabastan scoops Asher up in his arms and carries her as fast as he can, cursing under his breath the entire way.

"Minerva," Dorcas croaks, feeling her phone buzz in her pocket, the set alarm going off. It's time. There's no more waiting. It's now or never. "The protective perimeter has to come down. It needs to come down *now."*

Minerva lifts her gaze to meet Dorcas' eyes. "As soon as I do that, Hallow heli-carriers will be dispatched."

"I know," Dorcas says, "but we don't have much time. They're there, do you understand? Lily's there to get them out, and we're on a tight schedule. Bring it all *down."*

When the arena breaks open, it's on Dorcas' orders, but it's Minerva's hands that make it happen. The creator digs her claws in and rips, and destroys, and has no regrets about it.

Five letters. A name. The word that starts the war.

Poppy.

~•~

Lily clips the harness around her waist and gives a sharp tug, glancing one more time at screen to make sure they've got the right spot. It's simple enough, Lily supposes. A tracker in a ring to get to the starting point. Marlene first.

"Ready?" Amos asks, bracing his hand on the latch on the side door, staring at her and waiting for the cue.

"Ready," Lily confirms, and she doesn't wait one second the moment the door opens.

It's a slow descent where they hover over the top of the maze, and she dips down at a pace that makes her impatient. She wants to sinks down rapidly and hit the ground running.

Instead, she lands lightly on her feet in a cube of hedges, finding a ragged Marlene McKinnon glaring at her with her sword raised, looking damn near feral. Lily realizes, belatedly, that simply grabbing her and going won't be so simple.

"Who the hell are you?" Marlene spits out.

"My name is Lily," says Lily, carefully holding her hands up to show she's no threat. "I'm a friend of Dorcas'."

For some reason, this does not soothe Marlene like Lily had expected it to. Instead, it makes her snarl and come running right at her with her sword. Lily yelps and skips to the side, clunky and slow in the harness, and she curses under her breath as the sword slices against her arm.

Well, great. That's just great. Huffing, Lily throws up a mental apology to Dorcas before she kicks out with her foot to slow Marlene down, then wraps the rope around her wrist and snatches on it. Marlene cries out, and the sword clatters to the ground. There, perfect. No weapon.

"Listen to me, I'm here to *help,"* Lily hisses, inching closer and fully just dragging Marlene in. They collide into each other, and Marlene gasps, struggling to push away and not really managing it with the state of her broken arm and Lily's unrelenting grip to contend with. "I don't have time for this! I'm getting you out of here. *Hold on!"*

With that, Lily wraps the hanging clip on the harness around Marlene and secures it, then grabs onto her and gives a sharp tug on the rope, bellowing into her headset to be brought up. As soon as their feet leave the ground, Lily wraps her legs around Marlene and holds her, and holds her, and holds her through each bite and hiss and claw of fingers.

Marlene is still fighting and lashing out as much as she can all the way through the air and into the heli-carrier. Barty, Mary, and Amos are there to hastily help them inside, all chattering and trying to peel Marlene away from Lily at once.

It's not until Marlene really registers that there are other people that she calms down enough to pause, her head swinging around, eyes flashing. She's defensive, panting, unaware that she's saved. Lily leaves Mary to offer her water, soothing her with the promise that she's okay now, she's not in the arena anymore, and she'll never have to go back.

"Barty, get that tracker out of her arm," Lily orders, sweeping past him to head to the cockpit. She ignores the stinging in her arm from the sword and the ache from Marlene quite literally beating the shit out of her to stoop down in the cockpit and stare at the radar. "Has she got it yet?"

"No, still waiting," Sybill says nervously. "It should be possible to pick up the pings of the trackers in the tributes' arms so we know where to go, but…"

"Shit," Lily curses. "Shit, shit, shit."

Sybill glances at her with wide eyes. "What do we do?"

"We do nothing," Lily mutters. *"I* have to go into the maze."

"Lily—"

"We don't have *time,* Sybill."

"But," Sybill starts, only to cut herself off as Lily drops her phone in Sybill's lap, displaying Marlene's position. Sybill blinks. "What is this?"

"This is going to be me, here in a moment," Lily declares, pointing at the screen. "You'll be able to follow me through the maze and send Barty or Amos down to bring whoever I find back up. We'll communicate through the headset, but you'll have eyes on me the whole time, so stay close."

"Okay," Sybill says. "Just—be careful."

Lily nods and steps back out of the cockpit to find Marlene absolutely sobbing her eyes out as Barty digs the tracker out of her arm. Her broken arm. Oh, that's—well, that's horrible, but it is necessary. She's allowing it, though, and Mary is right there, holding her other hand and soothing her through it.

"Got it!" Barty announces the moment he does, in fact, have it. He holds it up like a trophy, blood on his fingers.

"Toss it," Lily orders, and Barty does, fully just flicking it out of the open door. Lily drops down next to Marlene and Mary, reaching out to peel their hands apart. She doesn't hesitate, just slips the ring off her finger, and looks up to find Marlene staring at her. "Sorry, I need this. I'll give it back."

"I—" Marlene's breath catches, her voice hoarse, throat still bruised and arm still broken and bleeding. She's a fucking mess, and yet, she holds Lily's gaze and says, "If you lose that, I'm going to fucking kill you."

Lily just huffs a laugh and darts away, stopping only long enough to explain what she's doing and making it very clear that Mary is *not* to drop down into the maze. Barty is tasked with removing trackers, Sybill has to fly, and that leaves Amos to come down for retrieval. Mary catches this, and the last thing Lily hears as she drops out the heli-carrier is Mary Macdonald telling her to go fuck herself.

~•~

"Why isn't the radar picking up the signal of the tributes' trackers?" Dorcas hisses.

Minerva presses her lips into a thin line and shakes her head sharply. "It's tied into Hallow technology only, Dorcas. No other radar *can* pick it up."

"Shit," Dorcas chokes out, staring at the screen as she watches Lily hit the ground in the maze, unclip from the heli-carrier and take off running. Dorcas swallows. "Okay, well, that's going to make this a little harder."

"What can we do?" Pandora asks.

Dorcas bites her lip. "Help guide her until we have to go. Who is she closest to from her position?"

"As of now…Majesty, who moves fast," Minerva says.

"Okay," Dorcas replies firmly, "so get her to them."

~•~

Lily could do without the hands that burst free from the hedges behind her, thank you. She does not at all appreciate them, and she can't stop herself from sending a look of sheer disbelief up to the sky as she tears down the passage, a ring on her finger and a heli-carrier flying above.

Lily is pretty sure that the hands are just guiding her along, but it's not exactly a comfort to feel chased by them. They're fucking *creepy,* and it's genuinely terrifying. She ignores them as much as possible and weaves through the maze as fast as she can, taking turns when hands burst free in front of her and the hedges part for her to dive into.

It's not long before she finds someone. Majesty, Lily recalls, and they only get one moment of staring at each other before the hedges close up around them, nowhere to go, and Lily

looks up to see someone sinking down. Immediately, she's pissed, because she'd know that hair anywhere.

"What the fuck did I *say?!"* Lily bursts out incredulously.

"Amos actually has a history with patching up wounds, so he needs to help Marlene," Mary snaps.

"Then they could have sent Barty!"

"He's helping Sybill!"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Lily hisses, shooting her a glare before focusing on Majesty, who is staring at them like they might be some new alien lifeforms coming to abduct them.

Not too far off, actually.

"Hey," Mary says gently, addressing Majesty. How she can be gentle now, here, Lily does not know. "Majesty, right? My name is Mary. I understand this might be confusing for you, but we're here to get you out, alright? We've already rescued Marlene McKinnon, and we have to help the others after you. I know this is a lot to ask, but I need you to trust me, okay?"

"Out?" Majesty asks, cautious. "You're getting me out?"

"We are. I promise," Mary murmurs. "We're not with the Hallow. I swear we're not. Hallow is hollow."

Majesty stares at her, and then they swallow and look up at the heli-carrier, and then, tentatively, they take a step forward. Drawn in by the promise of freedom. Drawn in by the chance to finally rest. Drawn in by Mary's calm words and defiant declaration. *Hallow is hollow.*

And so, Majesty goes up without a fight, and Lily checks in through the headset, getting the updates. The tracker is taken out of their arm. Amos is doing what he can to help. Barty is keeping an eye on Lily's position, removing trackers, and steadily giving out water. Mary plans to keep dropping in, and Lily gives in, because she's better at it than Lily was.

The next people Lily comes across are Narcissa and Alecto. They're all running from hands and crash into each other, and Lily's head nearly gets taken off by Alecto's sword. Narcissa has her bow up and pointed at Mary in seconds as she comes down, and Lily moves fast, striking out while she's distracted and nearly getting a sword to the stomach for her troubles, if not for the hands that dart out to grab Alecto and hold her.

Narcissa and Lily fight, and they're still fighting when Mary makes it to the ground. She rushes over to pull Narcissa off Lily, the both of them wrestling her bow away from her. Alecto snarls and fights against hands that don't harm her, just hold her, and then Mary is talking. Not soft, not soothing, but firm. *Listen to me. Now.* That's what her words mean, and it's what these two need, apparently, because they do.

Narcissa goes up first. Alecto follows.

It's the same thing, over and over, the same fight and then the same spiel. Lily locating, Mary coming down, Barty taking out the trackers, and then doing it all over again. Rabastan and Asher. Emmeline and Alice. All that's left is—

"Lily!" Sybill shrieks as Lily runs, guided along by more hands and an ever-shifting maze. "Lily, they're here! The Hallows are here! We need to *go!"*

"Not yet!" Lily shouts back, because not yet. Not yet. Not yet." They can do this. They can get them all out. There's still Regulus, there's still Sirius, there's still more of the mission.

So, Lily doesn't stop, and she doesn't slow down.

~•~

The whole building *wails.* The loud alarm that blares through the building makes Dorcas suck in a sharp breath, her eyes wide and her hands shaking.

"Dorcas, we have to *go,"* Minerva declares.

"But—" Dorcas traps a whine behind her teeth and glances at the screen where Lily is still running, still running, still running from their guiding hands. If they leave now, they can't help her. They won't know she and everyone else made it out, not until it's over, not until Dorcas can make the call.

"Dorcas!" Minerva shouts.

"Wait," James chokes out. "Please wait. Regulus and—"

"We have to. James, I'm sorry, we have to," Dorcas tells him, utterly devastated. "We don't have *time.* If we don't go now, we'll die. James, I know, okay? I *know,* but—but Lily is still in this, and as soon as we're in the garage, I'll make the call. She'll do everything she can to get them out. She *will."*

"There's still a chance, James," Frank says. "You just have to hope, okay? But she's right. We have to go now."

"Come on! Come *on,"* Dorcas orders. "Go, go, go!"

With no other options, that's what they all do.

~•~

Regulus is wet from rain and running for his life. Always the hands. He's so fucking tired of the hands. The rustling of the hedges are loud, then louder, then too loud. There's a heavy *thwap-thwap-thwap* noise from above that has him looking up as he takes a corner, managing to catch sight of a hulking shadow passing over in the sky for only a second before he collides into someone hard enough to hit the ground.

He rolls, then comes back up with his dagger at the ready, only to falter in surprise at the sight of a woman that should most definitely not be in the maze. Not a tribute. An illusion?

"Regulus," she says, hands help up, not moving—she speaks like she knows him, "my name is Lily. I'm not here to—"

"Regulus!"

A jolt travels through Regulus' body at the familiar sound of Mary's voice, and his heart hammers as she drops to the ground from a line she's clipped to. She moves towards him, fast, and he steps back sharply, swiveling his blade up.

Mary stops, blinks, then looks so fucking sad. "Hey, Regulus, it's me. I promise it's me, okay? I—I know this is confusing, but we really don't have much time now. We're getting you out of here. I need you to come with me."

"Where?" Regulus asks shortly, eyes narrowed.

"Away. Somewhere safe," Mary tells him. "I—I know you're scared and on edge, but the sooner we get you out, the sooner we can find Sirius and get him out, too."

It's like she says the magic words. Regulus' heart jumps, and he lowers his dagger. "You're getting him out?"

"As soon as we have you," Mary vows. She holds out her hand to him. "Come on. Barty is waiting in the heli-carrier."

"Barty?" Regulus asks, and his voice cracks, tears filling his eyes as a harsh pressure builds in his chest. Here is Mary, not quite a friend, but Sirius and James' friend. Someone kind. Someone who reminds him of home. And there is Barty, somewhere, waiting. Barty. A constant. He's here? Home is here, and home has come for him, and Regulus wants so badly to go home now. James is home. Where is he?

Mary steps forward and touches him gently, easing her hand around his elbow to pull him closer. She tugs his dagger away and murmurs to him, explaining that they have to go up, up, up. Regulus is not okay with this, really, because he does not like heights, but she bargains with him; *as soon as you're in the heli-carrier, we'll find Sirius.*

There's not a lot of time, and Regulus wants to go home, and he'll do anything to make sure that Sirius can come home, too. So, he tucks his face into Mary's hair, closes his eyes, and holds onto her as they rise.

It's chaos in the heli-carrier. Utter fucking chaos. People are shouting, moving around, full of activity. There are faces he doesn't recognize and faces he does from the maze. There's Barty there, suddenly, who practically peels him away from Mary and chokes out a harsh breath as he snatches him into a hug. Regulus sinks into him all at once.

"Fucking hell, fucking—" Barty cuts himself off and pushes Regulus back, guiding him to a seat built into the closed side of the heli-carrier, next to a very large gun. "Okay, look, I have to get the tracker out of your arm, Regulus. I have to *cut* it out and dig it out. It's going to hurt. Hey, are you listening?"

Regulus is dazed, overwhelmed, and can barely hear himself think over the sounds of everyone else. Barty smacks him. Just slaps him hard enough to make him jolt and focus. Barty raises a scalpel and raises his eyebrows, too.

"Okay," Regulus says, nodding. "Okay."

Regulus barely even gets to feel it or make sense of anything, because someone starts shouting from the cockpit, and a man in glasses starts barking orders at Mary, and it's utter chaos. The heli-carrier tilts, and everyone rocks with the motion.

"Sybill!" Barty roars. "Keep the fucking thing *steady!"*

There's blood on Regulus' arm.

"They're fucking shooting at us!" someone shrieks.

"Regulus? *Regulus?"* Narcissa demands, suddenly at his side, staring at him with wide eyes. Her arm is wrapped in white cloth. There's blood on it.

I killed your sister, Regulus thinks. He does not say it, but he feels it, and he feels nothing.

"Got it!" Barty declares. "Okay, time to toss!"

"Barty, no!" The man in the glasses dives forward to yank Barty out of the way just as he tosses the tracker out the opening, and everyone starts screaming and ducking as gunfire sprays through the heli-carrier.

"We have to get Lily!" the person from the cockpit yells. "Mary, get Lily! Bring Lily up *now!"*

"Fuck!" Mary shouts, and then she's running right for the open door and swinging out, the rope catching and spinning on the mechanism as she sails down.

Regulus watches it slow.

Regulus' ears are ringing.

Regulus is holding Narcissa's hand.

"Amos, can you—" Barty cuts himself off and hits the ground just as more gunfire rips through the opening. Everyone goes to the ground, diving out of the way.

The heli-carrier tilts again, and they all slide and sway, rocking with the motion of it. Regulus is on the ground, tucked under Narcissa, and he doesn't know how he got here.

"No! *No!"* Lily shouts, swinging back inside with Mary and clearly not pleased to be here at all. "Not yet! There's still—"

"We have to go, Lily! We've done all we can!" the person from the cockpit shouts back. "They're already here!"

Lily marches off to the cockpit, and Regulus shoves Narcissa aside, woozy and shaking. He crawls to his feet and watches Mary, with tears on her cheeks, slam the side door on the heli-carrier closed and lock the latch.

"Fuck! *Fuck!"* Lily snarls, stomping back out of the cockpit, and everyone stares at her. She stands in place, her chest heaving, and she squeezes her eyes shut. "Alright, listen up! Everyone hold onto something. We're leaving, and it's not going to be a graceful exit!"

"Wait," Regulus croaks, stumbling forward. "Wait, you haven't got everyone. You haven't—"

"We got everyone we could," Lily says.

"Regulus," Barty whispers, there suddenly, catching him by the chest and halting him. Regulus is still trying to move forward, and he can see. He can see through the front window of the heli-carrier, and so can Barty, and Barty shifts to block him, to block his view. Regulus' eyes sting.

"Sirius," Regulus chokes out, slumping into Barty's arms and trying fruitlessly to reach past him, trying to pluck the Hallow heli-carrier ahead out of the sky. "Sirius. Barty, *please.* Sirius —"

"I know, I know," Barty says, and he looks over his shoulder, grimaces, and then lets them both sink to the ground.

"Sirius," Regulus repeats, weeping. "Sirius. We have to get Sirius. Barty, we can't leave him. We can't—"

"Stop. Regulus, *stop."* Barty clutches him closer and holds onto him, staring into his eyes. "Just stop."

"We can't leave," Regulus whimpers. "Please. Please, Barty, we can't leave him. We can't, we have to go and get him, it's supposed to be me and him. Where is he?"

"They got him, Regulus," Barty says softly, his voice laden with pity. "The Hallows got him."

Regulus gasps out a hoarse sob and shakes his head, the whole fucking world ripping apart around him. He curls up. He lays there and bleeds, lays there and weeps, lays there and screams.

They got him. The Hallows got his brother.

His big brother.

Always his big brother.

Chapter End Notes

guess what song i was listening to when i wrote that last scene? two birds by regina spektor. "two birds on a wire, one says come on, the other says im tired" YEAH THAT ONE 😃 DID I CRY? YES, MAYBE, BUT YOU CANT PROVE IT.

starting from the top, pandora and remus. giggling while writing "what difference can one night make?" because REALLY, JUST WAIT 😭 remus just. well, he's clearly struggling rn, and so he dipped. needed a little break. terrible timing on his part. shaking my head at him as if i didn't write it.

moving on, because i will talk more about remus in a minute. cut to poor james, who is having one hell of a night, huh?

and then effie my beloved <3 her also asking about remus, except she never quite says his name, does she? how frustrating. lily is literally so, so close. like, the sheer irony of her to be like "sorry some servant isn't the priority right now" when, if she knew who that servant was, she would go and get him Immediately.

and then lily herself! and mary!!! ah, there's some Tension there. hm. just know that i love these two so, so much. and sybill pls 😭 she really can't keep a secret to save her life GOODBYE. but ofc mary and barty are like hey! we want to come! district six, the district of the loyal. i do love themes, clearly.

also the whole amos and barty thing—don't look too closely into that. barty just likes sex, this is established, and he's going through a lot.

like, okay, so that moment where james is like, shit remus is already gone, and dorcas says they have to go down to the basement level—yeah, so there's still hope! remember that; james always works to make sure people never get left behind, right? and they haven't left the hallow yet... 👀

anyway, that moment between dorcas and minerva was so. i think it's honestly one of my favorite dorcas scenes ever written, im not even gonna lie. it just felt really, intense? because it's established that dorcas and minerva have a bond, and this whole time dorcas —and us, following the story—have had this love for minerva called into question. because hey, it's Minnie, we love Minnie, right? but then she's doing all of this, and it's like, oh god we actually hate her—and then you reach this moment and realize. She's Not The Bad Guy.

like ive been saying it, to just wait and really think about what minerva is doing, because the thing is—she literally didn't know she had other options and had no motivations to find other options when this was a plan that would work, and WAS working. but the moment dorcas gives her that option, and extends that branch to make this choice, minerva instantly does it. she throws it all aside and renders everything she has done useless. do you know how heavy that is? do you know how hard that is? she tortured people and had people killed, and then she stepped up and did the right thing, even when doing so made all the wrong things she did before be for...nothing. LIKE PUT SOME RESPECT ON HER NAME PLEASE.

but on the bright side, lily got marlene, then nabbed her ring (told you the ring was important) to get the rest. they're not quite out of the woods yet, because they still have to make it back to the phoenix, so... more to come on that.

and also they got everyone except one...

oh, sirius 😔 my baby, i love him, i truly do. there's still more of this mission in the next chapter, so i can't really speak about what's coming, but just know that what you're thinking is gonna happen likely isn't, or at least not in the way you're expecting.

alright, let's do honorable mentions again, because i really missed them:

-dorcas "walk, i said WALK" meadowes 😩
-rodolphus "you're crazy, i like crazy" vs dorcas "i like women, only"
-james just casually being like "well alright ill just cut the tracker out of remus' thigh" like HELLO??? he's a mad lad, i love him so much
-narcissa being there for regulus, and still not knowing he killed bella, Big Yikes
-pandora my love 😭 her having to leave her dad who is dying. ITS SO UPSETTING!!!!
-on a higher note, that whole scene where lily and everyone is yelling over the phone lmaoooo. very entertaining to write
-remus also liked it when sirius caught the spear

yeah, that about covers it, i think. the next 2 chapters are kinda extensions of this one? like they all happen in the same time frame, over one long mission. so, it stays intense for the next chapter for sure.

The Breakaway

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-depictions of guns/gun violence
-graphic depictions of violence
-descriptions of blood/injuries
-depictions of shock
-depictions of panic/panic attacks
-not explicitly described, but heavily implied depictions of james' issues with time (things being out of order and him not being able to make sense of it)
-likely medical inaccuracies (to all those in the medical field, you have my deepest apologies)
-not explicitly described/shown, but implied depictions of people being cut (not for violence, its necessary)
-depictions/descriptions of car crashes and car chases
-references to past death/murder
-murder
-death

listen, okay? i need you to hear me when i say this is a very, very heavy chapter. it's action-packed. it's very fast-paced. it may be anxiety-inducing. so, please please please check the warnings and take care of yourselves. i will be putting a more in-depth warning in the end notes that will contain spoilers for those who need it, so don't hesitate to check them if you need them, which is—as always—so valid!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's a long way down to the basement, and the lift has been shut down, because—unbeknownst to everyone—when things go terribly, terribly wrong within the arena, things proceed to go terribly, terribly wrong within the building that controls said arena. Dorcas probably should have anticipated that.

It's smart, Dorcas can bitterly acknowledge, because once that alert was sent out and there was confirmation that someone or something was breaking into the arena, the mothership put out the alarm and responded accordingly.

"Come on, come on, stairwell," Dorcas directs, holding the door open so everyone can file past her. Best to stay out of sight on the way out, if they can.

Dorcas' planning around patrols and routes has granted them quite the headstart they need, though. The seven of them make their way down the stairwell quickly, or as quickly as they can. James falls behind, but Frank stays with him. As they bypass the sixth floor towards the fifth, the door bursts open down below and a flood of Aurors come in.

There should be a moment of hesitation, because Dorcas has never killed anyone before, and yet she points and shoots without even blinking. Headshot. Huey gasps. James and Frank lean over the rail from further up and shoot, too. Not necessarily headshots, but Aurors do go down.

Gunfire ricochets off the walls, spraying crumbling concrete and making them all duck. Minerva pushes forward, hits one Auror, grabs the next and ruthlessly slams them back against the rail, and then tilts them right over the side. They scream as they fall, sailing down and landing in a crumpled heap at the bottom. Rodolphus, who is closer than Frank and James, sees this and gets inspired, clearly, because he darts into the fray and starts tossing Aurors, too.

The moment the Aurors are cleared, they continue swiftly on the way. They made it down to floor three when the doors up ahead, back at the sixth floor, burst open yet again. More Aurors come into the stairwell, shooting down at them and following them down. Dorcas carelessly raises her gun over the railing and starts pulling the trigger, mildly satisfied when she hears the yelp and groan of people being hit.

Some make it down and reach them at the second floor, meeting James and Frank first since they're at the back. Frank slams one Auror against the wall, then fully drags them by the front of their vest to quite literally toss them over the rail. They don't have as far to fall, so they might get back up. Minerva must think so, too, because she snatches Huey's gun and points it down over the railing to shoot.

Another one goes sailing past, launched aside from where James smacked the shit out of them with his cane, his other hand up as he shoots at the Aurors still coming down with Frank's help. Some drop. Some shoot back, and Pandora gasps when she ducks out of the way, her shoulder slamming back into the wall. Rodolphus grabs her by the back of her neck and pushes her down, then braces one hand against the wall and the other to the railing as he

swings himself up and kicks at an Auror that pushes past Frank and James. The Auror lands on their back, and Dorcas looks away before Frank brings his raised foot down against their head with force.

By the time they all reach the first floor, the Aurors close are thinning out, but more are steadily flooding the stairwell from higher up, shooting down at them with little success. At one point, James runs out of bullets, looks at his gun, then just throws it at the Auror in front of him, whacking them in the face with it so hard that they stumble back.

Minerva makes it to the basement level first with Huey and Pandora right behind. There are a few Aurors that fell that are alive and well enough to stand back up, and Minerva puts them right back down with bullets between their eyes. One Auror lunges at Huey, who yelps and stumbles back, and Rodolphus heaves a sigh like he's babysitting as he starts to assist.

Pandora is closer. She punches the Auror in the face, then almost instantly bursts into tears. Just starts crying, and the Auror looks so genuinely alarmed by this for a second that they don't even move or do anything. This turns out to be a mistake, because while still crying, Pandora throws herself at the Auror like a wild, untamed cat trying to claw their face off.

It's dreadful, honestly. She's just flailing and screaming and crying all at the same time, leaving bloody scratches on their face but not doing any real damage. Rodolphus is the one who has to sweep in and shove the Auror's head into a wall, making them go limp and slump to the ground, knocked out.

Rodolphus blinks at Pandora. "You, uh, good?"

"No," Pandora says with a sniffle.

"Come on!" Minvera calls out, holding the door open and waving them all through. The floor is littered with bodies and blood, some dead and some not and some too injured to move.

Dorcas makes it through the door but waits for James and Frank, and then Minerva slams the door once everyone is out. More Aurors are still chasing them, but Minerva steps back and

proceeds to shoot the lock until she empties her clip. She tries the handle and presses against the door, seemingly satisfied when it won't give.

"Tell me you have a way out of here," Minerva grits out, swinging around to face Dorcas as she tosses aside her gun with a dull clatter. Frank does the same, and when Dorcas checks, she repeats the motion. Great, so they're all out.

The good news is that it'll take the Aurors a while to catch up. If they make it to the garage quickly, then they'll be able to get out and get to the train, and then they're all in the clear.

"Yes, there's a van in the garage," Dorcas tells her.

"Who's waiting to let us in the station?" Minerva asks.

Dorcas shrugs. "I don't know. Whoever Lily sent. They'll let us in the moment we set off the censors."

"Good," Minerva says. "Let's go."

"Wait," Dorcas mutters. "We have to take one *tiny* detour."

Minerva raises her eyebrows in disbelief, but Dorcas sets her shoulders and tilts her chin up, because she's in charge here, and she made a promise. James beams at her.

~•~

"Do you hear that? Fucking gunshots! And the building is on lockdown now. Lift won't work. Potter and his lot, no doubt."

Remus crosses his arms tighter around his ribcage, feeling the frantic thump of his heart as he paces back and forth in his cell. The muffled sound of gunshots has faded, but the faint sound of an alarm blaring through the building has not.

Something has happened, obviously.

Remus doesn't know *what* has happened, but by the dread turning the blood in his veins to ice, he just *knows* it somehow involves James, and probably Pandora. Oh, what did they *do?* He's freaking the fuck out wondering if they're okay, if they're even alive, and fucking *Malfoy* isn't helping.

Yet again, Lucius must have gone out with someone for drinks or something, because he got trapped down on this level when the building shut down unexpectedly. Remus doesn't know how many people he's with, but he has heard at least one person grunt in response to the things he has said.

At first, Lucius was prattling on about James apparently having some sort of secret plot going on to help Regulus or Sirius win the hunger games. He was going on and on about how James has his district stylist doing dirty work, which is against the rules, and Remus has been resisting the urge to claw his own ears off or snatch his mask away and scream down the corridor for Lucius to shut his stupid fucking mouth. Remus wants to fucking kill him. Itches with the urge. Hungry for it.

Once the gunshots started, Lucius fell silent. He's just now picking up his complaints and ranting, and Remus can hear him pacing at the end of the hall, likely waiting for the lift to come back on so he and his companion can leave.

There's the distant sound of a door slam and feet pounding against the ground. Remus freezes, his eyes going wide, and he can't stop himself from whipping around to face the bars on his cell, staring wide-eyed at nothing and straining his ears. Lucius has fallen silent. The footsteps have stopped.

And then, Lucius flatly says, "Potter, how did I know it was you? Of course it was you and…"

The silence is thick.

"Yes, me," comes the dry voice of Minerva McGonagall. "Do finish your sentence, Mr. Malfoy, please."

"What is the meaning of this?" Lucius hisses.

"Look," James says, his voice ringing out sharp, "I'm only going to make this offer once. You and Dolohov can come with us, or we can go through you. The arena has fallen. We're getting the tributes out. Either come with us, or get the hell out of the way, and if you don't—well, I told you what would happen if you got in my way again."

Remus is pretty sure his heart fucking stops. *The arena has fallen. We're getting the tributes out.* Sirius. That's the first thing Remus thinks. Just Sirius.

What the hell is happening? James never mentioned this, and surely he would have, if he knew. Damn. What a difference one night can make, indeed.

"You—" Lucius makes a low snarl of fury. "What did I say, Dolohov? I *told* you Potter would fuck this up somehow. I knew you were planning something. I *knew* it."

"Oh, come off it, Lucius," snaps someone else, someone that Remus doesn't know. "Fuck the glory of winning. Who cares about any of that? They're getting my brother out. Your *wife* as well. Winning the games isn't *important—"*

"To you," Lucius grits out. "It's not important to you, but to some people, the integrity behind these games *matter.* If you think I'm going to just stand by and let you ruin this—"

"Well," James cuts in, "I did my part. I tried."

There's the following sound of a grunt, and then people are yelling, and Remus holds very still as he listens to the clear sounds of a brawl. Possibly more than one. He can hear Pandora shouting, and Frank cursing, and someone else slamming into a hard surface.

The fight doesn't get further away. It gets closer. Remus takes a step forward, drawn to it like a moth to a flame, his palms itching. It has been years since he's done anything, absolutely anything at all, that could release the built-up pressure always fluttering under his skin, like he's eager to rip out of himself and *let go.* His heart flutters rapidly at the base of his throat, his temples throbbing, struggling to breathe behind his mask in a strange sense of anticipation he can't really understand. There's the sound of violence, bodies taking hits, and Remus steps forward again. Again. Again.

The moment Lucius Malfoy stumbles into view outside of his cell, Remus' hands are darting out between the bars of their own accord. His fingers curl into silky hair, and he fists it before yanking *hard.* Lucius barely gets one second to gasp, and then Remus is slamming his head into the steel bar once, twice, a third time. Lucius stares at him dazedly, bloody and bruised already, eyes unfocused.

Remus yanks on his head with all his strength and hears the snap at the same time as he registers the feeling of blood pooling over his fingers in Lucius' hair where his head was split open. Remus knows what a dead man's eyes look like, and Lucius is indeed a dead man before he ever hits the ground when Remus finally relinquishes his grip.

It's eerily quiet.

James steps over Lucius' splayed legs slowly and comes into view, his eyes wide, and yet they still light up the moment he sees Remus. Despite the dead man at his feet, James grins.

Remus reaches up and hesitates for a moment, feeling briefly suspended in this one second, trapped in amber and trapped in a cell he's never removed his mask in.

But it's just James here. Just James. His friend. If Remus can trust anyone, it's him. And, well, Remus just murdered a man, so taking off the mask isn't going to make much of a difference at this point. Either way, he'd be executed for it. So, exhaling in relief as he does it, Remus removes the mask.

"Remus," James greets warmly, "I was handling that."

"I was faster," is all Remus can think to say, and James releases a high-pitched, hysterical sort of laugh, staring at him in pure disbelief. He shakes his head like he's amazed.

"You just—you killed someone. Are you alright?"

"He's not the first, James."

James blinks. He blinks again. "Oh, so you—you—"

"It's a long story, but let's just say I didn't end up becoming a servant in the Hallow on a petty crime," Remus says dryly. "I can, uh, tell you all about it later the next time I feel like opening up a bit more, but *after* you explain to me what the fuck is happening right now."

"Oh. Right. Yeah, so I'm here to break you out," James informs him, and then he pulls out a knife.

Remus stares at him. "James, this isn't the sort of cell you can break into with a knife, and I—I can't come with you. My—"

"Listen to me, there's not much time," James interrupts. "The arena is—well, some people broke in. There's this whole secret revolution my stylist is a part of. It's insane, and we—we hope they managed to get Sirius and Regulus out. Do you hear what I'm saying, Remus? You can be *free.* You can come with us and be somewhere safe, and Sirius will be there, and—and—" He stops, then swallows. His voice drops to a whisper. "Please. Just please come, because—because Sirius would want you to, and because you're my friend, and because you deserve to be free, and because I *won't* leave you behind."

James sounds—and looks—desperate. Hoping. *Pleading.* All Remus wants to do is agree, just agree so fucking badly, because he is who he is and would give anything to go.

Anything except his father's life.

"They'll kill my dad, James," Remus whispers, his voice small.

"Believe me, Riddle will be a little busy with many other matters to focus on the loss of one servant," says McGonagall, who sweeps into view. "I cannot promise you that your father will live, but I can promise you that whether you stay here or go with us, his chances of dying are the same. War is here, and that goes for everyone, including Riddle himself. Furthermore, the spread of rebellion will surely lead to liberation missions across the districts and already has; your father could be safe already, or may one day become so."

Remus stares at her, his mouth running dry. He hesitates, his heart pounding in his chest. *Dad,* he thinks. *Dad, please don't die. Please don't be dead. I want to be free. Can I be free?*

"Remus," James croaks, "do you think your dad would want you to give up your freedom and chance at safety just for him? Don't you think he'd give his life for you to have all of that?"

Remus thinks about it, that letter, those words he read so many times that he memorized them, words he has thought of day in and day out. *Days of thinking of our last fight has taught me many things about regret, and I want to tell you now that the only regret I truly have is not assuring you, even in our differences, that I would always love you and support you through anything. If you doubt anything else, do not doubt that, because I will always love you, no matter what; I will always be proud to call you my son.*

After all the fighting, and the struggles to communicate, all the push and pull and pain, all the distance and years spent apart, and every time Remus never really listened to his father—after all of that, here Remus is, deciding to listen this time.

"Okay," Remus chokes out. "Okay, I'll come, but—but you really *can't* break into the cell with a knife."

James exhales in visible relief, then clears his throat. "Um, well, actually the knife is to cut the tracker out of your thigh."

"Oh," Remus says.

"Er, if you're alright with that, I mean," James mumbles awkwardly, looking a little unsure.

"I—no, I mean yes, that's—well, it's sort of necessary, isn't it?" Remus asks, coughing. "Right, just—uh, *do* you have a plan to get into the cell, though? Because it's on a timer. It won't open again until morning, unless it's manually opened."

"Okay, how do I manually open it?"

"At the end of the hall, you take a left and go down to the second office. That's the control room. It's practically never used or monitored. It does take three different people to do it, though, sort of as a failsafe. The three keys have to be turned at the same time, and they're all at separate parts of the room, but once they're turned, you can open any cell you want."

James nods and turns to the side to, presumably, look at everyone else he's with. "Okay, I'll go. I need two more."

"Frank, Rodolphus, go with James," says Dorcas, the stylist, who is also apparently a part of a revolution? "If the Aurors make it through, they'll reach you three first, and you're all strong enough to fight. Huey, you and I will go bring the van out into the garage. Minerva, get that tracker out of his thigh, and Pandora… Darling, what would you like to do?"

Pandora steps into view and looks through the bars at Remus with a trembling smile. "I think I'll hold Remus' hand."

Remus' face softens. Pandora looks a fright. Her hair is a mess, face swollen from tears, and she's all banged up. He reaches through the bars, and she moves closer, not looking at Lucius' body as she reaches out to tangle their fingers together. He gently squeezes, and she squeezes back.

James passes Minerva the knife, and then he's gone, moving quickly away with his cane thunking against the ground as he goes. The others depart as well, except for Minerva, who eases close to the bars. Remus presses up against them and turns, holding his thigh in place in the open space in between.

"Remus, wasn't it?" Minerva asks quietly.

"Yes," Remus murmurs.

"I'm Minerva," she replies, kneeling down. "I'm going to cut the seam of your trousers to reveal the injection site. You should have a small scar there. I'll do my best to be as quick as I can, but I'm afraid it's going to hurt either way."

Remus blows out a deep breath and closes his eyes, letting his forehead rest against the cold bars and feeling Pandora once again squeeze his hand. Exhaling, Remus gives a jerky nod and grits out, "Do what you need to do."

~•~

"We got them all," Lily whispers through the phone. "We got all of them, Dorcas, all except Sirius. The Hallows got him."

Dorcas' eyes sink shut. She leans forward and presses her face against the wheel, locked away in a quiet van, the only sound to accompany her being Huey's quiet breathing.

"Okay," Dorcas rasps. She blinks open her eyes and straightens up. "Okay, but—but you are out, yeah? Marlene? Is she safe? You're all headed back to the Phoenix?"

There's a beat of silence, and then Lily mumbles, "We, um, made it out of the arena, but we've run into a bit of trouble. Marlene is fine, and we're all fine, and we'll handle it."

"Lily—"

"Just—just worry about you and your lot, Dorcas. You all get the hell out of there, okay? We'll see you soon."

Dorcas doesn't get to respond before Lily hangs up. With a harsh swallow, Dorcas rolls down her window and tosses her phone, clenching her jaw, then she reaches out for the side of the steering wheel and turns the key.

~•~

James sees what Remus meant about the office when he steps inside. It's deserted and untouched, so unused that the air is stale and there are abandoned cobwebs in the corners. There are also three separate panels in the room, enough distance between them that one person wouldn't be able to reach them all at once. James isn't sure anyone ever comes in here.

With an exchanged look between all of them, James splits off as Rodolphus and Frank do the same. Frank goes to the far corner, Rodolphus goes to the back, and James goes to the main panel at the front.

"Alright, I'll count us down, and then we turn," Frank declares as he reaches out to grasp his key. James and Rodolphus do the same. "Three…two…one…"

James turns his key and watches the panel light up in front of him, a small screen flashing *Manual Override Optional,* and a row of numbers between one and twelve flashing. Only twelve servants stay overnight, and the rest are brought in for parties or by request, then escorted out after their duties are done. But these are the ones that stay, one servant per district, and James looks at the number six. That's Remus.

For some reason, James' hand hovers over the button, and his gaze slowly crawls to the number twelve. Yeah, Remus is assigned to district six, but he's from district twelve. Slowly, James' eyes flick across each glowing number, his chest pinching when he thinks about how these people, all of them, are reduced to numbers and the services they provide, but they all have homes they come from and lives they should get to live. It's not just Remus. He's not the only one.

"James?" Frank asks. "Did it work?"

"The numbers are lit up," Rodolphus comments, moving over to glance between said numbers and James. "Are you waiting for an invitation or something? Hello? Let your friend out."

James ignores him and presses the number one. There's a buzzing noise, and the key on the panel flicks back in place as the numbers go dim. Okay.

Okay, so one at a time, then.

"Get back to your panel," James orders. "We have to turn these keys eleven more times."

Rodolphus heaves a sigh and turns around to shuffle back to his panel, muttering, "Oh, for fuck's sake. Great, I'm stuck with a bleeding heart."

"Frank," James says, "count us down."

So, Frank does. And again. And he keeps doing it. Over and over, they repeat the process, one cell at a time. They almost certainly don't really have time for this, and that's eleven other people who will have trackers cut out of their thighs, but… Well, James can't *not.* What is he going to do? Not save everyone if he can? Do you even know him at all?

By the eleventh turn, they've fallen into a rhythm, quick with it and used to the pattern. They only falter when there's a clatter in the distance, making them all freeze. James swivels his head to look at Frank, who is very still.

"Shit," Frank whispers. "Three, two, one."

They all flick the keys one last time, and James quickly presses the number twelve, wincing at the loud buzzer. It's quiet out there otherwise, though, and they all look at each other and wait. When nothing happens, they shrug.

There's no pounding footsteps, no sounds of movement, no cracks of gunshots. With nothing else to do, they move for the door cautiously. It's closed, and Frank reaches it, grabbing the handle and holding his free hand up at them. They wait and listen, but there's nothing. The door creaks open, and still nothing. Frank presses his back against the door and pokes his head around the doorway, and still nothing.

"See anything?" James breathes out.

"No, we're clear, come on," Frank mumbles with a heavy sigh of relief, straightening up and stepping out and getting shot in the head only seconds later.

It's quick, sudden, an abrupt *crack!* that has Frank's head jerking and blood splattering back against the doorway and James' front. He flinches when it hits his face, small dots and smudges of red filming over the front of his glasses.

Frank is there one second, alive and standing, and then he's dropping to the floor in the next.

James doesn't really understand it. He sees it, and it doesn't make sense to him. He stares, and he isn't sure what the fuck he's looking at. He thinks maybe Frank is hurt real bad.

"Frank?" James asks, starting to take a step forward, and then he's yanked sharply back by the collar and slammed up against the wall by Rodolphus, who presses him there and claps a

hand over his mouth, his eyes wide.

James thinks Rodolphus is shaking, and then he realizes it's him, but he isn't entirely sure why. He doesn't feel cold. There's something warm and wet on his face. Blood.

How'd that get there?

Rodolphus stands there for a long moment. One heartbeat, two, five, ten. By the fifteenth, it hits James that Frank's heart isn't beating anymore. He's not—he can't really put it all together, the sound of a gunshot and blood on his face and Frank hurt on the ground and Frank standing and Frank's heart not beating and Frank and Frank and Frank—

His mother died today.

A strange noise crawls up James' throat, muffled into the palm against his mouth, Rodolphus shoving him harder back when he tries to move, to struggle, to get Frank and stop him before he steps out of the room, but there's blood on his face, and Rodolphus is whispering to him fervently, begging.

"Shh, shh, please, you have to be quiet, man," Rodolphus hisses under his breath. "I know, okay? I know, but he's dead. He's dead, James. Shut *up,* they're coming."

James goes still, because the urgency in Rodolphus' voice is enough to scare him, and he is afraid. He can't see very well. There's something on his glasses, obscuring his vision.

Blood.

Frank's blood.

There's the sound of a tread of a boot lifting sticky away from the floor, and then a gun swings into the open doorway barrel-first, only getting in an inch before Rodolphus whips

away from James to slam it up and lash out at the Auror that's starting to come in. James watches Rodolphus knock the gun into the Auror's face, can't really see all of it, but then the Auror cries out and Rodolphus has the gun.

The air fills with gunfire, Rodolphus using the Auror as a shield as he swings out the doorway to shoot at those that are shooting at them. James reaches up shakily and pulls his glasses off, staring blankly at the floor, vision blurry and dry as he cleans his glasses off before putting them back on.

"James!" Rodolphus bellows. "A little fucking help here!"

Blinking rapidly, James swivels and leans on his cane as he eases out the doorway. His first instinct is to help Frank get up, but Rodolphus seems to be in a worse predicament right now, so that's who James focuses on.

James snatches up his cane and whacks the closest Auror in the face with it, grunting from the force and following them as they crash into the wall. He brings his aching leg up to knee them in the stomach and snatch away their gun. It's not a pistol, but something with a wide spray and rapid fire. Aim, shoot, and hope you don't miss is easier like this.

Rodolphus and James duck in and out of the room for cover, shooting when they can, mostly tearing into the walls. The group of Aurors are down at the other end of the hall near the lift, around the corners. A few trickle down at a time, so James and Rodolphus pick them off and do their best to not get shot. The entire time, Frank remains on the floor.

James and Rodolphus have the better cover, admittedly, and they don't waste bullets when Aurors get in close range. They just drag them into the room and beat them there, and at some point, things go very quiet.

Carefully, James peeks around the corner. There are bodies bleeding out all down the hall, and it's so silent that it's utterly chilling. Rodolphus reaches out and touches his shoulder, then gestures for him to stay, so James does.

It takes only a minute for Rodolphus to creep down the hall, gun at the ready, then straighten up and head back when he finds that they're fine. James braces against his cane and grunts as he steps out into the hall.

"That's not the last of them," Rodolphus mutters. "We need to get the hell out of here."

"Yeah, okay, let's go," James agrees, and so they do. On the way, James stops by Frank and leans down to nudge him on the shoulder. "Hey, come on. Frank, we need to leave."

Rodolphus stops and stares at him.

"Time to go, Frank, come on," James insists, plucking at his sleeve and tugging a little, trying to get him to move.

"James," Rodolphus says softly.

"You can go," James offers. "We'll catch up."

"James," Rodolphus repeats, his face twisting into a grimace as he nods towards Frank, *"look* at him."

James isn't looking at him.

James doesn't want to look at him.

James is scared to look at him, for some reason.

Swallowing, James' hand goes slack on Frank's arm, and he squeezes his eyes shut. There's the sound of breathing. Two people. Just two people. There's blood on James' face, but not on

his glasses, and he can see. He opens his eyes and looks.

He'll always wish he didn't.

Frank landed awkwardly, so half of his face is lying in his own ever-growing pool of blood. His eyes are wide and glassy, his mouth still open slightly on his last exhale of relief.

James feels his mouth twitch and tremble, his eyes burning, and he doesn't even know why, but at this moment, all he can think about is the way Alice had weeped *I've got him* as a last promise to Augusta, and it was a lie.

There's nothing for Alice to have anymore.

With trembling fingers, James reaches out and brings Frank's eyelids down, as if he's sleeping. James isn't sure why he does it, because Frank isn't sleeping. Frank is dead.

"James," Rodolphus says, "we have to go."

Every single cell in James' body protests leaving, and yet, he knows he doesn't have a choice. He blinks rapidly against his stinging eyes, trying to breathe around the harsh ache in his chest, and he forces himself to stand up. His leg hurts.

Rodolphus starts moving when James does, and they don't speak. Unlike Frank, Rodolphus doesn't quite match James' pace, but he keeps a gun at the ready as they move towards the cells again. They're stopped rather quickly by Pandora helping a limping woman towards the garage.

"James," Pandora breathes out in relief as he moves forward to come help her. "We heard gunshots. Are you—" She falters as she looks at him. "There's blood on you."

"Frank's," is what falls out of his mouth.

Pandora's eyes go wide. "Frank? Is he—where is he?"

"Dead," is what falls out of James' mouth next, which is odd, he thinks, because his voice sounds blank, devoid of emotion as if he feels nothing, but he feels everything.

"Dead?" Pandora chokes out. "He's—"

"He was shot," James explains flatly, and then he doesn't want to talk about it anymore. "Did —did Remus get out? Is this the last from the cells?"

"No, he's—I mean, he's fine. The tracker is out, and he's helping bring the last few servants with Minerva. He, um, had to coax a few into agreeing to leave, but we've got most of them to the van now. Remus and Minerva should be following with the last two here shortly," Pandora tells him.

"Good." James nods and says nothing else all the way to the garage with Rodolphus bringing up the rear, keeping his gun up. Pandora has started crying. The woman in between them is shaking and sipping in air like it's a miracle.

Out in the garage, there's a lot of activity at the van at the center. Dorcas and Huey are bustling around, helping the people they've broken out inside. Already it looks like a tight fit, but it's not an impossible one. Some of the freed people are crying silently, but none of them are speaking. They all look fucking terrified, and each of them have injured thighs, which Dorcas and Huey are wrapping up as gently as possible.

"We got one more," Pandora calls out, and Dorcas hops out the back of the van to help the woman in. Pandora crawls in after her, taking over helping Huey with the rest.

"Are you okay?" Dorcas asks James and Rodolphus, swinging her gaze between them. She eyes the gun in Rodolphus' hands, but doesn't comment on it, apparently trusting him enough by this point. "We heard gunshots. Where's Frank?"

"Have you called Lily yet?" James mutters.

Dorcas hesitates, then murmurs, "James, where's Frank?"

"Dead," James says irritably. "Have you called Lily yet?"

Rodolphus moves forward to plant one foot in the back of the van, giving the stunned Dorcas a pained look. "Frank was shot in the head. There was—we couldn't do anything. Take it easy on him, okay? I think he's in shock."

James isn't in shock. James feels fine. James has blood on his face, and his leg hurts, and he needs to know if Dorcas has called Lily yet, so he asks again. "Have you called Lily yet?"

"Oh, James," Dorcas croaks, her face seeming to just *sag,* her eyes getting brighter and shoulders slumping like a new weight has dropped on them. The leader. She's the leader, and she made the call to send Frank along, and James is the one who saved eleven extra people just to lose one friend.

"Have you called Lily yet?" James snaps.

"Y-Yeah, I—I—" Dorcas rolls her jaw, stuttering to a stop and raising her gaze up like she can fight the gravity of the tears building in her eyes. She blows out a slow breath, gives a harsh sniffle, then jerks a nod. "Yeah, I called her. She—"

"What?" James whispers, breathless, so fucking *desperate.*

Dorcas swallows. "They got Regulus out. He's out, James. He's out and on the way to the Phoenix."

James feels like his chest cracks in half. A quiet whimper falls out of him, and his hand flies up to his mouth as his eyes begin to burn, and there it is. The overflow. Instant. He's just here now, breaking down in sheer relief and wanting so badly to get to Regulus *right now,* and hold him, and slump into his arms and cry until he has no more tears to give.

Soon. So soon. Very soon, James will be able to go to him, and bury his face into Regulus' hair, and maybe never let him go again. He wants—oh, fuck, oh he wants Regulus' hands in his hair and Regulus' eyes meeting his and Regulus promising him that he's good, he's still good, and that it's not bad to be good even when being doing good leads to bad things happening. He can explain it to Regulus, tell him that he never meant to Frank to die, because be only wanted to save everyone he could, and Regulus will be able to explain it to him that it's not his fault, and he tried his best, and it's okay, it's okay, it's all okay when they're all together, safe and secure.

And Sirius. He'll forgive him, won't he? James knows, deep down, that Sirius won't even blame him. Sirius will hug him, and they'll hold on, and they'll mourn Frank together. They'll breathe together. They'll all finally, finally, finally be together.

"Okay," James chokes out. "Okay, so—so Regulus and Sirius are safe? They'll be there when we get there?"

Dorcas doesn't respond.

Dorcas drops her gaze.

They got Regulus out, she said. Regulus. They got Regulus out. Why didn't she say Sirius, too? Why didn't she just say that they got everyone out? Didn't they get everyone out?

"Dorcas?" James whispers.

"I'm sorry," Dorcas whispers back, looking up with tears in her eyes, and James feels his lungs seize. "I'm so sorry, James. They—they couldn't get Sirius. I'm—"

"No," James moans, shaking his head and stepping back. "No, no, don't say—don't tell me that. Don't—"

"I'm *sorry,"* Dorcas says, her voice hoarse. "James, they did all that they could, but they just —they couldn't get him. I'm so sorry, James. The Hallows got Sirius before we could."

James turns away from her, dropping his head forward and strangling the handle of his cane as he tries to breathe and only manages to sob. There's a tentative hand pressed in between his shoulders, and he whines helplessly, feeling Dorcas wrap her arms around his front as she leans against his back, hugging him from behind, holding him together.

"James," Dorcas murmurs, "James, Regulus will be there. He'll be there, and he'll—he needs you, okay? I know. I know it's hard, and I'm sorry, but Regulus will be there."

Regulus. Oh, Regulus. They took his brother away. He's never going to be okay again, not without Sirius. James doesn't know if he will either. And, for a moment, James can only stand in place and hate everyone else, all those other tributes that got picked up before Regulus and Sirius. Why couldn't someone else get left behind? Why couldn't Sirius *and* Regulus make it out?

It's a selfish, harsh thought that burns through him like a blazing fire, the sun warm until you get too close, and James would incinerate them all if it meant Sirius could have made it along with Regulus. Just them, if it could only be two. James doesn't care that it makes him selfish. He doesn't care that he thinks it and feels it, here and now, that he'd sacrifice all the others if that's what it took. *Here,* James thinks. *Have them. Have any of them, except for mine. Those two are mine. Please, please, please don't take them away from me.*

James can't do this, not to Sirius, or Regulus, or himself. How could he? He has to try. He has to do something. He has to—

"James?"

The sound of Remus' voice makes James look up, and oh no. Oh no, no, no please no, not this. Not Remus. He told Remus that Sirius would be waiting. He said—he promised that—

"What's wrong?" Remus blurts out, limping along faster with a woman limping along beside him. His leg is already wrapped, and Minerva follows behind with a man who is touching his face like he forgot what it felt like without a mask.

"Frank," Rodolphus calls out from the van, and James inhales sharply as Dorcas peels away from him to go help the others get in the van. Rodolphus clearly thinks that James is breaking down about Frank dying, and maybe he feels that it's on him to be the one to say it so James doesn't have to, because it's him that gives Remus an answer. Not the full answer, but an answer nonetheless. "Frank didn't make it. We—we watched him go down, and James isn't… taking it well."

"Oh, James, I'm—I'm sorry," Remus whispers, shuffling forward, and then he's there, pulling James into his arms.

James is limp in his grip for a few beats, and then he lifts his arms and hugs him tight, clutching at him, not letting him go as Minerva and the other man go by. There's more bustling at the van, and James grips Remus as hard as he can, blinking the tears from his eyes, breathing in and out.

"It's going to be okay," James croaks, swallowing thickly before he pulls away and fails to meet Remus' gaze. "Are you okay? How's the leg?"

"I'll live," Remus says, then winces. "Shit. Ah, sorry."

"Shit!" Huey bursts out. "Hey, uh, we have company!"

"Dammit!" Dorcas hisses, and James whirls around to see her waving her hand at Minerva. "You're driving. *Go!* James, Remus, get in. Time to go."

There's frantic shuffling inside the back of the van. Huey runs up front with Minerva, Pandora yelps as she falls directly into Rodolphus' lap, who hastily moves his gun aside with

wide eyes full of alarm. The van rocks as everyone shifts around, piling on each other and huddling together.

Past the van, at the exit of the garage, a sleek black car has pulled inside, facing the van head-on. Out on the street, two other cars are stopped right across from each other, blocking the exit. Aurors trying to trap them in.

Remus and James move for the back of the van, and James grabs Remus' elbow to help him climb up into it. Pandora shifts in Rodolphus' lap, earning a grunt as she leans forward to reach out and help pull Remus in.

"Come on!" Minerva calls from the front.

"What's the plan here, Dorcas?!" Huey shrieks shrilly.

"I—fuck, I don't know!" Dorcas shouts. "Minerva?!"

Silence.

James grabs his cane and tucks it underneath one arm while reaching out to grab one of the van doors with the other. He swings it shut with a slam and, instead of swinging himself inside next, he grasps the other door and slams that, too.

Remus swivels around and blinks. "James?"

James grabs his cane and stares through the steel-mesh on the back of the van, then swiftly runs the line of his cane through the two door handles on the back of the van. Remus' hand flies up against the steel net, fingers peeking out. His eyes are wide as he rattles the doors, unable to open them from the inside.

"James?" Remus repeats, more frantic this time. "James, what the hell are you doing? What are you—"

"Remus, it's okay. It's okay."

"James, open the fucking door! Open the—"

"Remus!" James bursts out, and Remus snaps his mouth shut, face hovering through the other side like pixels. "It's okay. I promise it's okay. I'm just—I have to try."

"Try *what?* Get in here. Open the fucking door, James, and get *in,"* Remus spits out. James steps back, and Remus smacks his hand against the barrier. "James, where the fuck are you going? What are you doing? Don't, James. *James!"*

There are others, too, calling for him, Pandora and Dorcas and even Rodolphus demanding he get inside the van. James raises his voice and calls, "As soon as you've got the opening to go, Minerva, you *drive!* You go, do you hear me?!"

"James, stop!" Dorcas shouts. "Don't do this! Get in the fucking van. That's an *order!"*

"James!" Remus bangs his hands against the only thing that separates them, wild-eyed. *"James!"*

Turning, James moves around the van and heads right for the car blocking their path, hearing everyone shouting at him to come back. James' leg is on *fire,* and he feels off without his cane, but he grits his teeth and takes off at a run. His leg has been through hell today, so he's sure it's the adrenaline that gets him to that car, and sheer force of will.

The Auror is already opening the door and getting out with a gun in hand when James reaches them. They raise it and pull the trigger, but the shot fires wide as James shoves their hand up and slams them up against the side of the car. The gun clatters to the ground, and it's kicked away, skittering across concrete and disappearing beneath a different car.

With a curse, the Auror lashes out at him, and James ducks, then throws his elbow into the side of their head. The Auror cries out and curls forward, slipping and hitting their knees. James grabs the car door and *yanks.* He does it a second time and then a third, slamming their head into the car door until they slump on the ground, knocked out.

James breathes out harshly before he shoves his way into the car behind the wheel, reaching out to slam the door shut behind him. He grips the wheel and looks around, a little lost for a moment. He's never driven a car before.

Right, well, it's already on, so that helps. He looks down at the lever with the little letters next to it. R for reverse, right? He tries to pull it down, but it's stuck. Okay, not that. Shit.

James tries pressing a pedal and jolts when the engine snarls at him, though the car remains idle. A noise of frustration slips from James' lips, his eyes stinging, because he has to do this. He has to save his best friend, like he couldn't save Frank, for himself and for Regulus and for Remus. He can't just leave Sirius here. The Hallows got him, so James will get him back, but he can't fucking do that if he can't even *move.*

There's still blood on his face.

People scream his name in the distance.

"Come on, come on, come *on!"* James shouts, banging his hand on the wheel as he kicks at a pedal and yanks on the lever at the same time. He chokes out a harsh breath when the lever comes down, finally, slotting into place.

Oh. Oh, okay. There.

Sniffling, James exhales shakily and puts both hands on the wheel, then moves his foot off one of the pedals. R is indeed for reverse, because the car slowly starts easing back. Too slow. James needs to go faster.

So, James slams his foot down on the other pedal and almost instantly starts screaming as the car jolts and *flies* backwards. His eyes bulge as he shouts his head off, staring out the front windshield to see the faces of his friends from the van in front of them. They all look fucking horrified. All except for Minerva, who flexes her fingers on the wheel.

The car jolts and rocks up on the incline as it goes backwards, and then James hears the crash of metal on metal before he feels the collision of the back end of his car slam in between the other two cars blocking the exit.

James is still pressing the pedal all the way to the floor, his body jerking and teeth clacking at the loud shriek of the other cars being shoved back from the force. It leaves a wide opening, and James frantically jerks at the wheel, full of panic as the car jerks from side to side, and he can't think, can't figure out what to do or how to do it, but still trying so fucking hard to get it done. All he can see is the world flying past the windows, the van screeching as it comes flying through the opening, and then there's a deafening crash.

James feels this collision travel through the entire car and all the way through his body, hearing the loud shatter of glass all around him, and then everything jerks to a halt so suddenly his whole frame rattles. His head whips forward on his neck, and the last thing he sees is an explosion of white, and then everything proceeds to go black.

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"James!" Remus shouts, utterly frantic as he throws himself at the back doors, staring out the small mesh-holes as the van speeds down the street. The car James took—the back half of it is tucked inside a window display behind him, the front half hanging out. Remus can't see James from this far.

"Go back!" Pandora screeches. "You have to go back!"

"Minerva, turn this fucking van around *right now!"* Dorcas bellows, rocking with the harsh motion of the vehicle as Minerva takes a sharp turn.

"We can't!" Minerva says harshly. "If we stop now, *none* of us will make it out, Dorcas! And, in case it escaped your notice, we are currently being chased!"

"Then *lose them and go back!"* Dorcas snarls.

"I'm *trying* to lose them!" Minerva snaps. "By the time we do, there won't be anything to go back *to.* You know that! We have to go, Dorcas. I'm *sorry,* but we can't go back!"

"We can't leave James!" Remus whirls around and looks at Dorcas. He doesn't know her very well, but she's in charge here, from what he's seen, and she's close to James. He stares at her, and his breathing goes thin when he sees her face twitch before her expression collapses altogether. Her shoulders heave. "No! *No,* we—we can't leave him. We—"

"We don't have a *choice!"* Dorcas explodes, her voice cracking, her tone so harsh that many of the servants around her flinch back. "Don't you think I want to go back?! I do, okay? I wanted *everyone* to make it out, but—but—" Her shoulders jerk again, and the tears in her eyes spill over. "But not everyone could."

Remus wants to snarl at her, and maybe he would, but screams ring out when there's a ping against metal. Everyone instantly ducks down, covering their heads. The van careens around yet another corner, tires screeching, and the gunshots stop.

"They're shooting at us," Pandora wheezes, practically clinging to Rodolphus for dear life.

"Minerva, you need to lose them!" Dorcas calls out.

"Doing my best," Minerva snaps, and then she jerks the wheel again so sharply that everyone in the back goes tumbling over each other, multiple people groaning.

Remus props up to peer out the back to see two cars taking the corner behind them, and he stares for a beat before he lays back. He ends up sprawled out against Dorcas' lap, and she blinks down at him in bemusement. He ignores her and reaches out to grab Rodolphus' leg

for leverage, bracing his other hand against the wall of the van. Then, with a huff, he raises his uninjured leg and slams his boot into the steel mesh in the doorframe. It doesn't give, so he kicks it harder.

"What are you doing?" Dorcas asks, audibly alarmed.

"Helping. Us. Lose. Them," Remus grits out, slamming his boot forward on each word, and on the last, the mesh pops out in one corner. He kicks it one more time and watches it fly out.

There's a loud shatter, and Remus jerks up to watch one of the cars take the steel through the window, and the car swerves hard before hitting the side of a building. The other car whips around it, still coming and not slowing down.

Remus rocks with the motion of the van as Minerva takes them off-road rather unexpectedly, but even still, the car continues to follow. With a growl of frustration, Remus reaches out to snatch the gun out of Rodolphus' hands and crawls towards the back window.

This isn't a gun he's ever held before, but he has held one gun at least, so he has a general idea of how this needs to go. He points the gun out the opening and starts shooting.

The car behind them jerks, the glass shattering. Remus can hear the faint scream of the driver inside, but he keeps shooting until the car swerves too hard to one side, the front end dipping and then hitting too fast. The car tilts, gets some air, then flips and skids in a horrible screech of metal.

"There!" Remus spits out furiously, shoving the gun at Rodolphus as everyone gapes at him. He glares at Dorcas and hisses, "We fucking lost them."

"Minerva," Dorcas croaks, "how far out are we?"

"Two minutes," Minerva replies, and Dorcas' eyes sink shut as she slumps down, not saying another word.

The van is quiet. Pandora is crying. Dorcas looks like she's about to fall apart. Huey is gripping the handle up front like his life depends on it. No freed servants speak, and Rodolphus holds onto Pandora and his gun, and Minerva drives. James is not with them. James is left behind.

Remus wants to rip the world apart. As hard as he thinks, he has absolutely no fucking idea how he's going to manage to explain this to Sirius when he sees him again.

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"We have to lose them *now,* Lily!" Sybill shrieks, and the heli-carrier dips low into a dive that makes Lily's stomach lurch. She feels sick. Oh, she feels so fucking sick.

Lily swallows harshly and pushes to her feet, leaning forward to peer at the radar. Still one Hallow Heli-carrier tailing them. Two had come into the arena, one that got Sirius and one that follows them. Too close. It's too close to the Phoenix. Sybill is right; they have to lose it. Now.

Lily stumbles out of the cockpit, chest heaving as she sweeps her gaze over everyone. A lot of the previous tributes look like they're in shock, too fucking stunned by what has happened and what's happening still to really be involved at all. There's Mary still passing out water, Amos helping with injuries, and then Barty. Oh, that's… The mere sight of Barty holding onto Regulus Black makes her heart clench.

Regulus is limp like a rag-doll, staring blankly at nothing. He's not crying anymore. He's not screaming his brother's name, though the sound of that had ripped at Lily, especially as a younger sibling herself. His pain—she *felt* that.

Now, he's just lying there. Barty has wrapped his arm and simply sits there with him, looking fucking exhausted. Narcissa sits next to Regulus, and she's stroking his hair, murmuring to him, but he doesn't seem to hear her. She seems to understand. She would, wouldn't she? Her older sister is dead. They got them out after the banners played in the sky, so she has to know. Lily just doesn't think she realizes that she's holding the hand of her older sister's murderer.

There's a now-familiar pinging of metal as gunfire rains across the side of their heli-carrier. They're still being shot at, and it's so expected now that no one even flinches. Everyone remains low to the ground and away from the door, just to be safe.

Lily swallows. "Barty."

"Yeah?" Barty mumbles, swiveling his head to stare at her.

"I need you to use the gun," Lily tells him, and then she waits for him to follow her gaze towards the gatling gun. When he does, she looks back at him, waiting.

Slowly, Barty looks at her, and then he grins. "Thought you'd never ask."

"Everyone, stay away from the door!" Lily calls, just as a precaution, and she moves over to grip the handle, waiting for Barty to step up to the gatling gun. It's very big with two large handles to swing it around with. Barty grunts as he swivels it towards the door. "Ready?"

"Ready," Barty assures her, eyes wide with delight, smiling with all teeth and looking young like this, a young boy who likes destruction and has a new toy that will destroy.

Lily gives a nod of warning before she releases the latch and runs the door back, pressing flat against the wall.

The gatling gun makes a whirring noise, the thick barrel starting to turn, and then Barty is doing some odd mixture of a warcry and a cackle as the bullets start ripping free. It's *loud.* The sheer noise of it makes Lily's ears ring and her teeth ache. Bullets tear through their heli-carrier, and Sybill screams from the cockpit in distress.

The heli-carrier tilts, and people go stumbling and sliding across the floor, including Regulus, who looks like a lifeless puppet as he legitimately just drifts by without even twitching.

Narcissa crawls after him. Someone cries out, and someone else shouts, and Barty is laughing like a madman.

Lily has no idea how long it takes, but whatever arsenal the other heli-carrier has, it doesn't hold a candle to this gun here, because there's eventually an explosion that rocks the very air around them. Sybill shrieks again, and Lily's stomach lurches as the heli-carrier starts to climb. The smell of burnt iron and leaking fuel fills Lily's nose, smoke and heat so heavy from the other heli-carrier that she swears it's strangling her.

The gatling gun whirs to a stop, and Barty stumbles back, quite literally falling to the ground, just sitting there, panting and looking dazed. Lily grips the rail over the doorway and swivels to peer out. She watches, utterly mesmerized, as the Hallow heli-carrier swivels through the sky, a hunk of burning metal that finally crashes to the ground and explodes *again.*

A hysterical laugh spills out of Lily's mouth, and she slams the door shut, locking the latch. It seems unbearably quiet in the aftermath, and Lily just stands there and shakes until she finds her voice and calls out, "Hey, Sybill, I think we lost them!"

"Yeah, looks like," Sybill chokes out, laughing hysterically along with her.

"ETA?" Lily asks as she heads towards the cockpit.

"Three and a half minutes," Sybill tells her.

"Marlene. Marlene!"

Lily halts and whirls around immediately. Emmeline is kneeling down next to Marlene, who is staring up at her in visible distress. She's trying to speak, but she can't seem to breathe. There's blood on her chest.

"Help! Help, she's been shot!" Emmeline calls out, and Lily rushes over with her heart in her throat. Emmeline's hands are shaking. "I—I don't know what happened. She was—she—"

"Move. Move, I'm a medic!" Lily orders, and Emmeline goes scrambling back until she bumps into Alice, who wraps their arms around her and holds on. Lily reaches for Marlene, her heart thumping hard as she watches Marlene gasp for air, her eyes wide and panicked, blood spilling out over the fingers she has pressed to her chest. "Let me see, let me—"

Marlene is stiff, flat on her back, and she jerks in visible pain every time she tries to move her broken arm. Her own body is fighting against her, instinctively trying to do everything she can to get air into her lungs, but something has gone wrong.

Lily is a flurry of activity around her, barking orders and making demands for what she needs. Amos and Mary run around to get whatever she asks for. Without finesse, Lily rips Marlene's shirt open and pushes the torn fabric aside, her stomach dropping from under her in distress at the sheer amount of blood. It's not through-and-through, Lily can tell that just from the damage. It's internal. She's going to need surgery, and she's going to need it *fast.*

"Sybill!" Lily shouts. "ETA?!"

"Two minutes!"

"Get us there *now!"*

"What can I do?" Mary asks, sounding fretful.

"Go to the cockpit and get the phone there. I stole it from Poppy's office, but she has a contact list. Call Kingsley and tell him to tell Poppy to start prepping for emergency surgery," Lily orders, snatching the cloth that Amos brings her and packing it in on Marlene's chest. Mary stands up and darts away. "Amos, get the first aid kit."

"Lily," Amos says, his voice strained as he nods at Marlene.

Lily glances down, and at a minute away from safety, Marlene breathes out and does not breathe back in again. Lily freezes. Marlene has fallen slack. She's. She.

"No," Lily whispers. In seconds, she's swinging her leg over Marlene's hips and straddling her, looking for a pulse and not finding it and then immediately beginning chest compressions with her teeth gritted. "Amos, find me an AED."

"I don't know if we have—"

"Find me a fucking AED!"

At Lily's shriek, Amos scrambles up hastily, and Lily stays with Marlene. She chants it, desperate, *come on, Marlene, come on, come on.* A steady press of hands to chest, enough force to crack ribs, *making* her heart continue to beat, circulating the blood that's trying to escape her gunshot wound, and filling her lungs with mouth-to-mouth. Head tilted back, airway cleared, nose plugged and *breathe, come on, fucking breathe!*

Amos does miraculously procure an AED, and he's there, working around her, because she can't stop. AEDs aren't very hard to use, really. They come with instructions, usually, even if there's never a situation where AEDs are necessary that gives you time to calmly read said instructions, but Amos has enough training to know this.

Lily leans in to cover Marlene's lips with her own, breathing one, two, and then going back to chest compressions. Amos places the defibrillator pads on Marlene's chest, having to shift her bra up on one side for one of them, and then he's making Lily clear, and Lily lifts her hands.

"Nothing," Amos says.

"Again," Lily orders.

Amos lets the AED analyze, then does it again. A beat. Lily's ears are ringing, but she hears him say, "Nothing."

"Again," Lily repeats.

"Lily," Amos murmurs, his voice gentle.

"I said do it *again!"* Lily shouts, and she doesn't care that with each shock, a person's chances of revival decreases. She doesn't *care* what this looks like, or seems like. Marlene is not fucking dying here, not like this, not now, not so close, not—

"Nothing," Amos repeats softly.

"Come *on,* Marlene!" Lily snarls, her eyes hot and sharp with something that burns, and she's angry, so fucking angry. She braces her hands against Marlene's chest and goes right back to compressions, speaking through clenched teeth. "Fuck you, McKinnon. You don't get to do this to her, do you hear me? I can't—I can't love her like she deserves, so you have to. You have to be here! Come on, *please!"*

"Lily," Amos mutters, "she's dead."

"Shock her again," Lily grits out.

"She's dead," Amos whispers, reaching out to lay his hands over hers. "Stop it, Lily, she's gone."

"No," Lily chokes out, vision blurring. "Shock her again, Amos! Do it! Don't just fucking sit there!"

Amos sighs, watching her with pity, but he dutifully draws his hands back. Lily dips in and breathes for her again, internally pleading that this time, this time, it'll be enough. When she comes back up, Amos shocks her again.

"Holy shit," Amos breathes out a moment later.

"What? What? Is she—"

"She's back."

Lily gasps out a deep breath and a sob all in one, melting forward like all of her strings have been cut at once, and she finds her forehead resting against Marlene's. It's clammy, and Lily is dripping tears on her, but she doesn't care.

"Thank you," Lily whispers. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Come on, Lily, we need to get her on a backboard to carry her out with," Amos urges, bursting into motion.

Lily peels back with shaking hands and fumbles for the ring on her finger. It's slick with blood and slips back onto Marlene's finger with ease, where it belongs.

"Alright, everyone!" Sybill calls out from the cockpit, her voice warm with triumph. "I'm bringing us home!"

~•~

Severus puts his car in park and eases the door open. When he steps out, glass and gravel crackles under his shoe, and it continues to do so with each step as he shuts his car door.

"Sir?"

"Let me see," Severus murmurs, moving past the group of Aurors surrounding the car hanging out the shop window.

The back half looks like a crumpled can, warped metal and glass shards everywhere. The front half is practically untouched, and Severus can't help but think that some deity or higher force that exists out there—if it does—is very partial to James Potter. Something is certainly looking out for him.

Well, mostly. Severus walks around the front of the car and peers through the window. Inside, Potter is slumped against a deflated airbag, body slack against the wheel. There's a tiny cut on his head, above his eyebrow, and his glasses are smashed in his lap. He looks fine otherwise.

He could be dead. Severus can't tell if he's breathing. For Potter's sake, Severus hopes he is dead.

Sighing, Severus reaches out and grabs the door handle. He has to yank on it a little to get it to open, and then it does. Potter does not stir. Severus reaches in and feels for a pulse.

Alive.

Severus almost pities the poor bastard.

"Sir?" is asked yet again.

For a long moment, Severus doesn't respond. He stares at Potter and rather hates him. Everything started falling apart because of him, really. Because he threatened to drink some venom for love. After that, it was utter chaos. Severus hasn't really had a moment of rest since.

Severus can't resist sneering at him. The last thing this war needs is an incompetent fool ruining everything without even trying. Potter simply *exists,* and he causes problems. He

speaks when he shouldn't and acts without thinking. A fool. The worst kind of fool. One who has influence.

Tonight has been… Severus doesn't even have a word for it. He was notified early about the dispatch of Aurors to the arena in the endeavor to retrieve tributes before the opposition could. The Order, Severus presumes, but Albus never notified him of this. Albus doesn't notify him of everything as a man caught in the middle of two sides, because he won't risk it, so it is entirely possible that this was planned.

Severus doesn't think so, however. He looks at Potter like this and thinks that, somehow, he was behind this. Severus can give credit where it's due. If Potter was behind it, he did very well. All tributes liberated except for one. Mm, that one, though. Sirius Black. Another wrench in this war, and Riddle will be utilizing him, of course. Severus doesn't doubt it.

If Riddle is going to use Black, he will surely find some way to turn Potter into his weapon, too. After tonight, there is no possible way Riddle will be ignorant to the brewing war, and not only that, but also the fact that there *is* opposition. The Order was a secret organization, but it won't be any longer. Riddle may not know all the details yet, but he will surely do what it takes to learn them, and regardless, he will know that the Order is out there. He will be prepared for it now.

You fool, Severus thinks as he stares at Potter in disdain.

What does Potter know? *Does* he know anything? That's not a risk Severus is willing to take. Black most certainly doesn't, but Potter just might. Riddle will want to get information from him, or he'll figure out how to use him, or both. Either way, Severus doesn't plan to let that happen, if he can help it.

This is a liability that needs to be dealt with now. So, Severus pulls out his gun and puts it against Potter's head. Still, Potter does not stir. This is a kindness, really. He is a fool, but a dead fool can do no further damage.

Just as Severus goes to pull the trigger, there's the sound of a car door opening, and Riddle says, "Do not shoot him."

Severus closes his eyes, only for a second, and then he pulls his gun down and turns around. Riddle does not drive. He has his own personal driver, a man who holds open his door and shuts it after him as he gets out and walks closer. Glass and debris crunches under his shiny shoes.

Riddle comes to a halt next to Severus, cold eyes surveying Potter thoughtfully. All the other Aurors on scene shift nervously, just from Riddle's mere presence. Severus remains still, just waiting, not saying a word.

"Though he has caused quite the mess, James Potter is more useful to me alive than dead," Riddle declares, and Severus finds that he can hate Potter more, after all. "Get him out and have him escorted to my castle."

"Not Azkaban, sir?" Severus asks.

"No," Riddle murmurs. "Not Azkaban. Sirius Black is being held there for now. James Potter will remain close to me."

"Yes, sir," Severus says.

Riddle is silent for a beat, and then he reaches out and cups his hand to Potter's forehead, pushing his head back to peer at him. Potter does stir, then. Only a bit. His face twitches, lips moving, and he whispers, "Reg."

Riddle's lip curls in distaste, and he drops Potter's head, letting it hang forward again. He steps back. "Severus."

"Yes, sir?" Severus murmurs.

"Clean this up," Riddle orders, swiveling a finger to gesture to the street; as he walks away, he adds, "and prepare for war."

Chapter End Notes

for those of you coming to the end notes for a more in depth warning, SPOILERS AHEAD: there's a couple of really heavy moments in this chapter, and ill go in order. the first person who dies in this chapter is lucius, killed by remus from within his cell. after that, frank is killed by a gunshot to the head, and james does not handle it well. in the moment, it's so sudden, and he can't really make sense of it, so he sort of jumps back and forth between understanding that frank is dead and not really understanding it at all. he also goes into shock, which leads him to respond a little strangely to the whole situation (he doesn't really process it, honestly), and it also leads him to make some...questionable decisions. he learns that sirius is left behind in the hallow and fixates on saving him, stealing a car and resulting in a car crash after. following this, lily and the others are still being followed by a hallow heli-carrier, and they have to lose it, so they shoot it out of the sky. in the midst of this, marlene is shot, and she (BRIEFLY!!!) dies, but lily and amos manage to revive her right before they make it back to the phoenix, meaning she'll be able to get emergency surgery.

yeah, that about sums up the heavier parts of this one as concisely as possible.

to everyone else:

well...at least remus made it out, right? 😃

ooooh, i know yall are mad at me. i KNOW it. i can just feel it through the screen already. oof, yall are gonna rip me to shreds for this one 😭 but, ya know, just a gentle reminder, if you're not enjoying the fic, or you just need to tap out, then definitely don't hesitate to drop the story! thats okay! that's valid!!!

anyway, let's get into it.

the fun little stairwell montage where everyone was being badasses. dorcas has killed people now! heh, she's killing it out there :D

okay, bad joke, sorry.

remus is ALSO killing it out there (and i made the joke again, someone shoot ME). no, but him literally just itching to murder that man. like, if you recall, lucius was the one bribing gamemakers to focus on hurting sirius (and regulus) in the arena, so yeah remus busted his head open and snapped his neck, especially since he had to listen to lucius bitching. like he was annoying. i don't blame remus, and i better not see one person being shocked by remus just killing him either; ive been TELLING yall from day one that his motto is be gay, do crime. murder is a crime. but anyway, i support remus' rights and also his wrongs!

cut to james. oh, baby. this poor man. it's so... god, how fucking awful is that? like that line about "he saved eleven extra people just to lose one friend" is so ROUGH, because it's true. realistically, had he only saved remus and not all the other servants, they would have all made it out to the garage faster, and frank would have lived... also rip frank—alice and augusta's boggart was foreshadowing btw.

but like, james couldn't NOT try to save anyone. and how he was so ready to see regulus again, but then he heard about sirius... gut-wrenching. like, if it wasn't clear, he was in a state of shock and very fucking overwhelmed, already struggling with frank, and the need to get sirius (or simply try, he's always trying, isn't he?) wasn't something he could escape. and the worst part is that he wasn't just doing it for himself or sirius, but regulus and remus too. like he was trying for ALL of them, because in that moment, he genuinely couldn't look at it through the lens of leaving anyone. :(

that scene of remus pleading with him to get in the van, and then the car crash and everyone pleading to go back, and dorcas breaking down bc she was the leader and had to make the calls and knew they couldn't go back? just. devastating.

oh, and marlene. well, that was rough, huh? it was a close call, but lily is all of us refusing to give up on marlene. like she MEANT marlene wasn't dying 😭 she's so valid for that actually. sorry if it scared you, marlene is still alive and kicking!

severus. not him looking at james and just instantly hating him and deciding to kill him because he's a menace 😭 but well. james is in the hallow, too. big yikes 😬 yeah, so that peeta storyline? it's about to get reallyyyy complex.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-pandora punching someone, crying, then trying to claw their face off. she's going through a lot 😔
-james trying to get frank to move 😭
-rodolphus carried, sorry its just the facts
-remus being hot and sexy during the whole time, but especially the car chase
-barty getting to use the gun!
-regulus sliding across the floor like a ragdoll and narcissa crawling after him 😭
-sirius being in azkaban (i couldn't NOT)
-someone looking out for james (hi, its me, im the problem)
-james whispering "reg" 😭

The Breakdown

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-depictions of violence
-depictions of shock
-depictions of panic/panic attacks
-depictions of guns/threats of gun violence
-references to past violence
-reference to past deaths/murders
-a brief mentions of vomiting (it doesn't occur, but it's mentioned)
-very vague references to aquaphobia
-violent thoughts
-vague mentions of, like, not wanting to be alive (not like, actually, it's from grief/pain, in that vein)
-depictions of grief

this chapter is...also heavy, but no one dies! who cheered? 😃 no, but uh, really, this is a very chaotic chapter, and it's meant to be, because it is for the characters. so, ya know, strap in!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a welcoming committee at the Phoenix when they arrive. Mary barely gets to kick out the ramp while Lily, Amos, Emmeline, and Alice carry out Marlene before there's a flurry of people rushing forward to meet them, a stretcher waiting.

Everyone is talking all at once, and the transition to get Marlene on the stretcher is quick. Poppy climbs on the side and immediately starts working over her as people roll them away. Lily starts to go with them, as do a lot of people, but they're all halted and blocked.

Lily's stopped by Kingsley, his hand against her shoulder. Their eyes meet, and she still feels sick, a sensation that only grows worse when she sees how he's looking at her.

"Kingsley," Lily rasps, "you have to let me go. I need to—"

"What you need to do is *stop,"* Kingsley declares sharply, his voice loud enough that everything sort of just—does stop. Well, central to here. Off to the side, a very injured Asher is being carted off towards the infirmary, and there are a few other people lingering that bustle around to check on the remaining tributes. But, right here, close to them, everything falls silent. "What the *hell* were you thinking?"

"Look, I know you're upset—"

"I'm not just *upset,* Evans! You—"

"This wasn't me!" Lily bursts out, shaking his hand off her shoulder as she glares at him. "Dorcas was the one who—"

"Oh, don't feed me that bullshit," Kingsley snaps. "You may not have come up with the idea to break into the arena, but you threw this mission together. *You* rounded everyone up and gave them something to do. *You* decided to carry out a mission not cleared or approved. *You* led them through it."

"Kingsley—"

"We gathered everyone involved, and do you know what they all had in common? Hm? *You.* It was you. So, don't stand there and tell it wasn't when it was. You broke every rule and put multiple people in danger, *including Sybill!"*

"I'm—I'm fine. Kingsley, I'm fine, see?" Sybill stutters out as she stumbles forward, but he doesn't even look at her.

"Do you have *any* idea what you've done?" Kingsley hisses, never taking his gaze off of Lily. "You think your mission was a success? You just helped bring upon *war,* and you didn't just put yourself in the middle of it. No, you dragged them into it, too. Sybill could have *died."*

"But I didn't. I'm fine. Kingsley, I'm—I'm really fine, and I did good. I'm actually really proud. You should have seen—"

"Stop talking, Sybill."

"Really, King," Sybill insists, "I'm an amazing pilot. I was—"

"Stop talking, Sybill!" Kingsley bellows, and Sybill snaps her mouth shut, her eyes instantly getting bright. Kingsley focuses on Lily again. "Don't you get it? She's *in* this now, because of you. They'll use her now that they know what she can do. That's how it works here. She'll be in the sky when war comes, do you realize that? A war pilot. You made her into a fucking war pilot, and if she dies, if she gets hurt, that's on *you."*

"That's *enough,"* Mary bursts out, moving forward abruptly and getting right in Kingsley's face with no warning whatsoever and not an ounce of fear. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. You weren't *there."*

"No, I wasn't," Kingsley agrees coldly, not reacting to Mary at all, his gaze still locked on Lily.

"Kingsley," Lily whispers, a lump in her throat, "I'm *sorry.* I needed a pilot, and—and I could trust Sybill. I—"

"But you couldn't trust *me?!"* Kingsley bursts out, flinging both arms to the side. "You asked nearly every other fucking person in this bunker for help and didn't think to come to *me?"*

"Would you have helped?" Lily croaks helplessly, raising her hands and letting them drop to her sides. Her eyes are stinging and it shouldn't hurt, this shouldn't hurt so much, because Kingsley wasn't supposed to matter to her. No one was. "I mean it, King. Be honest. If I had come to you, would you have helped me with this, or got in my way?"

Kingsley drops his arms and stares at her, exhaling a huff of air like she just punched him in the chest. "All you had to do was ask. Because I'm your friend. Maybe you don't care about things like that, but I do. And, if not for you, then for *her.* I took the same piloting courses, and I would have done it for her, so she could be safe. Because I love her. But you don't know anything about that either, do you?"

Lily feels *that* like a punch to the chest. Again, it shouldn't hurt as much as it does, because it's true, right? This is who she is. This is who she'll always be now. She tries so fucking hard to shut it down, to *not* care, but she's so tired and she's shaking and her face is hot and her eyes are stinging—

"You're a fucking fool if you think she doesn't care about people," Mary says sharply, reaching out and jabbing Kingsley in the chest. "She nearly fucking *died* to save people she doesn't even know. She refused to give up on someone just because her friend loves that person. She kept Sybill as calm as she could and was there for her every single step of the way. No one—and I mean *no one,* not one of us—would have made it back here alive if it wasn't for her."

"No one would have been at risk of dying if it wasn't for her," Kingsley bites out, and Lily flinches.

"Kingsley, stop it," Sybill says urgently, moving towards him and reaching out to grab his arm, tears in her eyes. "You're just—you're scared, that's all. And we all are, but—but today was a win. We saved lives, King. I helped save lives. I did something amazing. I *flew."*

Kingsley looks at her, finally, and his jaw clenches as he eases his arm out of her grip. "Why didn't you come to me? Lily is one thing, Sybill, but you—what? *You* didn't trust me?"

"No. I mean yes! Yes, of course I trust you, but—but Lily said… She said…" Sybill swallows. "I just wanted to help, and I—I did help. I know you're worried, but it's okay. It's really okay, because I'm *good* at it, Kingsley. I'm a good pilot, and I know that you like that I wasn't involved in missions, and that I was safe here, but why shouldn't I do this if I can? And I *can."*

"Yeah, you proved that," Kingsley whispers, his expression twisting. "He'll use that. He'll use you."

Sybill reaches for him again, but he takes a step back. She looks close to tears. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you, okay? I wanted to. I felt horrible that I didn't, but you—you don't have to be alone in this. I'm with you, yeah? I—I learned that today, that we're dating. We're a team, right?"

"You just learned that today?" Kingsley breathes out, looking utterly astonished. "What—Sybill—"

"You never said it, and I—I didn't know, but it's okay, because I know now," Sybill says in a rush. "I know now, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I'm sorry I didn't know. But I know this now, that I love you too, and so I'm telling you because we learn something new every day, and I want you to learn this today. I want you to know I love you."

"What I learned today is that, evidently, we're not a team," Kingsley tells her. His voice is usually so smooth, even, steady and calm. Now, it cracks. "You proved that today, too. And I can't, Sybill. I can't do this with you. Not like this. Not when you don't—not when you're going to—I just can't—"

"Are you breaking up with me?" Sybill chokes out, staring at him with wide, wet eyes. Lily's heart clenches, because she looks fucking pitiful.

"Yeah. Yeah, I uh—I am." Kingsley reaches up to swipe a hand over his mouth, shaking his head, eyes squeezing shut as he takes another step away. Lily's heart gives a second harsh clench, because he looks just as pitiful as Sybill does. His hand drops and his eyes open. He looks at Sybill and shakes his head again. "Shouldn't be too much of an adjustment for you, should it? You didn't even know we were dating."

"Kingsley," Sybill whispers.

"I have to go," Kingsley says. "Thanks to all of you, I have a lot of fucking work to do."

With that and nothing else, Kingsley turns around and marches away, and he doesn't look back. Lily moves the moment she sees Sybill's shoulders hitch, wrapping her up in a hug and holding her as she releases a gut-wrenching, audibly heartbroken sob into Lily's shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Lily rasps. She raises her gaze and looks around at everyone before, finally, her eyes meet Mary's. And, really, that's all she can say. "I'm sorry."

~•~

Euphemia rushes as quickly as she can through the bustling crowds, breathing heavily as she pushes past multiple people with Andromeda hot on her heels. Nymphadora is with Bingley and a few of the older kids that made it out of the district, all of them eager to see those coming in, but staying put when the adults tell them to.

Fleamont is gripping Euphemia's hand tight, and she knows he must feel as desperate as she does to get where they're going. It feels like they've been barreling down corridors for years since being told they can go to the infirmary to check on their loved ones. So far, only those from the arena have made it back, but that means Sirius and Regulus are here.

It's mayhem throughout the compound, people rushing about, everyone chattering and shouting and speculating. It's even more chaotic near the infirmary. Apparently, there were a couple of tributes who needed severe medical attention, and Euphemia selfishly hopes it's not Sirius or Regulus.

Getting through the crowd is a difficult task, but they do, and then it's hard to pick out everyone lined up in chairs outside of the infirmary. Tributes, clearly. People are bustling around them, tending to their cut arms, giving water and food and blankets. A lot of them look tense and overwhelmed, and Euphemia has to resist the urge to tell everyone to back off.

These people are well-meaning, but they don't know what it's like. They don't understand how the arena affects someone; these people are still in survival mode, likely in shock from being rescued as well, and Euphemia thinks it's a miracle no one has lashed out yet.

Helplessly, Euphemia pushes forward, scanning the rows of people to locate who she's looking for. Sirius and Regulus, Sirius and Regulus, Sirius and—

Regulus. Just Regulus. He's sitting at the end next to his older cousin, Narcissa Malfoy, who is fussing with the person who is invading their space, trying to force them to drink water. Regulus isn't acknowledging them. The poor boy is quite blatantly in a state of shock, his hands sitting limp in his lap, gaze blank as he stares straight ahead.

No Sirius. Euphemia looks around for him, even though she doesn't doubt Sirius would stay with Regulus if he could, so maybe he's one of the tributes that arrived in critical condition? Euphemia's heart drops at the thought.

Andromeda pushes forward and halts in front of them, her breath audibly catching in her throat. She's looking at her sister. Euphemia knows through Sirius, and just from being around for all the drama, that Andromeda has a very strained relationship with her sisters. But does that matter in situations such as this? Does that matter when she has lost her husband, and watched her older sister be killed by her youngest cousin, and spent years surely missing her sisters regardless of the strife that existed from them all falling apart in the first place? Does it matter, here, when stakes are so high, and years have passed, and war is splitting the world apart?

"Cissy," Andromeda croaks.

Narcissa's head snaps up, and Euphemia doesn't think it matters at all, not right now. "Andy?"

There's a moment where everything seems to freeze for both of them, and then Narcissa pushes to her feet, takes one very frantic step forward, and halts just as abruptly as she moved. Euphemia knows Narcissa only as her mentor, a young woman who never spoke out of turn, who observed everything with calculating eyes, who found the best ways to make fools out of everyone who believed she wouldn't, and believed she couldn't. To Euphemia, Narcissa was more dangerous than Bellatrix; far past Bellatrix, who simply had no reservations about slaughter, there was Narcissa, who wasn't just *in* the hunger games; no, she *played* the game, and she played it well, so well that Euphemia never doubted she would win.

Standing across from one another, it's just Narcissa and Andromeda now, and Narcissa left home. It's been years. They stand apart from each other like those years have cleaved their sisterhood in two, as if they will never find it again.

Euphemia doesn't believe that. She has seen the way Regulus and Sirius have put so much effort into getting back what they lost, and they did. It can happen, and it always seems to start with a simple need outweighing resentment and pride.

Sometimes, really, the one thing you need is your flesh and blood. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have that, like those who will never be able to have family again, even when they need them. Not everyone has flesh and blood that will reach back like the instinct it should be when you reach for them. Not everyone has flesh and blood that needs you, too.

But Andromeda is a mother to a child who will never see her father again. Andromeda is a sister to a woman who tried to kill her cousin, and was killed by her other cousin in front of her eyes, on screen. Andromeda is a sister to another woman who stands before her now, tentative and waiting, years upon years of flesh and blood and family echoing across the space between them. Andromeda is a human who is surrounded by other humans, and the world is on fire, and it doesn't surprise Euphemia at all that she is the one who opens her arms first.

Narcissa practically flies into them. She exhales sharply and moves forward swiftly, a tight embrace that they both fall into. Simple sisterhood. Because, at the end of the day, sometimes people need each other, and that's what matters, and they're very fortunate to have flesh and blood they can hold onto.

"Bella," Narcissa chokes out. "Andy, she—she's gone. She's—"

"I know," Andromeda says, voice heavy. "I know. I'm here, Cissy, I'm here."

Euphemia tugs on Fleamont's hand, easing them past the pair, leaving them to their reunion. Regulus hasn't moved or even looked anywhere. He's just sitting there and staring.

"Regulus," Euphemia says softly, carefully kneeling down in front of him while Fleamont takes the open space next to him that Narcissa just vacated. Regulus doesn't acknowledge either of them, likely doesn't even know that they're there, or where he is. His gaze is unfocused. Gently, cautiously, Euphemia reaches out to cover Regulus' hands in his lap. "Regulus, dear, it's Effie. Can you hear me?"

The light touch does make his hands twitch, and then Regulus blinks and *looks* at her. She can see his eyes actually focus on her. "Oh," he rasps. "Hello, Effie."

"Hi, honey," Euphemia whispers, unable to stop her voice from shaking, or keep the sting from building in her eyes. She wants to wrap him in her arms and shield him from this world, all the horrible, cruel edges of it.

"You're here," Regulus states, sounding startled, and then he blinks again and exhales in relief. "You're safe."

"Yes, and so are you," Euphemia murmurs.

Regulus swallows. "Monty? Where's—"

"I'm right here," Fleamont murmurs, and Regulus jolts a little, swiveling to stare at him right beside him. It's clear he has no spatial awareness at the moment, yet he releases another sigh of relief when he sees Fleamont.

"I know you're very confused right now, and a lot is going on, but is—do you know if Sirius is in the infirmary?" Euphemia asks, not wanting to overwhelm him further, but needing to get an understanding of the whole situation so she knows how to suitably reassure him—and herself.

"No," Regulus says. "Sirius is—" His voice catches, and he blinks again, and then he's whipping his head back and forth between Fleamont and Euphemia with pure horror painted on his face. Euphemia's heart immediately *drops*. "Oh no. No, I—I didn't—where is James? I want to see him. Can I see him? Please let me see him. Is he here? Tell me he's—"

"Not yet," Euphemia croaks. "Not yet, but he—he should be arriving soon, Regulus. He'll be here soon. You said—is Sirius not—Regulus, where is—where—"

Euphemia is trying so, so very hard. She truly is. Because she can feel it, somehow, in her weary bones that rattle like she's about to malfunction and fall apart. It's there, lodged in her throat like a knife, *where is my son? Where are my children? All my children, all those that I have fed, and loved, and watched grow?* Regulus is right here, and where, where, where is Sirius?

She can see it there, in the collapse of his expression, the awful tremble of his lips and building tears in his eyes. He's clinging to her hands suddenly, as if he's afraid she will pull away from him, but she won't. She never would have in all the years she has known him, but he was always the one to shy away from her grip. She wanted to hold him as any mother would wish to hold a child that needed it, but he only ever wanted that from Sirius. It's like this, that he turns to her, and Euphemia knows immediately, just that simply, that Sirius isn't here.

He isn't, because if he was, that's who Regulus would cling to; that's the only person he ever wanted to cling to.

"No," Euphemia chokes out reflexively, because *no.* No, not this, not Sirius, not that lovely boy with the grin that could light up the world, not *her* lovely boy who clung to her after he left the arena at sixteen years old, so young and so upset to have ever raised a hand against her, crying in her arms and chanting the apology mindlessly; *I'm sorry, Mum, I'm sorry.* That was the first time he called her that, and the last was with an apology, too, always with an apology when he addresses her this way, like he has to apologize for the imposition of being her son, when it's one of the things she's most proud of.

"I'm sorry, Effie," Regulus says, shaking, and he will never address her as anything else, certainly not as Mother. He could be married to James for fifty years and still never say it, because the only mothers he's ever known or allowed himself to accept are Walburga and Sirius, and Euphemia has known that as long as she has known him. She loves him, regardless, and knows, in his own way, Regulus loves her, too. "I'm so sorry. I—I tried to—I begged them to wait, to go back, but they couldn't. They—they couldn't, because the—the Hallows got him. The Hallows got Sirius. I—I'm sorry. I didn't—"

Euphemia's whole body is numb, and she can't—she can't even separate herself from the shock of it, from how hard it hits her. Sirius. Oh, Sirius. She did everything, absolutely *everything* she could, to save him. To help him. To love him. He is not flesh and blood—doesn't even look like her, pale boy that he is—but she did not have to birth him for him to have a home in her heart. She doesn't mean to, but the shock of it slackens her grip, and she doesn't want to let go of Regulus, not even for a moment, but she can't feel anything. Can't breathe. Can't—

"I'm *sorry,"* Regulus gasps out, fretful, almost frantic in the way he winds his fingers around her hands and squeezes, desperate and wide-eyed. It's like he thinks it's his fault. Like she is blaming him, and he doesn't want her to. She is not and never would. "If it could have been me, if they just—if they picked him up before me, if the Hallows got me instead—"

"No," Fleamont cuts in fiercely, so sharply that both Regulus and Euphemia jolt. Euphemia is so thankful for him, because he is picking up her slack, because he can step in when she fails to and be strong when she can't. It's an exchange, an unspoken partnership that requires nothing but instinct. She has done it for him, and he can do it for her now, because she needs him to. "No, Regulus, don't think that way. No one wishes it had been you instead."

"I wish it had been me instead," Regulus confesses, his chest stuttering. "Not him. Not my—he's my brother. He's—"

The moment Regulus breaks down sobbing, Fleamont eases an arm around him and pulls him close, a big man with big feelings and a big need to nurture. Euphemia has always been maternal like a bear, dangerous about it, claws and teeth and ready to swing for those she loves, still fighting all these decades on the other side of the arena. Fleamont, though?

He's more gentle than she is, always has been, very rarely one to lash out about anything. Over the years, Euphemia has learned how to be soft; over the years, Fleamont has been forced into being harsh—a remote shattering against the wall, tossed with the strength of a man who is strong enough to be her rock, but not strong enough to remain steady when trapped with the guaranteed loss of someone he loves. Trapped even now, because they knew, didn't they?

They all knew only one could make it out, and Sirius wasn't going to be the one who did, except more than one has, and Sirius is the only one who didn't.

How does someone accept that? How do they live with that? How are they meant to continue on in the aftermath of that?

There's a reason, here, in the form of Regulus Black, who sinks into Fleamont while weeping, a man he has never considered a father and never will, because that was Sirius for him, too. Sirius and Orion, and he has now lost both.

Euphemia's eyes itch, and she squeezes them shut, forcing her trembling fingers to wrap around Regulus' once more and cling to him as he clings to her. She dips her head and presses her face against their tangled hands, shoulders heaving. A warm hand settles into her hair; Fleamont, she would know him anywhere, through anything.

He strokes her hair, and they cry.

They all cry.

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Remus is quiet on the train.

Well, they're all quiet on the train, honestly. He has somehow collected a flock of recently freed servants, all of which hover close to him and look to him for what to do. Maybe that's fair, considering he was the one who coaxed each of them into fleeing in the first place, so fucking grateful that James is the kind of man he is to think of them all. Not just Remus.

The thing is, Remus knows these people. Adjacently. Sort of. He knows their eyes, knows part of their faces from seeing them each morning and each night when entering and exiting their cells. He knows that look in their eyes, that guarded sort of fear for every move they make. He knows how they feel right now, sort of lost and overwhelmed by an unburdening none of them were prepared for. They all have the same injury on their thighs, all suffered the same pain to take the freedom each of them were utterly terrified to claim for themselves.

Some of them are older than him. Some are younger. Each of them linger close by like he's the only comfort they have in all of this, like he's the only thing that makes sense, like they trust him before they trust anyone else.

Pandora sits next to Dorcas and Huey, staring down at her shoes without really seeming present at all. She has James' cane draped across her lap, trembling hands wrapped around it; she refused to leave it behind with the van. Dorcas is next to Minerva, her jaw clenched and one leg jumping up and down restlessly. Minerva is calm, watchful, sweeping her gaze over everyone like she's checking that they're all there. Rodolphus won't stop fidgeting, his hands seeming empty now that he dumped his gun on Dorcas' orders when they all left the van and boarded the train.

All Remus can think about is James. Is he alive? Did he die in that car wreck? If he didn't, has he been captured? What will happen to him? What is Remus supposed to say to Sirius? How is he supposed to explain that he tried, he really did, but James was left behind anyway? What about—

The train abruptly comes to a creaking halt, and everyone looks up at the same time. No one moves for a moment, but then Dorcas shoves to her feet, eyes bright.

"Alright, everyone, listen up," Dorcas says, and her voice carries, draws all the attention to her. "We've arrived at the Phoenix, but we aren't the first today. A large group coming out of the arena are already here, and I don't doubt they'll all need medical attention of some sort, along with the rush-job of having to get them unexpectedly settled in. It's the same situation with all of you."

She looks around with a grimace of apology, and Remus tries not to grind his teeth. He finds it very difficult not to resent her, or Minerva, for leaving James behind. Maybe Remus will just field all of Sirius' questions straight to her. She's his friend, right? Remus will let *her* explain what happened, because even now, he still doesn't have the answers.

"I know that many of you are confused, and scared, and in pain," Dorcas continues, her voice softening. "I would like to tell you that you'll have immediate comforts and ready accommodations waiting on you, but that would be a lie. This was not a planned mission, and the Phoenix is not ready for you, so those things will take a little time. I don't know how long,

but you *will* have someone to help you at some point, if you'll just be patient. It's going to be very, very busy inside, and loud, and chaotic. We will all be heading towards the infirmary together, so stay close. Anyone who approaches or offers help—they will *not* hurt you. I promise you, you're safe here. All of you are safe now."

Dorcas and Minerva lead the group inside, and saying it would be busy was an understatement. The place is *crawling* with activity, people rushing around, loud shouts and orders flying about in all directions. It's utter mayhem.

The Phoenix is *massive.* They come out in an underground train port that leads further into a large wing for the bunker, and Remus is immediately overwhelmed by the sheer amount of *everything.* So many people, so many levels, so many halls. So much movement, so much noise, so much space. It's a lot, and it's stifling. The air is stale, and either Remus is just going crazy, or there really is less oxygen in the metal hub beneath the earth. It's artificial light and the low background whir of generators, and all Remus can think is that it's another prison.

"Meadowes!" a loud voice booms.

"Not now, Kingsley," Dorcas retorts, still marching along as she leads the charge through the crowded hall.

The man—Kingsley—looks absolutely *furious.* He falls into step beside Dorcas and starts hissing at her in low tones. Remus watches, eyebrows furrowed, but Dorcas doesn't let anything slow her down. They're a large group of people hobbling along, all helping each other continue on. Everyone is following her, following the leader, and anyone else who would dare to try and take over wouldn't get very far.

Regardless of Remus' issues with James being left behind, he has to admit that he feels a sense of gratitude, possibly, for Dorcas. Because it's very clear to him now that this mission was hers all the way around, and not one that came from someone in charge here. She's—in trouble? She risked a lot, then, to do this? Remus can admire that, if nothing else.

"I don't *care,* King!" Dorcas bursts out as they take a corner, yet again running right into more chaos. "Dumbledore is just going to have to wait, or he can fucking meet me here!"

"Dorcas," Minerva says carefully.

"No," Dorcas grits out. "Marlene *first.* Fuck anything else."

Remus raises his eyebrows. Clearly Dorcas is not fucking around, which everyone else seems to pick up on as well, because Kingsley stops berating her and Minerva quietly sighs and looks away. Remus also looks away, surveying the current activity around him, distracted by it.

Some people watch as they come by, mouths hanging open, eyes wide. Other people don't even seem to notice them, far too wrapped up in rushing to do whatever it is they're doing. People go by in blurs of faces, none that Remus can really look at, all of his senses flooded at once.

They take another corner, and Remus hears her before he sees her. That's what registers first. The sound of her voice. He knows her voice, even without hearing it for so long.

Lily.

Remus comes to a very abrupt halt, his heart seeming to stop in his chest for a second, because he wasn't—he didn't even think to prepare himself for this. He can hear her in the distance, up ahead somewhere. Whatever she's saying is indistinct, but harsh, and his heart thumps with *I know you, I know it's you, I know it is, I know, I know, I know—*

Breath punching out of him, Remus surges forward without finesse, shoving forward and pushing people mindlessly, carelessly aside. Someone calls after him. He does not care. Nothing matters. Nothing else matters, not the ache in his thigh, or the pressure in his lungs. Nothing, nothing, nothing matters but getting to her now, immediately. It's Lily. It's—

"—don't give a shit what he wants!" Lily is saying, the words catching above the crowd and reaching Remus' ears, coated in fury and still the sweetest thing he's ever heard. Remus shoves his way forward desperately, choking on air, and there she is. Oh, there she is. It's her. It is, she's right there, glaring with flushed cheeks and looking—she looks—it's been six

years, and she looks different, but she's Lily. She's his best friend, right there, so close. "I already told you—"

"You can't just bypass this, Evans," says the man she's currently yelling at. "You don't get to decide what the priority is after breaking countless rules to—"

"Oh, get fucked, Bones," Lily snarls, and Remus tries to say her name, tries to call for her, but he can't breathe, so all that escapes him is a choked wheeze. "I'll cooperate when I've spoken to Poppy and checked on—"

"You'll cooperate *now,"* comes the sharp reply, and oh, they don't know her at all, do they? Remus could laugh. He thinks he does, a bit, and maybe he cries as well as he squirms between bodies and edges towards the front, so fucking close to breaking free and entering her line of sight. "Even an unsanctioned mission needs a debrief!"

"You want a fucking *debrief?"* Lily scoffs, and Remus stumbles out of the crowd just as she harshly announces, "I went in and got all the tributes out that I could, and the only one I didn't get is Sirius Black. The Hallows got him, so he's likely *dead."*

Remus jolts to a stop, frozen in place, and any chance of him getting to breathe again is promptly snatched from him.

The whole world proceeds to stop.

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There is a sound, a noise like a wounded animal, raw and gutted. Lily tears her eyes away from Edgar to instinctively locate it, not recognizing it, and curiosity is human nature.

So, she looks.

Lily looks and then has to do a sharp double-take, because the illusion before her in the form of her long-dead best friend is so fucking clear that the rest of the world drains away in an instant. Her mind goes blank. It just—empties out, all at once.

Remus. Remus? It's—that's Remus. That's him standing there, right here at the mouth of the corridor leading towards the infirmary, crowded with people too nosy for their own good, everyone eager to help and get information about what has happened. Nothing ever happens here, not like this.

Lily has no idea what's happening here, not anymore. Nothing makes sense, all of a sudden, because that's Remus. That's her best friend, alive and breathing. That's him, dressed in washed out grey with a scar across his face she has never seen before in her life, tall yet hunched a little like he's taking a blunt object directly to the chest. He looks alive, and the look on his face says that, inexplicably, he does not wish to be.

He's in clear distress. That much is obvious. The last time Lily saw Remus, he was pushing a gun into her hands and telling her to run, everything falling apart around them both. The way he looks now, it's as if they're right back there, as if the world as they know it is coming crumbling down again.

But he's alive. He has to be, because other people are looking at him, too. Other people see him, and so he can't be an illusion. That's Remus. It's Remus, right there, and Lily does not know what is wrong, but she doesn't need to.

"Remus?" Lily breathes out, and nothing else matters except for the fact that he moves. He reaches up to press a hand over his mouth, an awful noise muffled against his palm, and that's it. That's all it takes.

Nothing makes sense, and nothing matters, and Lily is *running.* She breaks away from everyone else without a care in the world, flying across the open space between them to close it, to cut it down and never let it form again. It feels like years and only seconds before she slams into him with a choked noise, wheezing as they collide.

Six years it's been since she's wrapped her arms around her best friend, and yet they still fit.

Lily can't even describe the feeling that travels through her body. The sensation of it. Shock and fear and relief. Joy. There is so much joy in this moment for her. She is crying, one hand coming up to cup the back of his head, arms locked around him tight—and he does not hug her back.

He's slack against her, heaving for breath, and Lily chokes around a sob as she tightens her grip. She wants to shake him a little, make him hold onto her and never let her go again, make him understand the miracle that this moment is. He has to know. How can he not know?

"No," Remus croaks, and his hands brace on her arms, pushing her back. His fingers tremble on her skin, and he's searching her face desperately, something there in his expression that's pleading with her, but Lily doesn't know what it means. She has never not known what he was saying when he looked at her until now. So much they could share in an exchanged look, long ago, and now she can't follow the conversation. "No, that's not—that isn't possible. Sirius? He's—you said you didn't get him out. Tell me—Lily, please—"

Lily stares at him, shell-shocked, confused. She doesn't understand. "Sirius Black? No, we—we didn't manage to get him before the Hallows. Why? Did you know him?"

Whatever response Lily was expecting from Remus, it's not for his legs to buckle as a low moan of pure pain slips from his mouth. He goes down to his knees right in front of everyone, right there in front of her, and his hands slip down to her sides, fists clenching her shirt and tugging on her fretfully as he ducks his head into her stomach and breaks down crying.

Alarm threads through Lily, turning the blood in her veins to ice, her heart thudding painfully in her chest as she stares down at Remus with wide eyes. She doesn't have the answers, but she doesn't need them, not for this. She does what her love for him demands her to, dropping down right there with him and dragging him close, trying to breathe past the harsh pinch in her chest. He's releasing the most devastating, heartbroken sobs she has ever heard, more pain-filled even than the gasps and sobs that were ripped from him when he was whipped and beaten down time-and-time again.

Nothing ever really broke him, but this does.

Remus curls up against her, clinging and crying, revived six years later just to disintegrate before her very eyes. Lily does not know much, she doesn't know what Sirius was to Remus, but she does know for sure now that he was something.

Maybe, as much as she dreads to think it, he was everything.

~•~

Dorcas pushes through the crowd, struck by the odd silence and stillness, then sucked into it herself from the shock of finding the last thing she ever expected to. Lily slumped on the floor, cradling Remus half in her lap, holding him close like she will protect him as he sobs against her.

"Woah," Kingsley breathes out, and Dorcas gets it.

She's never seen Lily look like that. She's never seen Lily at all, as it turns out, because this is achingly real, like she's been stripped down to blood and bone for the whole world to see and does not care one bit about who dares to look. All her defenses dismantled, and Dorcas doesn't understand why or how or what it has to do with Sirius' moon.

"What's happening?" Dorcas asks.

"Some guy just showed up," Edgar mumbles, edging closer to them, eyebrows furrowed. He gestures to Remus. "He sort of just—broke down when he found out Sirius Black wasn't saved from the arena. Then—that."

"Oh," Dorcas says. "It's—yeah, he's Sirius' lover."

"Who is he?" Kingsley mutters, his voice faint.

"His name is Remus," Dorcas admits.

Kingsley sucks in a sharp breath and whispers, "Oh, shit."

"What?" Dorcas blurts out. "What is it?"

"That's—oh, fuck," Kingsley murmurs, his face softening more than Dorcas has seen since she arrived. "They know each other. That's Lily's best friend from—from before. She thought he was—we all thought—we were all *told* he was dead."

Dorcas' head whips towards him, and their eyes meet. She *watches* his eyes go cold, jaw clenching, and she feels her nostrils flare as fury floods through her. "Dumbledore?"

"Yes," Kingsley confirms, his voice clipped.

Oh, that man. Dorcas could just—she could really just—

"Bas?" Rodolphus pushes forward, his voice strained as he stumbles past them, not seeming to care about the two on the floor or the other crowds of people. "Bas! Rabastan!"

Dorcas watches the group further ahead, Rabastan Lestrange pushing people aside, moving in a rush at the same time that Rodolphus does. Dorcas can make out Sybill and Amos, as well as two other people she doesn't know, who are all crowded together. They're the only people really standing between everyone else and the tributes all waiting by the infirmary.

Rodolphus and Rabastan meet in the middle, slamming into each other and both laughing, exhilarated by the reunion. It's heartwarming, truly, but Dorcas does not have it in her to care about that right now. She's already on the move, too.

Marlene. She needs to find Marlene.

As she rushes forward, Pandora is the one who bites the bullet to gently usher Lily and Remus to their feet, so careful as she coaxes them to empty chairs off to the side, snapping at others around them to back off and find other shit to do. The rest that Dorcas brought in all follow her, including Minerva, and that's just as well. These people need to wait for help anyway.

This is the destination, and it just so happens to coincide with where she needs to be. As she draws closer, scanning everyone desperately, she can see most of the other tributes. Emmeline is near Alice, Alecto was sitting with Rabastan and now has been abandoned, Majesty is shying away from people trying to get them to drink water, Narcissa seems to be talking to a woman who bears a startling resemblance to Bellatrix, and Regulus is with—oh, he's in between Effie and Monty.

Asher is nowhere to be found.

Marlene isn't either.

There's so much going on around that those at the end of the hall—Regulus, Narcissa, the Potters—don't even focus on what's happening. Dorcas is tempted to go to them for answers, but honestly, Amos and Sybill are closest. She'd ask Lily, but she's currently occupied.

"Dorcas!" Sybill bursts out in delight as she moves closer.

"Hi, Sybill, Amos," Dorcas says breathlessly.

"Barty, Mary, this is Dorcas," Sybill introduces with a watery smile. "She's the woman who came up with the plan. Dorcas, this is Barty and Mary. They're from district six, friends with Sirius and Regulus. They came with us to help save—"

"Lovely, thank you, nice to meet you," Dorcas interrupts in a rush, aware that it's rude but having no capacity to care at this particular moment. "Sorry, just—where's Marlene?"

Everyone falls silent immediately.

They all exchange looks.

Dorcas stops and flicks her gaze between them, a strange twinge taking place in her chest that she's ignoring. She waits, and no one speaks. Firmly, she repeats, "Where's Marlene?"

"Shit," Amos mumbles, grimacing before he clears his throat. She is inexplicably angry about this. Angry about how they're all looking at her, and how they're not, not really. Angry about the implication that—that— "Okay, um. Dorcas, listen to me, yeah? It's—I want to say she's fine, but—"

"Amos," Dorcas says coldly, *"where* is Marlene?"

Swallowing, Amos rasps, "She's—she was shot—"

This does something very odd to Dorcas' chemical makeup. Something in her sort of just—shifts, and she is more rage than she is woman, more vengeance than she is person. It is here, right now, that she learns what it means to put the weight of purpose, her purpose and drive, on one person. The weight of that is held on the very foundation of Marlene McKinnon's beating heart, and that's such a fragile organ; it can so easily stop and bring the foundation crumbling down.

Dorcas gets it, suddenly, the process of loss into revenge into war. She gets how motivations can lead to destruction. The chaotic force of loving someone so much that you will burn the world for them and dance around the flames. It had a guide before that sentence left Amos' mouth, contained to one part of the world, one group of people who were to blame for Marlene's lack of safety in the first place.

But *she was shot* slips past Amos' lips, and the direction of this force splays wide, no longer aimed, just unleashed on anyone and anything that dares to stand before it. In seconds, Dorcas has Amos by the throat, slamming him up against the wall and holding him there. Amos wheezes, his glasses lopsided on his face, but he still lifts his hands to halt the others who hiss and start to move forward to peel her away.

"Don't say that to me," Dorcas tells him, and her voice doesn't seem to match the feelings within her. She feels like she is blazing, like she is a white-hot blade that can slice cleanly through anything that gets in her way. But her voice—it is not steady, and it trembles, and it cracks. "Say something else. For your sake, say anything else."

"She was shot," Amos repeats hoarsely, "and we lost her on the heli-carrier," and Dorcas is going to kill him, "and then we got her back," and Dorcas might not kill him, "so she's in surgery right now," and Dorcas doesn't know what she's going to do to him, or to anyone, or at all, "but we don't know what state she's in now, okay? We're all waiting on the update. Dorcas, she was alive when we got here, and you know Poppy will do everything she can for her. You *know* how good Poppy is."

"Dorcas," Sybill whispers, careful and tentative as she reaches out to wrap her hand around Dorcas' raised arm. She tugs gently. "Come on, let him go. That's it."

Dorcas exhales shakily and blinks hard, taking a stiff step back, her hands trembling. Amos stares at her, not moving, and so many people are staring at her like she's a bomb about to go off—and that's exactly how she feels. The timer is ticking down, and only Marlene can clip her wires.

These people are her friends. People she has known for years. People who know this part of her, this secret she had to carry with everyone else. Kingsley, Lily, Sybill, Amos, and many more here—they all know her, or this part of her, but not all of her. Not who she is as a stylist. Not as a Hallow. She has so many faces, and it's no wonder there are moments where people can't seem to recognize her.

Sometimes, she can't even recognize herself.

~•~

Aberforth perhaps should not find any of this funny, but it is taking genuine effort not to laugh right now.

Albus looks so *stressed.*

Oh, you can hardly tell with him, really, especially these days, but Aberforth knows. It's all in the pacing with him. He used to do it a lot back when they were all just kids. Pace and pace when Ariana was sickly; pace and pace when Aberforth fought Charles Lemmings for trying to steal his goat; pace and pace before every single reaping, until that last one, until all the reasons he had to stress came true.

He paces slower now, but it is pacing nonetheless.

Again, Aberforth should possibly not find his brother's distress a source of entertainment, but—well, karma is so much more amusing when it's not applied to you. Especially when it's applied to someone who very much deserves it.

"Doesn't feel so good, does it?" Aberforth can't help but ask, watching Albus pace from one end of his office to the other. He has a long beard. It looks stupid on him, which is a childish thought, but Aberforth is not above those these days, as it turns out. Truly, Albus brings out the worst in him. Siblings do that, and Aberforth is no better, because Albus is seventy-five and still pauses long enough to make a face at him, wrinkles and all. "What? It's true. You have to admit, there is a lot of irony in all of this, isn't there?"

Albus heaves a very weary sigh and lifts a withered hand to squeeze the bridge of his crooked nose, broken by Aberforth's hand and never healed straight again. Albus thought it was funny after the fact. *Even my nose isn't straight,* he'd said, grinning, and Ariana had giggled while Aberforth rolled his eyes. The memory is faint. Distant. A mere wisp now.

Lately, Albus has been far too pleased with himself, if you ask Aberforth. Sweeping around his less-than-humble abode with that ever-present twinkle in his eyes. Delighted because Aberforth arrived with the last remainders of his district. Not deterred by any harsh word or sharp accusation Aberforth has thrown at him. He tells Aberforth everything, every choice he has made, every detail of this brewing war—and he tells him just to have the excuse to spend time with him, to talk to him again. He has aged, but his eyes are the same, and the light of relief and joy and love in them has not changed. That is how he looks at Aberforth, nearly always.

Aberforth does not like it, obviously. He and Albus have over five decades worth of strife between them, not long-lost or forgotten. Aberforth is not the boy he once was; he is now a man who survived without his brother and no longer needs him. Being near him—well, it chafes his soul.

So, seeing Albus like this, a man in the midst of watching all his plans burn down around him…

Needless to say, it's satisfying.

"You are—irritating," Albus mutters, finally, yet again sighing as he swivels to brace both hands on his desk and peer at Aberforth over his glasses. "Explain to me in what world any of this could ever be labeled as ironic."

"Well, it's just history repeating itself," Aberforth points out, amused. "Except it's happening to you this time. Is this not what you did, Albus? Did you not go against all order, all rule, to act as you saw fit in a form of defiance? Was it not you who called for war in the first place?"

Albus doesn't look pleased anymore. "What Ms. Meadowes has just done is not even remotely similar to what *I* have done. I built this resistance from the ground up, Aberforth, and I have guided our position in this war into the path of a sure victory. She has just ruined *all* of that."

"Perhaps if you had not brought down war upon us all, this would not be happening," Aberforth suggests lightly, mockingly. "Perhaps if you had considered the impact of the lives you planned to shape into martyrs, you would have realized that this could happen, and would be no one's fault but your own. *You* put those people in the arena this year, Albus, didn't you tell me that? All the ready opposition to Riddle, and you couldn't foresee this? Opposition to you?"

"What are you implying?" Albus asks softly.

Aberforth holds his gaze. "Oh, it's not an implication. I am more than happy to state it. Considering recent moves you've chosen to make, there hardly seems to be much difference between you and Riddle at all."

"You speak foolishness led by personal resentment—"

"I don't. Ask yourself, Albus. Ask yourself and answer honestly what Grindelwald would—"

"Do *not,"* Albus cuts in sharply, standing to full height, every part of him going tense. Aberforth does not back down. He will not. Albus shakes his head. "Do not speak of Gellert."

"He would be proud of you," Aberforth says coldly.

Albus' beard twitches, and Aberforth can hear his throat click on a harsh swallow. There's a beat, another, and then Albus' expression wipes clean, turns mild, impenetrable. "That, I'm afraid, is impossible to prove. Because he is dead. Because I killed him. Have you so easily forgotten that?"

"No," Aberforth admits, "but I won't so easily forget that you loved him once, either."

"That—" Albus opens his mouth, closes it, then shuts his eyes and releases yet another weary sigh.

Aberforth freezes, staring at him in disbelief. *"Still,* Albus? Even after—even all these years later, you still—"

"That," Albus repeats forcefully, eyes snapping open, "has absolutely nothing to do with any of *this."*

"Oh, it's becoming ever so clearer that it does," Aberforth counters with a scoff. "Your love for a dead man—"

"For our *sister,* if you recall," Albus corrects. "It is for—"

"Do not put this on her!" Aberforth bellows, slamming a hand down to the desk and jolting to his feet as he points his finger in Albus' face. "You don't get to do that, you don't get to lay your mistakes at the mantle of Ariana, you don't get to beg for forgiveness through revenge. She would *never* want this. She would be disappointed in you for what you've done."

Albus leans back, regarding him in thick silence. Neither of them speak for a long moment, and then Albus steps back and shakes his head. "This is a pointless discussion. You can't even grasp the shift in the state of the world that took place tonight. You cling to the past, Aberforth, but I do not have that luxury when our present impacts the future of the whole world."

"I thought you would have been pleased," Aberforth says derisively. "It's war now, yes? Isn't that exactly what you wanted, Albus? Don't tell me you're not *prepared."*

"All of the advantages carefully built have been torn to pieces."

"In what way? So, the games are off. That will surely bring about positive change, if nothing else."

"Possibly," Albus allows, "but at what cost? So few think of the cost. That is my burden, weighing the costs and bearing the weight of those costs."

"What cost?" Aberforth hisses. "How is saving lives a *cost?"*

"If you believe I'm so incapable of compassion that I am not relieved lives have been saved, you are as foolish now as you were in your youth," Albus murmurs, staring at him with his eyebrows furrowed. "Do you truly think so little of me?"

Aberforth clenches his jaw. "I think nothing of you, Albus. I haven't for many, many years, and I won't start now."

"Ah, of course." Albus gives a faint, flickering smile as his gaze slides to the side, pained. He's silent for a few beats, then slowly resumes pacing. "I've gotten in contact with a secret informant within the Hallow, who informed me that Riddle has captured both Sirius Black and James Potter."

"Captured…" Despite himself, Aberforth feels his heart give a small pang when thinking of Euphemia and Fleamont. That boy as well, Regulus Black. None of them are going to take the news well. "Are they to be killed, then?"

"No," Albus says, gaze trained on the portrait of their sister hanging on the wall, Ariana in her songbird blue dress to match her eyes, delicate white ribbon in her hair. The picture of innocence. "They're far more useful alive than dead, if not for information then for how they can be weaponized."

"Weaponized? Will they be altered?"

"Elaborate."

Aberforth arches an eyebrow at him. "You are forgetting the nature of people again, Albus. Do you know where they come from, what family they were born into, who they were raised by and who they are? You do not, and you don't consider such things any longer. People are just bodies to you now, so they can more easily be disposed of. But I *do* know. Sirius is a Black, and not just any Black, but one brought up under the Potters' guidance. Defiance is in his very blood, nature *and* nurture. And James? He is a good boy, to his core. Loyal with a very strong moral compass. Not just optimistic, but earnest and eager to put effort into the things that matter."

Albus regards him thoughtfully, inclining his head in a gesture to continue, showing that he is listening.

Well, there's a first for everything.

"The very nature of themselves will need to be altered for them to be weaponized," Aberforth explains. "Whatever you may think, they will not simply play into Riddle's hands. That is not who they are. So, I ask you, *can* they be altered?"

Albus considers that for a moment, then hums. "That is not technology or weaponry Riddle possesses. He has nothing, as far as I know, that could erase who they are."

"He cannot alter their thoughts?"

"No."

"He cannot alter their memories?"

"No."

"He cannot alter their feelings?"

"No."

Aberforth spreads his hands. "And so, in short, he cannot alter *them,* and as such, he cannot *control* them."

"There is something you do not think about, Aberforth, and I don't fault you for it. You have not had the power of love and loyalty leveraged against you," Albus murmurs. "You have never wielded that power yourself. You do not know it from each side as I do. Control is—hm." He pauses, swiveling on spot and pacing in the other direction. "You do not have to change the nature of someone to control them. All you have to do is find the source of what's important in their thoughts, memories, and feelings, and then exert power over *that.* What

you do know, or should, is how far people will go for those that they are loyal to, and for those that they love."

Yes, Aberforth does know that. He knows that better than most, by example and not by experience. He is watching the twisted result of that pace in front of him, gazing upon his older brother, gazing upon a stranger.

"The very nature of those boys cannot be changed," Albus continues, "but it can be manipulated."

"Pain manipulates us all, and yet we find ways daily to overcome it," Aberforth counters. He is not a very optimistic man himself, as Albus once was in his youth, and so it feels strange to be the one arguing on the side of hope now.

"It's not through their own pain that they will be manipulated, Aberforth," Albus says softly, "but through each other's."

At that, Aberforth fails to form a rebuttal, because he *does* know the detriment of loyalty and love. In all his years, Aberforth has never seen a loyalty and love exist as the loyalty and love between those two boys do. He has seen an uncomfortable amount of Albus in Sirius, and himself as well as Ariana in Regulus Black, but the bond between Sirius and James is something entirely *other*. He has never before seen anything that could compare to it.

What James and Sirius have doesn't exist in history and may never exist again—not just once in a lifetime, but once in *any* lifetime. This is not history repeating itself, and therefore it is unprecedented. They can't avoid mistakes or prepare for what may come through the lens of the past, not with them.

Loyalty and love is dangerous, not just because it can be twisted and turn violent, but also because it can be leveraged. Aberforth has no doubts in his mind that James and Sirius could undergo any form of torture and come out the other side entirely themselves, but he does doubt that they wouldn't toss aside everything that they are, and all that they stand for, if it could mean sparing one another any bit of pain.

Suddenly, none of this is funny to Aberforth anymore.

"James and Sirius are not where the issues end," Albus informs him. "Tonight, the anonymity of the Order was dissolved. Two groups, one with enough power and artillery to break into the arena and escape, and the other that escaped from the Hallow itself. Riddle has now learned that there is an organization against him with weapons and at least one heli-carrier, as well as the fact that there is a breach within the Hallow that the organization uses. That is the very *least* of what he has learned without any further follow up."

"And with further follow up?"

"He will learn the identities of everyone involved, because he will surely gather the footage from the arena to study it for any details he can. Depending on how the mission went, some of those who broke into the arena will now be on his radar, if not all of them. I don't know yet what was revealed."

"Will you find out? Surely Riddle will not release the footage of what took place," Aberforth murmurs.

"He will not," Albus replies mildly. "However, I have a very competent technological genius here by the name of Filius who is working to gain access to the footage as we speak."

Aberforth stares at him. "Albus, tell me you do not intend to release the footage and endanger those children?"

"They are not children," Albus says. "No more than we were. No more than we ever got to be. Them or any of us. They are adults, and they made their choices. I have little choice otherwise, because this is what I'm left with."

"No, you *have* a choice. You can choose *not—"*

"Yes, I could choose to put the few above the greater good and watch the world fall to further ruin because of that choice. Or I can release that footage and lean into the war *they* chose to start too early. We all have choices, and they made theirs. All choices come with consequences."

"You wish to *punish* them?" Aberforth hisses.

Albus looks weary. "You truly do think so little of me. No, I have no desire to punish them. Releasing the footage isn't to teach them a lesson. The state of the Hallow itself is already in shambles, which is what this war *needs.* To allow Riddle to put a patch over it and cover up what took place will take us further away from the growing rebellion across the world."

"I think you always find some way to justify your worst actions. What is this greater good you speak of? Who's greater good, Albus? *Yours?"*

"This is not a debate. I will review the footage and have Filius release it, because secrecy has been stripped from us. The war is here and hiding is no longer an option. People need to know our presence. People need to know we are here."

"Open recruitment, is it?" Aberforth scoffs.

"To those who wish to step up, yes, and refuge to those who need it. You paint me as an unreasonable man, but I'm not."

"So you say."

"So I do," Albus agrees, lips twitching slightly. Just as quickly, the brief amusement in his eyes fade. "A lack of secrecy lends itself to disadvantages in more ways than you can imagine. Riddle will find how we entered and exited the Hallow soon enough, and he will either have it monitored, or destroy it. That access is lost to us now."

"Will he know about the stations?"

"No. He won't be able to detect the station below."

"Alright, so take the districts," Aberforth states firmly.

"Take the districts," Albus repeats.

Aberforth grunts. "S'what I just said. No more secrecy, as I understand it, so come up from under the ground and spread out. Take each district, clear out all the Aurors, and cut off the Hallow. Do you even know how reliant the Hallow is on the districts, Albus? As a mayor, I do. We build for them. We run the transportation. We provide food and materials. Even close to the Hallow, the districts make the Hallow flourish. District two is the source of the Hallow's manpower, the Aurors, and all weaponry. District one is the source of all medical and—"

"Technological advancements," Albus finishes, his eyes brightening. "Yes, that I do know. Filius is from one."

"So," Aberforth repeats, "take the districts."

Albus laughs. It's soft, a bit croaky from age, but it's as warm as it was when they were children. Albus always laughed when Aberforth or Ariana did, even when he was trying to be stern, unable to help but join in with them. He loved to laugh then and sounds as if he barely remembers how to now.

"Perhaps you think too much of me," Albus declares finally, and again, his lips twitch, but this time with fondness, as if the thought warms him. "I am but a man, Aberforth."

"You have the power," Aberforth insists. "I've seen this place. I've looked. You *can* take the districts."

Albus sighs and shakes his head. "I can't. What you fail to realize is that Riddle has a power that, as of now, I have no idea how to beat. A power I can't beat, as far as I know. I lack what those in this genre like to call a *deus ex machina."*

"Something to solve an unsolvable problem."

"Ah, I never knew you would grow into a cultured man. Abby, have you been picking up *books* over the years?"

"One, don't call me that," Aberforth says gruffly. "Two, fuck off. Three, I found books appealing when you weren't around to gaze at them with such reverence that it seemed like you wanted to stick your prick between the pages and—"

"Now, there's no need for such filth," Albus cuts in, scolding almost, though Aberforth is not exaggerating in the least. There is nothing Albus looked at so hungrily, so wistfully, as he did a book. Knowledge—he's always had a taste for it. No surprise there, really. After all, knowledge is power.

Aberforth has always enjoyed getting a rise out of his puritan brother, but to fall back into very, *very* old habits now feels too much like—kinship. Yearning. Nostalgia. He looks away with a scowl. "What is the unsolvable problem, Albus?"

"You already know," Albus murmurs. "You've been exposed to it before, if you recall."

"I—" Aberforth stops. His paper-thin skin breaks out into a wave of goosebumps, and he looks at Albus again, tense in his chair. "The fog. Biological warfare, you said. That's—"

"Unbeatable," Albus confirms. "I cannot take the districts. To even try would be to… Well, Riddle would unleash that in the name of war, and whether you think so little of me or simply too much, I would not send so many people—my people, the people of the districts, or any people—to inescapable death."

"So, what are your options?" Aberforth croaks.

Albus hums and resumes his pacing, glancing at Ariana's portrait as he softly says, "Yes, that is the question, isn't it?"

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Regulus has never given much thought to shock. Like, legitimate medical shock, or something close to it. A complete override of one's nervous system. A scrambled brain. A certain detachment from the body, floating like a ghost from beyond.

In a state of shock, time passes strangely, he thinks. Things occur, but from a distance. Everything is muffled, like it's all coming from underwater. Naturally, he hates the feeling.

There's nothing to be done about it. He sort of drifts in and out. There for a bit, crying, and then empty and numb as the world moves around him in a blur. Someone does something to his arm. He's treated to water and a muffin. Maybe it's supposed to wake him up a bit, but it doesn't work.

People come and they go. There's chaos at the end of the hall, invisible from this focal point, unreachable to him in this little bubble of nothing he's found himself in.

Effie and Monty stay with him.

And then Narcissa. The sharp, cutting edge of her voice from somewhere beyond. "He *what?"*

"Cissy," Andromeda protests.

Regulus looks up to find Narcissa heading right for him like an angel of death ready to give the final blow and break the news that his time has come. He doesn't move. He should,

probably, and his brain is screeching at him. *Remember, please remember, you deserve to live, too. Now is the time to fight. Get up. Get up!*

Regulus doesn't get up.

Effie does, though. She springs out of her chair so fast that it's almost like the movement shifts the very temperature of the space around them. The tension is cold, harsh enough to burn, and Effie steps in front of him with a jerky movement, placing her body between Narcissa and his own.

"Don't," Effie warns, her voice sharp.

"Move," Narcissa hisses.

"Narcissa, if you make a move for this boy, I will put you down. You know I can. Don't make me," Effie says.

There's a heavy beat of silence. Regulus swallows and stares down at his fingers. They're shaking. Monty is rubbing his back ever so gently, but he's visibly tense, too. Finally, Regulus hears Narcissa gives a harsh exhale, one of acceptance, because Effie was her mentor, too. She knows how good Effie is, and she owes Effie her life, in a way.

"Regulus," Narcissa says, voice clipped. Regulus raises his head and peers over Effie's shoulder to find Narcissa's cold eyes—not delicate, not at all—pinned right on him. "You killed her. You killed my sister."

"Yes," Regulus replies quietly, holding her gaze. "She tried to kill my brother first. I told her not to. I said—"

"I don't care," Narcissa cuts in, and he shuts up. "I don't care what she nearly did, and I don't care what you *said.* You're dead to me, do you understand?"

"Yeah," Regulus murmurs, turning his head and staring across the hall without seeing anything. "I understand."

He does understand. He gets it, and he doesn't blame her. He thinks maybe that's—good. It feels good; it's the only thing he can feel. The relief of blame. He thinks over and over, *don't let me get away with it, don't let me forget what it means, don't let me live easy; I deserve to live, but not a life of ease.*

"Come on, Cissy," Andromeda mutters, and then she's there, carefully guiding her away. "I know, okay? I know, but he—"

"He killed her—"

"He never meant—"

"Our *sister—"*

As they get farther away, their blooming argument goes fuzzy and drops into distant hissing that Regulus closes his eyes and drowns out. He doesn't care either. He hopes Andromeda doesn't calm Narcissa down. He hopes Narcissa treats him with scorn, because she should. He hopes Narcissa hates him for what he did, because he doesn't want to do it alone.

Effie moves to stand beside him, hand on his shoulder. Monty is still rubbing his back. It's the closest to James he can get until James gets here, and maybe it's better than Regulus deserves. Did he move fast enough when Mary dropped down to get him? If he hadn't hesitated, would they have gotten to Sirius sooner? He wasn't fast enough, was he? What he was scared of, and then—and then—

Regulus breathes, and he drifts out for a while again. Drifts and drifts and drifts. People come and they go. Time passes. Regulus closes his eyes and waits for James.

Every now and again, his mind forgets that Sirius is gone, and he has to remember on repeat, and then the shock wades back in. He careens between acceptance of it like a fact and sheer denial like it could never, ever be true.

There's a lot of activity around them, and Regulus has cried, but he isn't doing that anymore. When does a defense mechanism become an unhealthy coping mechanism? When it's no longer a choice, Regulus thinks. He hadn't planned to shut down and retreat into himself; he'd thought, or hoped, that he would never have to do that again.

He doesn't decide to, now. It just sort of—happens.

Perhaps it's only fitting that what draws him out is Remus. He comes into Regulus' line of sight, almost fluttering on the sidelines, swollen eyes and a scarred face. The shock of seeing him hits Regulus square in the chest.

"Regulus," Remus says. There is a defeated air to him, a strain in his expression. Lily hovers beside him, close, her hand on his arm like she wishes to run away with him.

Regulus feels his heart sink just looking at him, because he does not look well. He looks worse than Regulus has ever seen him. Sirius would be so—he'd fret over him, concerned, and this is what spurs Regulus to his feet. He tugs his hands away from Effie and eases away from Monty, standing up.

"Regulus," Remus repeats, and his voice cracks.

"You—you know?" Regulus rasps. Remus nods, his eyes dull, and of course he knows. Regulus can't miss it, that look on his face and in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I'm—" Remus' voice catches, his chest stuttering on a harsh breath in and out, like he's struggling with it, like it hurts to do it. Regulus knows what that feels like.

There's a moment of a thread between them under great strain, threatening to snap, and everything feels so fragile in a way Regulus doesn't know how to handle. He doesn't—he has no idea how to be careful with anything anymore. He has no idea where to even start, and being comforting, taking care of people—that's something Remus is far more adept at.

The thing is, Regulus has always wanted to, though. Always wanted to take care of Sirius as Sirius took care of him. Always wanted to comfort James as James comforted him. Always wanted to be the person who could do such things, as those he is surrounded by are. He doesn't know what to do or how to do it, and he thinks he's in shock, but if he does not try now for Remus—for Sirius—then what was the point of it all? There has to be a point. There needs to be a point.

So, Regulus steps closer, opening and closing his mouth, trying to find words and knowing absolutely none. Lily tenses at his proximity, fingers clamping down on Remus tighter, more possessively, more protective overall.

Remus pulls away from her, jerky and abrupt, and Regulus is nearly fucking hyperventilating when Remus reaches for him. Touch. Of course. There's so much that can be translated through touch, so much comfort to be shared in contact, and it's always Regulus' last instinct. He never thinks of it. There is something else in touch, a deeper perception, closer to what feelings lay beneath the skin and form symptoms in the body.

Remus can likely feel him shaking. Regulus doesn't like it, that he can feel that, but he's not alone in it. Remus is rattling like he's about to fall apart. That's what Regulus appreciates about Remus, above all. He makes Regulus feel less alone; the first person to stay with him while he faced his fears, and the first person now who he willingly holds onto in the aftermath of his loss. Their loss. They've both lost, haven't they?

It's strange the way they don't fit well together, like two misshapen puzzle pieces trying to form a picture neither of them can see. They do it anyway, an embrace, a tight one where it's all wrong and they're both trembling and there's no comfort to be found here, just fear, just pain.

Regulus feels large hands drape over his shoulders, *squeezing,* and then he's being pushed back. There's an awkward moment of fumbling, because Regulus doesn't know how to do this with Remus, the whole touching thing. It's not really…their *thing,* he doesn't think. They are at their best together when they are showing their worst to one another and basking in the

relief of being next to someone they know won't really care, or have an opinion on it, or judge them. They have no wish to change each other for the better, only help where they can and accept when they can't. It's relieving, really.

The awkwardness fades when Regulus meets Remus' eyes, and there's a wild gleam there, something that puts a tight knot in Regulus' stomach. "I have to—there's something—"

"No," whispers Regulus, who immediately feels dread slide in a spiral up his spine like a snake. He shakes his head. "No, it's not—that's not—don't you fucking dare."

"Regulus," Remus murmurs.

"Where is he?" Regulus asks, because he should be here. If Remus is here, he should be here. James should be here.

Remus swallows, his fingers clamping tight over the bend of Regulus' shoulders. "He didn't —not everyone made it out—"

And that's it. Regulus knocks Remus' hands off his shoulders and shoves Remus so hard in the chest that he stumbles back a few steps. Lily surges forward automatically, and Regulus is happy to meet her, and that does not go over well with *anyone* in the immediate vicinity.

Effie and Monty are calling for everyone to stop, Narcissa and Andromeda are trying to pull Regulus away from Lily, and Remus is trying to pull Lily away from Regulus. It's not really working well for anyone. Lily comes for Regulus like it's fucking *personal,* all pent-up aggression and flashing jealousy in her bright eyes, and Regulus could not care less about the very breath in her lungs or anything else, really.

Regulus lashes out like he's still in the arena, the first or the second or some sick amalgamation of both, and if he had his dagger, she would be dead. As he does not, she is not, and also she slaps the shit out of him so hard that his ears ring. He slams her back into the wall, the both of them tripping over their feet with hisses and grunts, the background sounds of people yelling and protesting fading to a dull buzz.

It's good, somehow, because Regulus can focus on Lily instead of James, and Lily can focus on Regulus instead of—whatever she doesn't want to focus on, he supposes.

He knows, distantly, that this is an exchange for them both that has very little to do with each other at all. Regulus has no ill will towards Lily. If he's honest, she's the first person he actually wants to grab the hand of and kiss in a Hallow gesture of admiration, and neither of them are even Hallows. But she's his savior. She saved him. She's saving him now, giving him a target to lock onto and giving him pain that isn't wrapped up in the agony of James' absence.

"That's *enough!"*

Dorcas' shout is sharp and loud enough to pierce through the violent fog in Regulus' brain, and possibly Lily's, and she's suddenly there to push in between them and shove them apart. She casts an imposing figure, and when she orders them to stop, they do. Because she orders it.

"There will be *no* in-fighting," Dorcas declares, her voice carrying, not raised but assertive enough that everyone looks to her and listens. "To place blame and turn on one another will help no one and does not honor those we lost tonight."

"Dorcas," Effie says, her eyes wide. "Dorcas, where is my—"

"Tonight, we—" Dorcas closes her eyes for a moment, then exhales and opens her eyes. "Tonight, there was a mission conducted in two separate parts, one to save those from the arena that we could. Unfortunately, we were not able to save everyone, and Sirius was captured by the Hallows. As of now, I don't know if he's alive or dead, or what happened to him."

Regulus slumps back against the wall, his eyes fluttering shut, a lump forming in his throat. This announcement gets mixed reactions from everyone. Remus makes a small sound. Effie and Monty seem equally hurt. Andromeda—ever stoic and unflinching Andromeda—has to swipe tears from her eyes.

But no one interrupts Dorcas.

They all listen.

"The other part was within the Hallow," Dorcas continues, taking in a deep breath and setting her shoulders. "An escape took place, but again, not everyone managed to make it out. Narcissa, your husband, Lucius, died tonight."

"Oh," Narcissa says softly, blinking rapidly. That's all she says. Regulus looks at her, his stomach churning. She looks rather startled, her eyebrows furrowed, and there's a distance in her eyes that he relates to. She's in shock, too. She lost one sister, gained the other, and became a widow all in one night, and none of these things were gently delivered to her.

None of this is gentle for anyone.

"Alice…" Dorcas swivels her head, looking for them, and they sit forward from where they're next to Emmeline. They look afraid already, knowing that to be singled out, there is very bad news waiting for them. "Alice, I'm sorry, but Frank was with us tonight. He—he also didn't make it."

"He—he was captured?" Alice chokes out, sounding almost desperate. "They captured him?"

Dorcas looks pained. "No, Alice."

"So, so what—so, if he wasn't—so what happened then? If he's not here and he wasn't captured, then—then—"

"He's dead."

Brutal. Utterly brutal. There is no way to properly deliver such news, and apologies will not make it hurt less, so Dorcas just speaks honestly, softly, her back straight and her throat bobbing harshly. Regulus doesn't understand what's going on. He doesn't understand why she's—why this is on her, or who she is right now. This is not his stylist. This is someone who knows all of this, inside and out. This is someone in charge, and that doesn't make sense to him. What's *happening?*

Alice collapses back into their chair, sagging into Emmeline, someone Regulus knows through Sirius that also adored Frank as yet another friend of his. Alice almost immediately breaks down, but Emmeline's face goes blank, her movements slow like moving through water when she wraps her arms around Alice. The sound of their muffled sobs echoes in the silence.

"Regulus, Effie, Monty," Dorcas presses on, and immediately it's impossible to breathe. Regulus feels his heart pulse painfully in his chest, and he grabs onto whatever is closest to him, bracing himself, bracing for it. Lily's arm is warm under his hand, and as if they were not just trying to claw each other's eyes out only moments before, she lifts a shaky hand and covers his fingers, holding him there. It's an absent gesture; her gaze is locked onto Dorcas. "James—"

"No," Effie chokes out instantly. "No, please, not my son. Not my boys. Dorcas—"

"James didn't make it," Dorcas continues, her jaw clenched, whole body tense like an unbearable pressure is working to crush her. Atlas, holding the whole world on a pair of aching shoulders. "We don't know if he died, or if he was captured. I'm sorry, but I don't have any more information than that."

Regulus' knees buckle, and though he doesn't know this, it's not the first time Lily catches someone in the last hour while learning they've lost the man they love.

Regulus can't do it. He can't do it. He's going to throw up—oh, fuck, he's going to heave everything out of him until he's empty, then feel the skin slide right off his bones, leaving him nothing but brittle marrow nicked by the claws of corpses he wishes he could join. Not this. Not this, not this, not this. Please, please, please not this.

Regulus is gagging, hand against his chest, feeling something invade him, under his skin, in his veins, in the pit of him. Swelling. Expanding. Ripping from the inside, ready to explode out. He'll be a smear. His scars won't be knitted together anymore, and he can't do this. He can't do it. Rewind life on a reel and take him to the day he turned fifteen; that liminal in between where he and James loved each other at the same time, and actually got to be happy with that. That's where he wants to be. Not here. Not now. Not this.

"Regulus, I'm sorry," Remus is saying, surging forward to try and hold him up, to hold him. Oh, they've lost. They've lost together, and they're lost together, looking for something to hold onto, and it's all gone. All they've ever clung to, ripped away from them. "I'm so sorry. I tried—I'm sorry. Lily, let him go. He doesn't—he doesn't like to be touched. Lily, just—"

"Fuck," Lily hisses, and Regulus digs his hands into her, shuddering and begging in every way except words for her to not let him go, because he can't figure out how to hold himself together now, and she saved him—tried so, so hard to save Sirius, too, even if she failed—and he whimpers with wanting her to save him again. Save him. Oh, please save him.

"Regulus, Regulus, shh," Pandora whines, hands on his face, standing before him with tears in her eyes and devastation curling her shoulders. She said his name. She called his name, and here they are. He wishes she never spoke. He wants her to keep talking, so he can hear her sweet croon, anything other than the possibility, the chance, the reality that—that—

Regulus could kill them all, if he could breathe, if he could stop shaking, if the seams of himself weren't unraveling. They crowd him, and each other, pressing in from all sides, and it's good. Touch him. Hold him together. Feel where every inch of him translates pain. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

It was supposed to be *me and you,* but Sirius is gone. *Come back to me, baby,* Regulus thinks, but James is gone. And he's—oh, he can't. He will, he has to, he's going to burn it all down, if he can pick himself up off the floor.

There's someone behind him. Barty. The touch of him. Face pressed into the back of Regulus' hair, hand pushing into the curve of his spine. Doesn't let him fall. Won't let him fall.

Somewhere, somewhere, Effie and Monty aren't strong enough at the same time. A mother's tears; an angel weeping while the world ends. A father's tears; a natural disaster on a pipeline

that carries them all along with it. They wash, and wash, and wash away. It's just rain.

When it rains, it pours. Regulus hates the rain. He hates the world and everyone in it. He'll blow it up. Set it on fire. Destroy every faction of every city more thoroughly than they destroyed Troy. There will be no rebuilding in the aftermath of what he will do.

"Breathe, breathe, breathe," someone is chanting, and Regulus tries and doesn't want to try and wants to stop and can't stop and has to try and can't and can't and can't can't can't—

"ENOUGH!" Dorcas bellows, and immediately the entire hall falls silent. All tears come to a halt. Everyone is so startled by the way her voice carries, shocked out of their own shock, and they stare at her with wide eyes.

No one even seems to breathe.

Regulus isn't breathing.

Dorcas exhales slowly and stands taller. "If—if they survived tonight, Riddle won't kill them. He's too smart for that. So, at the moment, there's a chance they're alive. We have a meeting with Dumbledore, and he will likely know one way or another if they're alive. We're all going to walk there in a calm and orderly fashion. Go. Move, *now."*

That's the thing that gets air back into Regulus' lungs.

Hope.

It feels like climbing to stand on his own two feet, and pull himself together, but he proved he could climb, didn't he? One of the hardest things he's ever had to do, and he still did it, and he does it again. He'll never really understand how, but he does. And he exhales. And he watches Remus and Lily look at each other, then look away all at once, and he watches as Effie and Monty move forward to stand with him. And they go.

They all depart as a group, the ones Dorcas selects. Regulus walks in between Effie and Monty, and Remus walks ahead with Lily, but he keeps turning back to glance at him. Pandora and Dorcas take the lead, and Pandora is holding Dorcas' hand.

Along the way, they pick up two others. Sybill—one of the ones from the heli-carrier, who surges forward to join them the moment a different man Regulus doesn't recognize swings to walk with them, his jaw clenched. They end up in a meeting room of some sort with a longtable and two men sitting at the far end. Regulus recognizes one—Mayor Aberforth—and finds that a different man he doesn't recognize at all is at the head of the table, resembling Mayor Aberforth a great deal, though his beard is less scraggly and his hair is more white, not the dark grey shade of Aberforth's. Dumbledore, Dorcas said. There's two of them? Brothers?

Regulus doesn't immediately get his answer, because things go awry the moment they walk inside.

"You lied," Lily says, her voice hoarse. She is staring at the man Regulus doesn't know at the head of the table. "You told me he was dead. You lied."

"Ms. Evans—"

It's fast. Scarily so, in fact. Clearly no one sees it coming, because there's nothing anyone can do to stop it. With no warning, Lily's hand darts out to yank the gun out of the holster of the man farthest from Sybill, and she has it trained right on the man at the head of the table before anyone can even draw a breath. Before anything can happen, the man she stole the gun from swivels swiftly and puts himself right in front of it, stepping forward so the barrel presses to his head.

"Lily," he says, his voice smooth and calm.

"Move, Kingsley. Now," Lily replies coldly, giving absolutely no indication that she won't shoot him if necessary.

"Lily," Sybill chokes out, and it escapes her as a whimper, her breathing thin and short. "Please don't. Please—"

"Lily," and that's Remus now, sounding uncertain and speaking with familiarity all at once. "What are you doing?"

"He lied to me," Lily states. Regulus doesn't know who she's talking to. She's looking at Kingsley. "He said—he told me—"

"I know."

"He told *us,* King—"

"I know," Kingsley repeats.

Lily inhales sharply and whispers, "Did you know?"

"No," is the immediate, steady answer.

"Six years," Lily announces. Her voice cracks. Her whole body is shaking, but the hand around the gun doesn't even tremble. She isn't crying. "I thought he was dead for *six years."*

"I know," Kingsley says softly, yet again.

"So, *move,"* Lily grits out.

Kingsley doesn't. "I can't do that, because you'll shoot him."

"I'll shoot you."

"You won't."

Lily's lips twist. "Won't I?"

"Step aside," says the man, the other Dumbledore. "Mr. Shacklebolt, step aside, dear boy."

"I can't do that, sir," Kingsley says stiffly. "She will *actually* shoot you, and she will not miss."

"Kingsley, move aside," Dumbledore murmurs with an entirely new inflection in his tone. An order masked in geniality. "Go on, do not shield me with yourself. I don't ask that of you."

Everyone seems to hold their breath. Kingsley doesn't move. What he does instead is reach up and wrap his hand around Lily's on the gun. "Listen to me, Red, you are not at a place you can't come back from, but this? *Don't* go there. I'm not going to let you go there, because I care. You'll have to kill me, and you won't, because you care, too."

"I don't," Lily croaks. "I really fucking don't. I don't care about anything, Kingsley, not one damn thing."

"Okay, Lily. Okay," Kingsley murmurs, gentle almost, and he eases her hand down, taking the gun, and she lets him.

Lily makes a quiet noise that seems locked between defeat and frustration, and she pushes past Kingsley to glare at Dumbledore. "Why? Can you at least tell me *why?"*

"I did not lie to you intentionally, Ms. Evans," Dumbledore tells her quietly. "I simply assumed that Mr. Lupin was dead, and I felt that not providing you with that closure would __"

"Bullshit!" Lily snarls, slamming her hand down to the table, making it shake. "That's *bullshit.* How stupid do you think I am? You know I had no fucking closure, and you—you could have found out. You could have checked, but you *didn't.* You just assumed the answer you wanted it to be, because that was more convenient for you."

Dumbledore is silent for a long moment, and then he looks at Mayor Aberforth. They stare at each other, and Regulus can see something heavy there between them. Yes, they're definitely brothers. Regulus can feel it in his bones.

"Yes," Dumbledore admits, finally, and multiple people in the room inhale sharply. He's only looking at his brother, and Mayor Aberforth doesn't look surprised at all. He shakes his head and looks away, and Dumbledore sighs, sounding old and weary. "Yes, Ms. Evans, I provided you with the answer that was most convenient. You're correct, I could have checked, and I chose not to. He was either dead, or as good as. If he wasn't dead, then he was a servant, which…I presume…?"

He's looking at Remus now, and so does Lily. Everyone does, and Remus swallows. "Yeah. I'm—I—yeah."

"As such, there was nothing I or anyone or *you* could do for his fate either way," Dumbledore explains, focusing on Lily once again. "Do you understand, Ms. Evans? I couldn't follow up on Mr. Lupin, because if he wasn't dead, you would never have stayed. You said as much. For your own safety—and yes, for the benefit of this war—I told you what you needed to hear."

"You bastard," Dorcas whispers, her voice shaking with so much audible anger that it's *palpable.*

"What of my family?" Lily chokes out, sounding desperate now. "You said—you told me they killed—"

"As far as I know, they're all dead," Dumbledore informs her, and she takes that like he struck her. Regulus finds this to be unspeakably cruel, watching someone be strung along, given hope, and then have it all snatched away again. "There were orders given for your family to be killed as punishment for your crimes, as is Riddle's way. That only further fueled my

belief that Mr. Lupin was killed as well. I could be wrong, and I hope—like with Mr. Lupin—that I am."

"You could be wrong?" Lily croaks.

"Yes," Dumbledore says softly. "I didn't check for them either."

"When this is all over," Lily whispers, "you better hope that someone kills you before I get my hands on you."

"I'll bear that in mind," Dumbledore murmurs. "I do want you to know, Ms. Evans, whether you wish to believe it or not, my intentions were not malicious."

"No, they never are, are they, Albus?" Aberforth scoffs under his breath, scowling off to the side, top lip curled in a snarl.

Dumbledore—Albus, apparently—does not acknowledge his brother. He gestures to the chairs. "Everyone, I ask that you take a seat. There is much to discuss."

"Fuck you," Dorcas spits out. "Why should we listen to a word you have to say? After everything you've done—"

"I am not the only person present who has done things, especially with tonight in mind," Dumbledore cuts in calmly, flicking his gaze to meet hers. "There's a lot to cover, Ms. Meadowes, including the status of Sirius Black and James Potter, as they were left behind in the Hallow."

Regulus' ears ring, just from the name. Sirius, he knew. James is still new, and Regulus hasn't processed it yet. Can't quite manage to.

Regulus can't hear anything past the name that chants in his head like a mantra, like a prayer. James.

James.

James.

James, baby, please be alive. Please, please, please. Because Regulus can do something with that. Regulus can do a lot of things with that, he thinks. If Sirius and James are alive, Regulus will get them back, somehow. Whatever it takes.

And then Albus' voice breaks through to announce, very clearly, "James and Sirius are alive."

And that.

Well, that inevitably saves the world.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns they are alive, and so it is here, in this room, that Regulus learns he can keep going, because they need him to.

But it's not the only thing he learns, here, in this room.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns what became of his home. Biological warfare and more death. So many losses. Adults and children, dead. Families, torn apart. The district he grew up in, empty and filled with ghosts. A hollow home.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns of a resistance that has been building for fifty odd years or so. Weapons and war. Safety under the ground. Missions. Secrecy.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns Dorcas has been a part of this resistance for years and has now formed herself into a leader, but doesn't seem ready to shoulder the burden of it, or the consequences. She wishes to leave, to be with Marlene, and Dumbledore explains to her that she does not have that luxury now, as she has made orders and must contend with the fallout of them. A trap of her own making.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns he will be given amenities and safety where Riddle cannot find them—as will everyone who was brought in tonight. The only catch is that they will have chores or jobs to do and rules to follow, and they are not allowed to leave. Apparently, the Hallows will now be scouring the area, since a Hallow heli-carrier went down not too far from here, and Riddle will be eager to locate this place. This means no visits to the surface, not even sneaking through the vents—a statement directed right at Lily—and it is made very clear that anyone who tries to go to the surface will be putting every life in this bunker in danger, and as such, those that do so will be confined to solitary lockup. This makes Remus laugh, harsh and brittle, and he sounds so fucking resentful when he says he has traded one prison for another.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns the footage within the arena that caught the near-perfect breakout will be released to the world tomorrow. With it, Lily and Mary's identities will be known, since they spoke their names in the arena. There is a good possibility that Barty, Sybill, and Amos will be in danger as well, as their names were mentioned and there is a chance that a clear shot of their faces might have been caught on camera. However, Riddle had this information already, so it's not as if *not* releasing the footage will keep any of them from being targets.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns the anonymity of this rising rebellion has gone up like smoke. Riddle knows of it, the presence if not the details, and he will be responding accordingly, as well as doing whatever it takes to get said details. The access to the Hallow granted before is now lost. War is here, and Regulus wasn't aware it was approaching.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns how things are going to proceed in the face of a war kicked ruthlessly and thoughtlessly in motion. Because this is not a war that can be completely won from this end yet, a different form of battle will take place, but it will essentially be a game of chess. Dorcas made the first move, and Riddle will surely take his turn after, and so it will continue. They can only go from there, gradually, and continue in a war of wits.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns he will do anything, anything, *anything* it takes—not to save the world, not to build a better one, but to make sure the sun keeps rising and the

stars continue to shine.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns what it is to *feel* just how far he will go for his brother and the man he loves. He'll go as far as he needs to. He'll go until his last breath.

It is here, in this room, that Regulus learns he's still breathing.

For them, he's still breathing.

Chapter End Notes

okay!

so, let's get right into it.

kingsley, you prick. 😒 it's fine, you can be a little mad at him, but like. in his defense, from his pov, all of this is really fucked up. and he did, like, step forward despite his own feelings to be angry on lilys behalf and outright state that he cares about her. he does, and they have a whole thing later, it's fineee. but also giggling and kicking my feet because mary stood up for lily 🥰 she's so girlfriend

then remus and lily.... you all do not KNOW the way i was on the sidelines watching the trainwreck of everyone being excited for the lily and remus reunion, literally looking like this: 😬

like??? come on, it's ME. 😭 yall seriously could not have expected this to go any other way. what did you think would happen? id make it easy and calm? pfft. come on, you're 55 chapters in, you should have known better than that 🙄

however, for those of you who need reassurances: lily and remus will...be okay. at some point. they just have some things to work on first, and there's a lot between them. six years worth. but! soon, very soon, we're about to enter a new era for lily, and it's gonna be fun. im very, very excited for it. to sum it up: remus can and will fix her 😭

dorcasssss!!! <3 she carried this chapter. not her about to lose her collective shit about marlene. poor amos, he's having a really rough night, huh? she just wanted to see marlene :(

and oh god, effie and monty. they were killing me. i know a lot of you were thinking of like, regulus sort of having no one, but the thing is—yes, he lost james and sirius, but

he's fighting for his life to have a reason to keep going, and effie and monty (along with a few others) are a very big support system for him in the upcoming chapters. like, at this point, he's clinging to them, ya know? just like they're clinging to him. effie and monty and regulus are so special to me, yall dont even know.

then narcissa 😬 big yikes. well first, her getting to see andromeda again 😭 THEYRE SISTERS!!!! but yeah, narcissa did NOT handle regulus being bellatrix's murderer well, and like. okay, so, it's one of those things that's never really fully resolved. you'll see more about it later. taking a fucked up family and finding more ways to fuck them up... yeah, okay, that was foul.

then the remus and regulus reunion! look, ill be 100% honest. i rewrote that so many times in so many different ways, bc like, these 2 especially have all these contradictory feelings that combat each other, and i can see countless ways each emotion could rise to the surface and take the wheel, so to speak.

so, it was kind of special to me to see them, in their grief and all this chaos, try to be there for each other. i mean, they're kinda shit at it, considering the current circumstances and such, but they tried! and they did, in a way. like idk, despite everything, and even outside just james and sirius, these two really care about each other. we'll see more duality with them in the future. they will return to being supremely fucked up very shortly, i assure you.

also, just the way regulus broke down and everyone all was there and kinda breaking down with him, and it was just so painful for all of them, but like there was something so human about the way they all came together??? idk, just. as devastating as it is, it's kinda sweet too :(

DORCAS AGAIN!!! she was feeling the weight of that leadership, lemme tell ya. poor girl. she will continue to, for a bit, unfortunately. a trap of her own making indeed :/

lily lily lily my beloved <3 she really was about to blow albus' skull open, soooo sexy of her 🥰 also, if it wasn't obvious, she's dealing with a lot at the moment. we'll see more on that later, i promise.

another thing i wanted to address: the talk with albus and aberforth. that was a lot of information, i know, but all you need to remember to reassure yourself is that whole "can he alter their memories, thoughts, and feelings?" moment, where it's stated that riddle can't.

also, albus: i don't have a deus ex machina
remus: *enters, stage left*

oh, and yeah, like. everyone's like, omg remus and regulus are gonna break out and theyre gonna go on a rampage! yeah, no... they CAN'T. like, they're literally trapped 😭 but ofc that doesn't keep them down for long... they'll get there, just be patient.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-pandora saving james' cane!!!
-sybill and kingsley broke up :(
-rabastan and rodolphus reunited!
-aberforth getting to mock albus 😭
-effie protecting regulus!!!
-lily and dorcas being feral
-regulus and lily fighting!!! sorry, this was funny to me out of context. me in the background: FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT!
-poor alice just getting the news about frank like that :(
-regulus is still breathing <3

Hell Week

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-depictions of violence
-descriptions of blood
-vague references to past child abuse
-very vague depictions of torture (not described in detail, essentially fade-to-black, but it does occur and is proven that it occurs)
-brief references to guns/gun violence
-references to past deaths/murder
-depictions of wounds/injuries
-brief references to death/murder (no one we know, but it's mentioned that people die, so)
-depictions of dissociative amnesia (brief, and nothing occurs during)
-a brief mention of a medical procedure done without permission, so it's forced on someone, and they are very much not okay with it. this is an attack on their bodily autonomy, and it makes them uncomfortable, because it IS uncomfortable and not okay, no matter how "minor" the procedure is. (for those of you who are very uncomfortable with this—which is valid—and need to know who and what procedure it is before reading, ill be putting spoilers in the end notes, so you're prepared for it going in)

i...believe that's all! overall not as heavy as the previous chapters, though it...certainly has its moments. take care of yourselves, regardless!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius has a new sympathy for Remus, because Azkaban?

A total shithole.

Oh, and do *not* get him started on the fucking mask. It was his very first present they gave him, a mask perfectly fitted to the lower half of his face, which means it's a gorgeous mask, but that doesn't mean he's ecstatic about wearing the damn thing. It's restricting and sort of itchy and also makes breathing deep basically impossible, so he feels perpetually out of breath.

He kept taking it off and yelling obscenities, so they locked it on his face. Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to have someone come inside your cell and have to *unlock* the mask on your face, because you've been muzzled like a fucking dog?

Sirius has killed three people, so now they tase him *before* they come inside. Pfft. Cowards.

In any case, Sirius doesn't know what the fuck is going on. He is supremely confused, honestly, but he has drawn his own conclusions. He *thinks* that he was extracted from the arena for the blatant defiance he and Regulus displayed, possibly, but that would mean Regulus was also taken for punishment and eternal servitude, except Sirius hasn't seen or heard a hint of anything about him. There's really no information on what's going on, but Sirius is smart enough to know it's…not good.

Obviously it's not good. He's in *prison.* Is it better than the arena? Eh, Sirius can't really say. He doesn't think he's going to die here, at least, because they would have already killed him, wouldn't they? But he can't move around here, can't talk, can't do…basically anything. It's—degrading. And boring.

Fuck, Sirius is so *bored.* This is torture. At least in the arena he had some fucking activity and interaction. Here, he's just stifled and confused and—lonely. It's very lonely here.

He is left, unfortunately, with his own thoughts—and this, believe it or not, is very shitty company to have. All he can do is think himself in circles, wondering about Regulus, James, Remus, everyone. Are they okay? Are they alive? Where are they? Has something happened to them? What's going on?

Sirius was not given the luxury of Hallow medicine to help heal his bumps, bruises, and cuts, so he's also still in pain on top of everything else. Being tased repeatedly doesn't help him either, though it's not damaging, as far as he can tell. Yeah, it hurts like a bitch, but it's only enough to put him down for a minute at most, just long enough for them to unlock the mask on his face so he can eat and have water.

Otherwise, they haven't done anything to him. Haven't beaten him. Haven't tortured him. Haven't answered his questions. Haven't even acknowledged him. They're all bastards, and

they all seemed to learn from the three he killed to stay out of his range. Bastards they may be, stupid they are not.

(The food here is awful, by the way. Slop, basically, and barely enough to keep a damn bird alive. Oh, and it's cold here? Like, so fucking cold. He is perpetually shivering. Plus, the bed is like sleeping on a slat of wood, and there is no blanket at all. As for showers and hygiene, he's essentially taken to a stall, left alone with a bar of soap and a spout that shoots out cold water at a velocity so high that it hurts his skin. His hair is a *wreck,* which is absolutely killing him, just as an aside.)

Anyway, Sirius is very bored, so this means a change piques his interest. When he's handcuffed and taken out of his cell, he can't help but be intrigued and almost *eager.* Even actual torture would be a nice change of pace, at this point.

(Be careful what you wish for and all that.)

He's taken to a room with a table in the center of it, a steel ring on one side that he's cuffed to with absolutely no slack, so he can't even raise his hands more than a few inches. The chair he sits in is cold and uncomfortable, but he holds still as one of the guards removes his mask and sits it on the table, out of reach. Sirius rolls his jaw, craning his head back with a grin.

"Ah, what a relief," Sirius says on an exhale. "Thank you…hm. Billy? Bob? Stuart? You look like a Stuart."

Probably-not-Stuart doesn't acknowledge him.

"So, Stuart, you wouldn't happen to want to clue me in on what's going on here, would you?" Sirius asks lightly. "Just, you know, give me a hint. Or come closer."

Probably-not-Stuart doesn't come closer.

"Come on, Stuart, I won't bite," Sirius needles. "We're pals, aren't we? I mean, you've had me convulsing on the floor with your fun little taser more than once now. We're practically family, if I'm honest."

Probably-not-Stuart turns and leaves the room.

"Was it something I said?" Sirius mutters to an empty room. Naturally, he gets no response. Great, he's bored again. At least he gets the sound of his own voice, though, which is a huge improvement in his opinion.

Sirius is singing, loudly and out of tune, when the door opens again. Riddle comes inside, a briefcase in hand. As soon as Sirius sees that it's him, he starts singing louder, more off-key, and drumbeats his fingers on the tabletop, bobbing his head like he doesn't have a care in the world.

Riddle does not look impressed with him, which—yeah, that tracks. He sits down on the other side of the table and places his briefcase on top, off to the side, then threads his hands together loosely. He's out of reach, sadly. Sirius wonders how he's going to get Riddle to inch closer, just enough for Sirius to snap his hand out and break a finger or two.

For now, Sirius continues to sing. Riddle waits him out, or intends to, but what he doesn't know is that Sirius' ability to be a menace can outweigh anyone's patience. He has tested this many times over the years, particularly with his own parents. Even negative attention is still attention, blah blah blah. Sirius grew out of that, in the end, but he has retained the knack for irritating someone into responding to him.

Look at me, look at me, look at me. That's all Sirius wanted as a child, but as he grew up, he realized that's not what he wanted at all. *See me, and love me as I am.* That was the real desire he had, underneath it all. Still the same thing these days, he thinks, but he doesn't care to be seen or loved by the man before him now. Nah, he just wants to get on his nerves.

"I see it hasn't taken long for imprisonment to make you lose your mind," Riddle notes flatly.

Sirius' voice cuts out, and he grins, because whether or not Riddle knows it, he just won. Ha. "Oh, well, if you never had it to begin with and all that. Good afternoon, or is it evening? Morning, maybe? Can't really tell, you see. There's no window in the cells, or light. I'm assuming you could change that, and listen, I'd greatly appreciate it if you'd have a window installed in my cell. I'd like to look at the moon. Oh, and the food here? Abysmal. I don't know what the meal plan is here, but you should absolutely get someone on that. Also, there's __"

"James sends his regards," Riddle interrupts, and Sirius stops talking immediately. "Yes, I thought that would get you to pay attention. Come now, we have much to discuss and wasting time on your trivial, childish musings does nothing for us."

"Well, it does a whole lot for me," Sirius corrects, though his gaze is sharp on Riddle's face now. "It certainly entertains me more than you ever could. You're a bit like a dead fish, really."

Riddle smiles thinly and reaches out for his briefcase, popping it open. "Do you know what happened a week ago?"

"I was taken from the arena. Thanks for that, by the way."

"Do you know why you were taken from the arena?"

Sirius watches as Riddle draws out a jar and sits it on the table. Inside it, there's a Horcrux Hornet, pouch glowing green and sheer wings remaining still. If Riddle is surprised that Sirius isn't afraid, he doesn't show it. "No, not really."

"Hm." Riddle regards the jar thoughtfully, then looks up at Sirius. "You don't fear me, Sirius?"

"No," Sirius says.

"You should," Riddle informs him.

"I don't scare easily," Sirius replies, arching an eyebrow. "And you, regardless of how you act, are just a person."

Riddle hums. "I think that you don't fear me as a person, or what I can do, only in regards to yourself. You're not afraid to die, or suffer, are you?"

"No, I'm not," Sirius admits, tilting his chin up.

"But what about those you love?" Riddle asks softly. "Are you afraid of what I can do to them?" Almost instantly, the jar is filled with light, muffled thumps as the Horcrux Hornet tries to fly towards Sirius. Riddle hums again. "Ah, there it is."

Sirius finds that he can't speak, suddenly silent, abruptly at a disadvantage. Okay, so he lost that round. He can't help it, really. Riddle has mentioned James, Sirius has no idea where Regulus is, or if Remus is okay—and yes, it *scares* him. Nothing scares him more than the idea of something happening to those he cares about. That's what real fear is, to him.

"You think you're so clever," Sirius murmurs. "This is what you do, then? You find what people are afraid of and use it as leverage over them, to threaten them."

"Well, if it works," Riddle replies.

"It won't," Sirius tells him simply. "I won't be threatened by you. My pride won't allow it, or maybe I'm just too spiteful, but whatever you're looking to get from me, you won't find it."

"I'm simply looking for a discussion. Let's talk, Sirius," Riddle murmurs, threading his hands together again. The jar goes quiet, the Horcrux Hornet settling. Riddle glances at it, one eyebrow twitching up. "You have a strong grip on your emotions, it seems. Admirable."

Sirius nearly laughs, because that's absolutely the farthest thing from the truth about him he's ever heard. No, he doesn't have a strong grip on his emotions, or any grip at all. They're just all over the place, strange, sliding wildly on a scale. He's a walking mood swing, quick to fly off the handle, easily influenced by the things around him.

But, when it comes to survival, none of that matters. He knows how to lock his shit down and put on a mask. Build up a wall around who he needs to be. Live and breathe by a facade, just to make it through. This facade? This one, here and now, is someone who is as unfeeling as the man across from him, unafraid and unaffected. Sirius has always been good at this. The mask he so easily puts on has always been a mirror.

"A week ago, there was an attack on the arena," Riddle tells him. "A group of anarchists broke into the arena to abduct the tributes within."

It takes a lot of effort for Sirius to keep his face neutral, to not react, to not immediately make demands about Regulus, or all of his friends, or for what happened and why he's still…

He's still here.

"As you can see, they were clearly not entirely successful in their endeavor," Riddle continues, almost wry as he gestures lazily to Sirius. "Meanwhile, at the same time, a group of anarchists within the Hallow conducted an escape."

Again, Sirius is exercising a lot of self-restraint in not reacting in any way. He's learned over the years that, to gather any bit of information you might want, sometimes the best thing to do is to let the person talk. Don't attempt to guide them. Don't show your hand. Don't reveal how badly you want to know.

He so badly wants to know.

"This brought it to my attention that there is an organized group of anarchists that oppose me." Riddle flicks his gaze towards the jar, then back to Sirius. "Now, tell me, Sirius, what do you know about all of that?"

"Oh, everything," Sirius replies lightly, flapping a hand carelessly, as much as his cuffs will allow. "All the fun details. Where and how and who. In fact, I invented it. I *am* the group of anarchists. I definitely didn't mean to leave myself behind, but hey, we all make mistakes, right? Oops."

"As I thought," Riddle murmurs. "You know nothing."

"Obviously," Sirius declares.

Riddle holds his gaze. "Allow me to tell you what you're so very desperate to know. Your brother and every other tribute alive at the time managed to escape; you were the only one who didn't make it out. Within the Hallow, it was *your* stylist, *your* handler, *your* mentor and others that led an attack to break their way out of the Hallow—and, ironically, the head gamemaker herself. They broke into the servants' cells and abducted the criminals as well. Of course, not everyone made it out alive. Many Aurors were killed, as was your friend—ah, Frank Longbottom, if I remember correctly."

That's a lot of information all at once with no warning, a mixture of awful news and wonderful news and completely unexpected news. Sirius' brain suffers overload for a moment as he tries to process it, because Frank? Frank is dead? But the servants were freed? Remus? So Remus is safe? And James? And Regulus? They're all okay? But how—who—what—

It's not through sheer force of will that Sirius doesn't react this time. He doesn't react, because he can't, because he's not here. He flickers in and out like a light desperately clinging to its last bit of luminescence. Nothing around him changes; Riddle is not speaking, neither of them have moved, and Sirius can't get a grasp on when he's here and when he's not. It's quick, like little snapshots, his mind trying to shape around all this new information and make sense of it.

Riddle is once again attempting to wait him out, as if Sirius' silent treatment is a new form of mockery for the purpose of being an agitation. Truthfully, Sirius can't break his silence, too busy being yanked in and out of reality, barely able to wrestle with it. All of it's internal, and so it seems as if he's just sitting there, doing and saying nothing.

Sirius has no idea how long it takes before he's fully settled again. Throughout all of that, he hardly even blinked.

Riddle stares at him, just the slightest tilt to his head, brown eyes rusty like blood and sharp with probing demands. He's still waiting Sirius out, utterly oblivious to the fact that Sirius just slipped away. Sirius' mouth feels dry. Okay. Okay, so now what does Riddle know? Does he know about Remus? Does he not? *Is* everyone safe, or will Riddle kill them all? Can he?

Sirius doesn't allow himself to think of Frank. He doesn't allow himself to wonder how everyone got involved in all of this shit. He doesn't allow himself to ruminate on the apparent anarchy taking place. What he does think of, only, is that Regulus made it out of the arena, while James and Remus escaped from the Hallow. It's such an overwhelming sense of relief that he could curl up and cry from joy, because it's everything—it's absolutely *everything* he wanted, and if it meant he had to stay behind and suffer whatever Riddle would throw at him, then it was worth it. He was always willing to do that, and he still is. It's still fucking worth it.

"Sounds like you've had a shitty week," is what Sirius says, finally, when he can bring himself to speak.

"You cannot even begin to imagine," Riddle says shortly, sitting up a little taller. "I have gathered all the information I could pertaining to what has taken place over the previous week. Unfortunately, I still find myself in the dark about some things. I was rather hoping you could help with that."

Sirius snorts. "Yeah, ah, you should have seen this coming. I mean, even if I *did* know anything, I'd literally die before telling you any of it. Surely you know that."

"I did suspect, yes."

"So, in what world would I ever help you?"

Riddle taps his finger to the top of his briefcase, likely a motion meant to draw the eye, an intimidation tactic of some sort that Sirius refuses to fall for. He doesn't bother breaking

Riddle's gaze. "There's many ways to get cooperation from someone, as I'm sure you know. Our methods are different, though closely related. You wield pleasure while I use pain."

"There is no amount of pain you could use that would ever make me cooperate," Sirius says simply. "Go on, give it a go, I dare you. Torture me out of my fucking head, leave me a smear across the wall, and still—watch—I won't break. I *don't* break."

"Yes, well, I hardly need your help if you don't know anything, do I?" Riddle keeps tapping his briefcase. "However, I do think I can guarantee it, simply because I have James."

That stupid fucking Horcrux Hornet. Sirius hates the stupid bugs, regardless of James' fondness for them. The one he kept sits in a jar in James' room back home. Sirius said they should set the damn thing on fire and secretly agreed with Regulus that it was better off being buried in the backyard, but James got testy about that if you suggested it to him. Either way, Sirius—like any sane person—doesn't enjoy the visible proof of his fear, such a weak and vulnerable emotion he's only ever willing to let a select few see. Now, Riddle can see.

Sirius hates it. He also chooses to ignore it, much like he's doing with the idea that James is captured here, too. "You're lying. How stupid do you think I am?"

"I need not lie, Sirius."

"Yeah, that's what liars say."

Riddle looks unimpressed with him all over again. This man is clearly an only child, because he doesn't seem to know how to properly go in circles in a pointless debate as Sirius does, and as Regulus does. What marks a true sibling is childish, petty arguments about senseless things that always escalates and then is inevitably pushed aside later in favor of hanging out or going to find food. Sirius has been preparing his whole childhood to piss this man off. *Thanks, Reggie,* he thinks.

"Whether or not you believe me, the facts remain the same; I have James contained within my castle, comfortably close by, because he—unlike the others who fled the Hallow—

seemed to make choices that led to his capture. Either he was trying to be the hero, or…" Riddle pauses, flicking his gaze over Sirius with visible disdain. "Trying to save you."

Sirius' heart sinks, because that absolutely sounds like James, and *dammit,* there goes that stupid fucking bug again! Every time he manages to wrangle his fear, put a lid on it, Riddle has to open his dumb fucking mouth and push him. Oh, Sirius wants to rip his fucking throat out.

"Don't," is all that falls out of Sirius' mouth, and it comes out harsh, almost a growl.

"Don't what, Sirius? Kill James? Hurt him? Torture him?" Riddle watches him, knowing that it's all of that, and more. Sirius doesn't want Riddle to even be within spitting distance of James. "You're so defiant. So prideful. Spiteful, like you said. What would it take to get you to set that aside?"

Fuck you, Sirius thinks. *Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.*

"The sound of his screams?" Riddle asks softly. He leans forward on his elbows, holding Sirius' gaze, a gleam in his eyes that makes Sirius' stomach churn. "What if I tortured him in front of you? Made you watch where you could do nothing to stop it? What if I tortured him so thoroughly that *he* broke, Sirius? What if it was him, begging and pleading for you to cooperate? What then? What would you do?"

No, no, no, Sirius chants inwardly. *Please don't. Please, please, please just leave him alone. Hurt me, not him.*

He balls his hands into fists on the tabletop, nails digging into his palms. He tries to breathe. Tries not to bend to Riddle's will, because it's clear he's using Sirius' fear against him. The Horcrux Hornet is flying so hard at the inside of the jar that it shakes minutely on the table. Stupid fucking bug.

"How far would you go for your best friend, hm?" Riddle asks, tilting his head again. "To spare him pain. To save his life. If there was something you could do, would you not do it?"

"What do you *want?"* Sirius grits out.

Riddle's mouth twitches as he leans back. "I want you to break. I want to watch. Set aside your pride, Sirius. Your defiance and your spite—do away with it all. Kneel down on the floor before me like a dog and *beg."*

Sirius stares at him for a long beat, feeling rather sick at the demand, as well as oddly detached from this entire moment just from how surreal it is. Riddle is not joking, and Sirius can feel bile rising when he realizes what comes next.

Exhaling sharply, Sirius stands up, a little hunched over from where his arms are still chained to the table. He walks around to the side, grinding his teeth as Riddle's gaze follows him, and then he proceeds to dip down on one knee before dropping down on the other. Just like that, he kneels.

His arms remain half over the top of the table, the side of it digging into the tiny, mostly-healed scar he has from where Regulus cut him in the arena. He holds Riddle's gaze, feeling the humiliation of this moment writhe under his skin, but he knows deep down that he has to. Not because he believes doing so will actually save James from whatever Riddle wants, but on the off chance that it might, he will never forgive himself if he didn't even bother to try.

"Don't hurt him," Sirius says stiffly. "Please."

"You're not even afraid," Riddle murmurs, and the thing is, like this, Sirius *isn't.* The Horcrux Hornet has settled down. Sirius isn't scared; he only burns with anger. "Look at you. There's not an ounce of submission in how you address me now. You are *inferior* to me, do you understand that? I am above you in power, and so you must come to me as the peasants fell before their kings. You are at my mercy, as is James, so *beg for it.* And mean it this time."

That horrible pit in Sirius' stomach only yawns wider, and he knows what is being asked of him. He just can't deliver. That's not who he is. Sirius Black is many, many things, but a peasant before a king is never and will never be one.

A little fun fact about Sirius, though. He's a very loyal man, and a devoted one at that, which means there's no low he won't sink to in the name of those he loves. So, for James, he drops his gaze in a clear sign of submission and gets as low to the ground as he can manage from his position. He closes his eyes and lets himself feel it, the sheer terror that rocks through him at the thought of James hurt or dead, feeling himself start to shake and hearing the Horcrux Hornet start back up again.

Sirius is practically speaking to Riddle's shoes beneath the table when he chokes out, "Please don't hurt him. Hurt me. Kill me. Just—just, please, not him."

"There, that's better," Riddle says. Sirius swallows and fights the scalding sensation of humiliation that makes his eyes sting and his stomach twist. There's a hand underneath his chin, lifting his head, and Riddle peers down at him like he's a stain upon his shoe. "Believe it or not, your request will be granted. I never intended to harm James, only you. But think of how far you've fallen in the name of your best friend and ask yourself just how far he will fall for *you."*

Sirius feels his stomach drop right out from underneath him, and it's one of those sharp mood swings that has him surging forward as far as he can go to clamp down on the only part of Riddle he can reach, which just so happens to be the inside of his wrist. Sirius sinks his teeth in his skin and bites ruthlessly, so hard that blood bubbles up and pours into his mouth, and he doesn't care, just swallows it down and bites *harder.*

He's promptly backhanded across the face with enough force to detach him, but Sirius went all in, so when he comes away, he brings skin with him. The inside of Riddle's wrist rips open, blood gushing as he hisses between his teeth less like a person and more like a snake. Sirius slumps back, heaving for breath and laughing, leaning against the side of the table and staring at Riddle with his blood staining his teeth.

"You," Riddle declares, *"will* regret that."

Sirius spits out whatever skin he took with him and leans his head against his bent arms, giving the man a cute, too-sweet smile. "Oh, no, I think that's my crowning achievement."

Riddle's nostrils flare as he pushes roughly to his feet, jerkily grabbing the jar and stuffing it back in his briefcase, clipping it shut and snatching it up. He sneers at Sirius. "You are a

useless excuse for a human being. A waste of oxygen."

"Is that the best you've got?" Sirius arches an eyebrow up at him. "Please, my mother came up with better insults. If you're going to kill the woman, you could at least *attempt* to carry on her legacy. At this point, *she's* superior to you, and she's dead."

"The only reason you're still alive is because your screams will bend James Potter to my will," Riddle informs him coldly.

"Suppose I just won't scream then," Sirius challenges.

"Oh," Riddle whispers in threat, "you will."

With that and nothing else, Riddle whips around and marches out of the room, still dripping blood as he goes. Sirius blows out a deep breath as soon as the door shuts, then forces himself to his feet so he can shakily plant himself back in his chair. He still feels a little sick. Sort of hot. Itchy.

He stays still until the door opens again, and then he swivels his head and slaps on a grin. "Oh, Stuart, you're back!"

Probably-not-Stuart ignores him and comes over to unclip him from the table. The mask isn't put on again. Sirius is led from the room, but not back to the cell.

No, he's taken lower.

Much lower.

~•~

"Hello, neighbor," Lily greets as she leans against the open doorway of Mary's room. She winks at Bingley on the other bed across the room, breaking out into a grin when a giggle seems to spill out of him, which he responds to by shoving his face into his pillow in pure mortification.

"Not today, Lily," Mary says shortly, shoving loose papers into a bag. "Bing Bing and I have to go."

Bingley's head pops up as he groans. "Oh, come off it, Mary, do I *have* to?"

"Yes," Mary answers promptly, not even looking at Bingley as she snaps her fingers at him. He starts dragging himself up, looking utterly miserable. Lily bites her lip so she won't break out into a smile. "I don't care if there's a war on, your education will *not* suffer for it."

"Save me," Bingley whispers hopefully as he brushes past Lily in the doorway, eyes wide. He has eyes like Mary, so dark they're black, but he never rolls them at Lily, at least.

Lily snorts and lowers her voice. "Are you mental? She'll kill me if I try anything, and you know it."

"Pfft, she can't kill you," Bingley argues. "You're too cool."

"Bingley, stop stroking her ego. It's inflated enough as it is," Mary calls sharply. "Go on. Get to class."

"Can you come by again, Lily?" Bingley asks.

"No, she can't," Mary answers for her. "She's banned from my classroom. Now, *go."*

Bingley grumbles, but he dutifully heads off down the hall, stopping by the room of one of his friends to walk with them. Lily watches him go, amused, then turns back to watch Mary

continue to grab…her lesson plans, probably? Maybe? Fuck if Lily knows. She knows nothing about teaching.

"I'm banned from your classroom now?"

"Yes."

"On what grounds?"

Mary shoots her a flat look. "On the grounds that you're distracting. Those grounds."

"Oh?" Lily grins at her. "Do I distract you, Mary? Make your job harder? Take your mind off your work? Make it hard to focus, perhaps? Take your—"

"Distracting for my students, *particularly* my little brother, who you like to sit in the back and giggle with, which—" Mary swivels and arches an eyebrow at her. "I know what you're doing, by the way. Stop it."

"I'm not doing anything."

"No? So, you're *not* trying to win over my brother to get to me?"

Lily leans her head against the doorway and hums. "You talk about my ego, but look at yours. If you *must* know, I'm not *trying* to win over Bingley. I have already done so. And getting to you—well, I hardly need his help with that."

"Give it a rest, Evans," Mary says dismissively.

"Oh, but you'd get bored if I did," Lily murmurs, her lips curling up at the corners. "Admit it, Macdonald, I keep your life exciting. If nothing else, I do manage that."

"Yeah, maybe, but that's hardly high praise," Mary counters, shouldering her bag and moving towards the door. "Personally, I think my life could do with a little less excitement."

"Shame. I think *my* life could do with a little more you," Lily teases, remaining in the doorway as Mary stops in front of her, looming a bit because she's taller and also in heels. Fucking hell, the heels are criminal. Her legs go for *days*.

"I can see you thinking naughty thoughts," Mary mutters.

"I like your legs," Lily says stupidly, because her brain and mouth have disconnected briefly, apparently. For fuck's sake, she's usually more smooth about it, but it's like with all that's happened in the past week, she's lost her touch.

"They're good legs," Mary allows.

"Long," Lily agrees.

Mary's lips twitch, then she looks annoyed about it. "No, nope, not doing this with you. You've caught me on a bad day."

"Have we had anything else lately?" Lily mumbles, her tone weary, and that immediately changes the whole mood. It's strange how there's this thing that connects certain people here together, inviting a sense of camaraderie between them, and the reminder of it overcomes everything else.

"No, suppose we haven't," Mary replies with a sigh. She arches an eyebrow at Lily. "It'd be easier for you if you actually spent time doing your chores. I know you got demoted to janitorial, but shirking your duties isn't helping your reputation."

"Fuck my reputation," Lily retorts with a scoff. "Do you honestly think I care about what anyone thinks of me anymore, especially here?"

"Yes, well, I don't have the luxury to not care, because my reputation reflects on my little brother," Mary says softly, adjusting her bag on her shoulder. "I'd like his time here to go a little smoothly at least."

Lily considers her for a long moment, then says, "You're a good sister, you know. A really good one."

"Oh, and you're the expert, are you?" Mary asks.

"I have one," Lily blurts out, then immediately wants to turn around and go in the opposite direction, possibly never speak to Mary again. Her feet feel nailed to the floor. "Had one, I mean. Well, maybe I still have one, I don't know anymore. I thought I had a best friend, but it turns out I still—well, he's still alive. So, you know, maybe I still have a sister, too."

Lily doesn't know why she's saying all of this. She wishes she wasn't. She's gone days not saying any of this to anyone, not daring to reveal the secretive hope that courses in her veins, not wanting to show just how much she cares—too human, too human, still too fucking human. She hasn't wanted the pitying looks she would surely get, or the gentle words of people who would feel the need to remind her of chances and odds and how, oftentimes, hoping in a world as fucked up as this one usually only leads to disappointment.

But, well, being under Mary's gaze is like being under a fucking scalpel; intense and sharp, peeling back the layers of her and taking a look inside. Or, no, it's like being x-rayed. Like Mary can see right down to her fucking bones. It is both unnerving and addictive, as well as terrifying. Lily gets trapped in the challenge of it, like a bargain with herself to see if she can get around Mary and keep her shit together, and what do you know? Not once has she managed to.

Mary doesn't look at her with pity. All she says is, "Well, for your sake, I hope you do. Bully for her, though. I can't imagine being your sister is anything other than hell."

"Oh, you think *I'm* bad?" Lily breathes out, laughing and feeling giddy almost, just to simply talk about her sister with the hope she's probably better off not having. "My sister is so, so much worse, you have no idea."

"Older or younger?"

"Older."

"Ah," Mary says, her gaze running from the top of Lily's head all the way down to her shoes, then back up again. Her mouth quirks at the corners. "Explains a lot about you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lily sputters.

"Younger siblings have this thing of wanting to be the center of a universe," Mary tells her wryly. "Older siblings tend to enable it. Not all, but—well, enough."

Lily rears back. "That's—not even close to true, and I can name one younger sibling right now that will completely deconstruct your entire argument."

"Don't say Regulus."

"I'm saying Regulus."

"Fool," Mary chides. "You, like many, are blinded by his personality to believe that this doesn't apply to him, too. It *does.* I never said *the* universe, I said *a* universe. Regulus doesn't want to be the center of the universe, but he wants nothing more than to be the center of Sirius and James'."

Lily opens her mouth, then closes it. Mary lifts an eyebrow smugly, so Lily has no choice but to scowl and pout and internally berate Regulus as a fellow younger sibling who has let her down. Damn him. He was the *perfect* counterargument.

"Okay, Aberforth," Lily challenges, snapping her fingers.

"District six was his universe. He put himself at the center of it and nearly died trying to stay there," Mary says.

"I—that's—" Lily wants to stomp her feet. She wants to bite the curl of Mary's shoulder. Oh, Mary is so pretty and smart and Lily thinks if they fuck, everything will be so much easier.

"You're thinking naughty thoughts again."

"Stop being right all the time."

Mary leans in with a smile, eyes like pools of ink that write countless stories Lily is desperate to read. Her hand is cool when it lands on Lily's side, a gentle pressure there, settling above the curve of Lily's hip and giving a slow push. As Lily turns under her guidance, Mary glides past her—and, while she goes by, she whispers in Lily's ear, "Never."

Lily nearly moans. Out loud. Just because Mary has gotten close and smells like sweet pea perfume and one of her curls brushed Lily's cheek and her breath had ghosted over the shell of Lily's ear, and oh, oh, Lily is in trouble.

Five minutes later, Lily bangs right into Remus' room down the hall, declaring, "I need to have sex."

"I'm not sure how I could help you with this problem," Remus replies. "The last time I checked, you don't fuck men." He pauses, pushing up on his elbows and looking aggrieved as he eyes her warily. "Wait, has that changed in the last six years?"

"No, that has not changed," Lily mumbles and resents that he even has to ask in the first place.

Remus blows out a deep breath and slumps back, clearly relieved. "Okay, great, that means I definitely *can't* help you with your problem."

"Tell me you don't want to fuck me without explicitly telling me you don't want to fuck me," Lily says flatly, kicking the door shut with her foot and moving over to shove his legs aside with a huff.

"What, are you joking? Of course I'd fuck you. It's my deepest desire, in fact." Remus arches an eyebrow and lazily props his arm up behind his head. "Come here, make my dreams come true, why don't you?"

Lily swings her leg over his lap and drops down on him as hard as she can, snorting when he bites his lip and bats his eyelashes up at her. "Excited yet?"

"Ecstatic," Remus tells her. "You know what would blow my fucking mind right now?"

"I've got an idea."

"Come on, rock my world."

"Anything for you," Lily says, reaching down the front of her shirt to dig out a smoke from the pack hidden in her bra. She reaches out to put it between his lips, then gets one for herself, grabbing her lighter at the same time. She lights her smoke, then leans down so her tip will connect with his, catching when he inhales. Lily gave him his first in six years days ago, and he'd coughed through the whole thing, then smoked five more back-to-back. "So, my problem."

"Mm," Remus hums, his eyes closed in pure bliss.

"Oi, pay attention." Lily wriggles in his lap, earning a warning look that makes her grin. "Anyway, my…reach, you could say, has been shortened significantly."

Remus blinks at her. "Your…reach?"

"I, ah, have a lot of sex."

"Lily, you've always had a lot of sex. I'm not sure why you're treating this like it's new? Or… different?"

Lily coughs. "I have a lot of sex with…a lot of women."

"Oh, so there's not—I mean, no girlfriend?" Remus asks, a touch awkward about it, and because she knows him, she knows he wants to avoid this topic so he won't be in danger of talking about Sirius.

"No," Lily murmurs. "No girlfriend."

Listen, she's not—she isn't *bitter,* okay? Really, it doesn't scald her insides a little bit that Remus was out there this entire time, and he found love, and she was here, running from it. That's not his fault. She's not angry with *him* about it, but she also sort of is. She's angry at him about a lot of things, none of which she knows how to voice yet. They used to talk about anything and everything. These days, they talk about anything and everything that isn't anything and everything.

"Well, get one," Remus suggests.

"Are you fucking stupid?" Lily snaps reflexively, recoiling back as a knee-jerk response. Remus blinks at her again, a wrinkle forming between his eyebrows. She clears her throat.

"Sorry. That was—rude. I don't think you're stupid."

Except she does, because he is, isn't he? What the hell was he thinking, going off and falling in love with *Sirius Black,* all while a servant? And just—falling in love, period. A doomed love, no less! The very thing she's spent years dodging, he walked right into with his eyes wide open.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

She's angry with him for it, because that's such a *him* thing to do, except he's not much of himself anymore, not as she knew him. She's angry with him, because he looks like her best friend and doesn't, talks like her best friend and doesn't, acts like her best friend and doesn't, feels like her best friend and doesn't, is her best friend and…isn't.

The thing is, they don't really know each other anymore. They can't share looks and have conversations in the span of one blink. They almost don't seem to know how to move around one another as they used to, like a machine in two separate parts that could always merge, two bodies and one heart.

That's gone now. That ease that was always between them is just *gone.* Absent. Dead like he was for six years. She grieved him. She was still grieving him. He's back and where does that grief go, where does she put it, what does she do with it?

It hasn't left her, and she doesn't know what to do about it. She doesn't talk to him about it, and she knows he knows she's not talking to him about it, like she knows he's not talking to her about a lot of things, and he knows she knows that. It's a lot of knowing between them, despite the fact that they barely know anything about each other anymore.

A stranger is just someone you haven't met yet. What do you call someone you knew better than yourself that you no longer recognize? A ghost?

What is, really, is the struggle to grapple with change. Because they've both changed so much. Still Lily and still Remus, but not as they were, not as they never should have had to

be. They know each other and do not know how they've changed. Lily has never known a Remus afraid of freedom, and Remus has never known a Lily afraid of love.

Worse yet is what sits between them. They don't talk about it, can't talk about it, because there's no fixing it. No fixing that Lily didn't save Sirius and was the one to deliver the news in the harshest, most devastating way possible. There's no way to overcome that, and Lily thinks the only chance they'll ever have is if they get Sirius back. He's become so important to her, Sirius has, because he's so important to Remus; she wants him here, for Remus, and will be the first to jump at the first opportunity to save him. Remus never talks about him. Won't. The first and only time Lily tried to bring him up, Remus shut her out so coldly that she still shivers just thinking about it.

There's a lot of shutting each other out, between them.

But, at the core of them, they're still barreling right into things they likely shouldn't, hand-in-chaotic-hand. It's probably best for them to actually take some time away from each other and adjust; instead, they are stubbornly sticking to one another like glue and steadily avoiding all the things they don't talk about, and they're equally obsessed with having each other again. Every night, Remus comes and crawls in her bed, and he cries there sometimes, but he's there, and she's there, and they don't speak because they don't have to, because they're still two bodies and one heart after all this time, if nothing else.

She feels like she misses him more right now when he's here than she did when she thought he was dead.

"Why can't you get a girlfriend?" Remus ventures cautiously. He's more cautious these days. It agitates Lily to see him like this, quiet and subdued sometimes, hesitant in a way he never used to be. He's always been a bit guarded about his more vulnerable feelings, though never with her, but now he's guarded about *everything.* It makes her want to shake him and scream at him, just so maybe he'll scream back.

"Relationships aren't really my thing."

"They…used to be."

Lily doesn't reply for a long moment, taking a pull from her smoke and letting the ash fall on his shirt. Neither of them try to brush it away. "Well, things change."

"Right," Remus says quietly. "Yeah, they do."

"Yeah." Lily sits there and smokes in silence, they both do, and then she clears the lump out of her throat. "Anyway, when it comes to sex, I'm *deprived."*

It's true, unfortunately. After Dumbledore released the footage to the whole world—including the Phoenix—he gave a speech to everyone in the Great Hall explaining that there was an unsanctioned mission conducted by *'a select few'* that essentially ripped away the secrecy of the Phoenix and therefore the safety of everyone within.

Naturally, everyone knew who those *select few* were, and so now, Lily and Dorcas are both public enemy number one for the most part, and no one wants anything to do with them. I n short, everything is shit, and Dumbledore is a prick.

Remus hums thoughtfully. "What about Sybill? You two seem to get on well, and she's going through a breakup, so maybe it'll cheer her."

"Mm, been there," Lily admits. "Too messy now, in any case. Kingsley is—he's my—I mean —"

"Your…friend?" Remus suggests slowly.

Lily glares at him. "No. He's just—Kingsley. I'm not going to do that to him. He still loves her, you know, and she still loves him. They'll make up, I'm sure."

"Alright, hm." Remus purses his lips. "I'd say Dorcas, but…"

"Also been there," Lily mutters. "Would *love* to go back, if I'm honest, but don't tell anyone that. That's too complicated."

"Because of Marlene?"

"Sure, let's go with that."

Remus squints at her. "There's more you're not saying."

"Anyway," Lily says firmly, "next?"

"Hm. Fine." Remus keeps eyeing her for a beat, ultimately letting it go in the end. He never would have done that before he died. Or, not died. No, not—he didn't die. He's right here. Lily still forgets sometimes, usually when she first wakes up in the morning, still so sure she's living in a world without her best friend, and then having to remind herself that it's not true anymore, even if it still feels that way. "Mary?"

"That one," Lily says with a wistful sigh. "Oh, Remus, *that one.* Fuck me, she's just—she's so —"

"Oh," Remus muses, chuckling, "that's the one you want."

Lily huffs. "She's not exactly my number one fan. For some reason, I think maybe she doesn't like me. Well, no, I think she does, but I think she doesn't *want* to like me, and I *know* she won't have sex with me. She's maddening. Oh, she'll stand around and bicker with me for *ages,* get us both worked up, then let us hang there. And she doesn't listen! Like, ever. She's so nosy, too. Pushy. Fucking *knows* everything, which is utterly ridiculous. But then—I mean, I don't know, because she'll defend me, or she *has* defended me once, at least. And she's so good with Bingley, you know. That's her little brother, I don't know if you know him, but she loves him so much. She looks out for people, too. Her people, but all kids. Like—she's a fucking teacher, Remus, going around and shaping the minds of the youth, which is—that's just—"

"Lily—"

"And! *And,* ooh, she's brave as anything, really. Dropped into the arena in a heartbeat without even blinking. Well, you saw. Just—she has this sort of sense of justice, a clear definition of what she thinks is wrong, and she doesn't stand by and simply accept it, you know? She makes people own up to their shit, but she's not—she isn't *harsh.* She's so… I mean, she's an artist, for fuck's sake, and a *good* one. It's beautiful, the things she creates, which makes sense because *she's* beautiful—"

"Lily—"

"She's like pure duality, do you know what I mean? She—oh, oh, you don't know this. She fucking *shot me!* Remus, she literally shot me when we first met. Took my gun, shot me, then ran off in heels. *Heels.* It was so absurd, but maddeningly attractive. I don't know what I did to offend her, because it seemed like we'd get on at first, but then when she started settling in the Phoenix, she just seemed to dislike me. She makes a point to talk about my ego—I don't have a big ego, do I? Look, I can't help it that I'm confident about how good I am in bed. It's the truth! I could *show* her, if she'd just—"

"Lily!" Remus calls loudly, reaching up to cover her mouth so she'll shut up. Instinctively, as if they're still sixteen, she licks his palm. He huffs a laugh and drops his hand. "Okay, I get it. You fancy her. You've made your point."

Lily blinks down at him. "What? No, I don't. It's just—you know, sex. That's all. That's it."

"Right," Remus says, his voice flat. "I'm not going to push, *only* because you said she's not interested, so it's best to respect her wishes. But, well, you've got a crush, at the very least."

"I don't *get* crushes."

"Mhm, sure."

"Anyway," Lily snaps, "Mary is not an option, so…anyone else?"

"Ah…Pandora?" Remus tries.

Lily pauses. "Oh, hm. Pandora… I don't know her very well. Does she like women?"

"Um." Remus' lips tip down. "I—don't actually know. I mean, she's my friend, but I've never seen her with anyone, and the topic never came up. But…you can find out."

"She is very sweet."

"Very."

"Seems like she deserves nice things."

"She does."

"And you like her."

Remus smiles softly. "I do."

"Right." Lily smacks Remus' stomach and starts to climb off of him, then yelps when he stuffs his hand down her shirt to reach into her bra. "Hey, your fingers are cold!"

"Just going for the goods," Remus tells her, drawing out her smokes with a grin. "Carry on."

"Okay, I'm off to try and woo your friend into bed," Lily declares, shuffling along the side of the bed to dip down and kiss above his eyebrow, the very top of his scar.

"Best of luck," Remus calls as she draws back, waving lazily as he lights up another smoke and lets his eyes drift shut.

Lily closes the door behind her and pauses there, hearing all things they talked about, and all the things they didn't. A part of her wants to open the door and go back in to find a way to bridge the gap between them, or die trying, but she doesn't even know where to start. So, she doesn't.

She walks away.

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Remus is on his fourth smoke when there's a knock on his door, which alarms him immediately. No one knocks on his door. Lily just barges in, and no one else comes to bother him.

Quickly, Remus sits up and hastily puts out his smoke, coughing and scrambling to tuck his ashtray in the drawer of the stand it sits on, then stuffs the pack of smokes under his pillow. There's a cloud of smoke that he frantically attempts to wave away, but he's not entirely sure it works. There are no fucking windows in an underground bunker.

"Ah, come in," Remus calls with a wince.

Of all the people who could show up at his door, he's not expecting Mrs. Potter. The sight of her poking her head in almost tentatively makes him freeze, wanting the floor to open up and swallow him whole. He hasn't seen her since the first time they met, only indirectly. He hasn't seen anyone other than Lily and hates himself for it. He's free, right? He should be—doing something, but he does nothing.

It's been a week, but Remus…doesn't get out much. He's been assigned to kitchen duty—ironic, really—so he usually eats when he's cooking the meals, which lets him skip breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the Great Hall. He's just. He doesn't know what to…do. He honestly has no fucking clue what to do with himself, or how to face anyone, or how to be—free.

He tried to do something, that first night. Tried to leave, to take his freedom by busting out to get to the Hallow, as if he could just stroll right in, grab Sirius, and say, "Sorry, this is mine, I'll be taking him back now." He looked like a fool, desperate as he was. They threw him in solitary for a night, a room so similar to Azkaban that he almost felt like he was still there. Lily apparently kicked up a fuss, and so did Regulus and Pandora, so he was released the next morning, but that one night was all it took.

One night, and Remus is stuck again. Hiding away. Lost in his own head, tormented with thoughts of what Sirius might be suffering—him and James. The guilt of it eats away at him, not managing to make sure James made it out, not managing to go and save Sirius now. So, he sits in his room, a warmer cell than he's used to, and sets his lungs on fire one smoke at a time. Grieving. Guilt-stricken. Lonely, and missing Sirius with every labored breath. No mask to make it harder to breathe, but losing Sirius smothers him more than a mask ever could.

The only change of pace and form of reprieve he gets is in the form of Lily, but that's not perfect either. It's not easy for them anymore, and she's—distant. There's something alien about her now, unreachable like she's stuck behind a barrier she won't let anyone break through. All her words have teeth.

"Hi, Remus," Mrs. Potter greets, easing inside slowly like she's giving him the chance to tell her to get out.

"Hello, Mrs. Potter," Remus says, a bit stilted, then struggles not to grimace at how formal and uncomfortable he sounds.

Mrs. Potter closes the door with a quiet chuckle, facing him with a small smile. Her eyes are a bit dull, her smile not quite reaching them, and she looks very tired. "Call me Effie, dear. Practically everyone does."

"Oh, right. Sorry, Mrs—ah, Effie," Remus mumbles.

"Do you mind if I sit?" Effie asks, pointing next to him.

Remus shifts quickly to make room. "Not at all."

"Thank you." Effie moves over and sinks into the open spot beside him, then visibly pauses. After a beat, she sniffs the air, then holds out her hand, lips twitching.

"Um," Remus says, his face burning. He's a grown man, for fuck's sake, but this is Sirius' *mother.*

"I've no desire to confiscate your smokes, Remus." Effie smiles at him again, wider, and wiggles her fingers. "I was rather hoping you'd share, actually."

"Oh," Remus chokes out, then wheezes on a startled laugh, but twists to indeed share with her. Again, she is Sirius' mother. His very beloved mother, at that. So, Remus gives her a smoke and brings out the ashtray. "I didn't know you…"

Effie hums around the smoke, lighting it and passing the lighter back to him. She inhales like she's been doing it for years, then blows out slow rings, looking faintly amused. "I'd ask that you don't tell my husband. He worries for the state of my lungs, and as far as he knows, I quit fifteen years ago. Well, I *did* quit, but I do share the occasional smoke with Sirius from time-to-time. He taught me to do the ring trick."

"Sirius smokes?" Remus whispers. Inexplicably, his eyes start to sting, because he—he didn't know that. He never knew that. They never discussed it, and he never saw it happen, and Sirius doesn't know he used to smoke, and doesn't know he's doing it again, because he's not here—he's not—he's—

"Not in the Hallow, as far as I know," Effie murmurs, glancing over at him sadly like she knows exactly what he's thinking and feeling. "It was always one of those things he kept at home, separate from the Hallow, just for him. He liked having things that existed outside of the Hallow."

Remus swallows harshly and nods. "Yeah, that's—that makes sense. Was there…anything else?"

Effie sighs. "There was something else. Something entirely untouched by the Hallow that he kept safe. Something he entrusted to me to keep safe when he couldn't."

A beat later, Effie reaches in her pocket and pulls out an envelope that Remus recognizes immediately. His breath freezes in his lungs, and he stares at it, feeling as if his mind has just run directly into a brick wall. That's. It's the letter. His letter. Lyall's letter. Remus never expected to see it again.

"I owe you an apology, Remus. Sirius asked that I would keep this safe, and I—I've had it with me ever since. He asked that I would return it to you if I ever saw you, and I did mean to, but this last week has been…" Effie's lips tremble a bit, and she blinks hard. Her hand shakes when she holds out the letter to him. "Forgive me. I should have come to you sooner."

Remus reaches out to take the letter, doing his level best not to let the building heat of tears in his eyes win. The letter isn't in the same pristine condition he left it in, now a bit wrinkled and bent at the corners, folded down and softened like fingers have run along the edges. That doesn't matter to him. It's the letter. *His* letter, from his father, that he left in Sirius' hands, and Sirius found a way to get it back to him.

"You have absolutely nothing to apologize for, Effie," Remus croaks, his voice coming out thick and shaky. He keeps swallowing convulsively, feeling as if his heart has shot up to lodge in his throat. "Thank you. I—I can't even—I—"

"It's okay, Remus." Effie reaches out with her free hand and gently pats his knee. She squeezes it, then looks away and keeps smoking, seeming to understand that he needs a moment to get himself together. "I didn't read it. No one has other than you, I presume. I do apologize for the state of it, though. I've had it through…everything that's happened as of late. Losing my home. Losing my—"

"I'm sorry," Remus whispers, squeezing his eyes shut. "I'm so sorry, Effie. I wanted—I didn't want to leave James. I tried to get him to—to get in the van, but he—I don't know why he

wouldn't. He just lost Frank, so maybe… I just—I'm sorry."

Effie clears her throat and stands up to put out her smoke in the ashtray, then turns to him, holding his gaze. "I sat Dorcas down and asked for details about everything that happened. I know my children, Remus. I know how far they'll go for each other and those they love, and that includes you. None of that is your fault. No one is to blame, not you or Dorcas or Regulus. The person who is at fault for James staying behind is *James,* because he is an adult who can make his own decisions. It's a hard pill to swallow, but he chose not to leave the Hallow for Sirius, for Regulus, for you and me and many people, and above all, he chose not to leave for himself."

"Are you angry at him for it?" Remus asks softly.

"Yes," Effie answers bluntly, then tilts her chin up. "And, just the same, I am immeasurably proud of him for it. The truth is, it's no different than many of us would have done. I would go there now if I could. I'd storm the Hallow just to try for them, even if I couldn't make it more than one step inside. There is such bravery in simply trying. We find our strength inside us, and the people around us, and through love—and those boys are some of the strongest people I've ever known."

"I know they are," Remus agrees hoarsely, having to turn his head away and look down as his vision blurs. He's all cut up with it, torn up about it, feeling ripped to shreds by how badly he aches in the aftermath of loss. It's not fair.

"They'll try until their last breath, and they haven't stopped breathing yet, Remus. Neither have we. I think we can join them in trying, not because we owe that to them, but because we owe that to ourselves," Effie whispers fiercely, stepping forward to cup his jaw and carefully turn his head, making him look at her. She doesn't judge him for the tears that fall. "We are still here, and they are still there, and no matter what any of us go through, we will find our way back to each other again. I believe that. I have to believe that."

"I want to believe that," Remus confesses, because he does, and he's desperate to. Pleading for a reason. Begging for a spark of hope. Needing it. Please, please, please.

"Then try," Effie says, and it's so simple, two words, but it's like she's unlocked something within him.

Remus promised Sirius he would never forget his worth, how invaluable he is, even if Sirius wasn't here to remind him, and yet that's exactly what he's done. He's *human.* He's a person, who deserves to have hope, who has the freedom to try.

Ridiculous as it may be, Remus chokes out a laugh that may or may not be half a sob, but it doesn't matter, because he nods into Effie's gentle hand and says, "Okay."

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Let's get this out of the way right now, because Dorcas is sure it goes without saying, but it's been one hell of a week.

When she made her choice to set all of these things into motion and start the war, she had come to terms with the fact that there was no going back, but what she hadn't realized was that the aftermath of her decisions would look like this.

Marlene didn't make it out of surgery until late in the night, and she didn't wake up until the third day. Dorcas wasn't at her bedside when she did. She was too late. Again. As always.

Dorcas wasn't prepared. She hadn't really been at her best, exhausted and running on fumes. She was going and going and going with no chance to stop for rest, which was apparently due to the mantle of her new proclivity for leadership.

You did this, Ms. Meadowes, Dumbledore told her. *You don't get to quit now.*

It felt like both a challenge and a punishment, and Dorcas didn't back down from either. She stepped up and stepped in to help all those she brought in, either through her own means, or through her own planning. This required assigning rooms, helping people settle in, providing reassurances that felt like half-lies and explaining rules she barely wants to follow herself. This required giving orders and fulfilling tasks, as well as answering unanswerable questions and providing assistance with everything from carting food around to being a reluctant tour guide around the Phoenix.

This required watching Riddle's broadcast explaining that the games were stopped early be interrupted through the help of Filius by releasing the footage of what happened in the arena during the rescue mission. Then, days later, watching a new broadcast in which everyone who broke into the arena were labeled as anarchists, while Riddle twisted the truth of the Hallow escape by labeling everyone who made it out as prisoners of war, and also twisted Frank's death into martyrdom to paint the 'anarchists' in a very bad light.

When she did get a second to return to the infirmary and get an update on Marlene, she'd had to tuck herself in a corner and stuff the back of her fist into her mouth to muffle her sobs when Poppy informed her that Marlene made it through and would make a full recovery with time. She'd slid down the wall and cried and breathed, and then got up and kept going.

On the third day, when Marlene did wake up, Cordelia—her cousin—was the one waiting there for her, while Cordelia's husband, Riker, stayed outside with their baby, Maximus. Dorcas knows this, because she rushed past them to scramble inside, rushing to Marlene's side after Minerva notified her that she was awake, which *she* learned from Poppy. Minerva knew she would want to know, and of course Dorcas dropped everything to immediately go to Marlene.

The reunion hadn't gone well.

By the time Dorcas had made it there, Marlene had mostly been caught up by Cordelia and the input Arthur provided, because he was cheerfully answering her questions and doing everything he could to keep her calm. When Dorcas got there, Marlene met her eyes and told everyone else to get out. Her gaze had been cold, and her voice even colder.

Dorcas' heart had dropped, but—well, what was she expecting, really? It was ironic, but Dorcas still didn't know, even then, how she was supposed to explain her part in all of this to Marlene. She thought to herself before that she would deal with that problem when she got to it, and well.

Well, there it was.

What was she supposed to say? The truth, finally, because she didn't really have a choice, did she? Dorcas felt guilt clog her throat as she realized that she—she wasn't so sure if she wanted Marlene to know the truth. The lie was easier. The lie was safer. The lie was all Dorcas knew.

But, well, she didn't have a choice. Marlene had already gotten bits and pieces of it, here and there, and she deserved to hear it from her. It was time for Dorcas to own up to her shit.

So, Dorcas did.

She told Marlene how she got involved herself years ago by one drunken conversation with Alastor Moody at a bar when he was there for his Victor's victory tour that year. He'd gone out for a drink, or five, and Dorcas had just been someone at the bar he struck up a conversation with. Casual at first, light, and then much heavier by the end of the night. He picked her brain open and rooted around to find what he was looking for, and then he followed up. Less than a week later, Dorcas was stepping into the Phoenix for the very first time.

She told Marlene how she felt so driven to help, to make change, always wanting to through fashion and then taking the immediate chance to do it this way, too. When Moody had died and the mourning period had passed, Dumbledore asked her if she was willing to take on a higher position to cover the loss of what Moody provided for the war. She was willing, and so she agreed, and she did it. She did it a little too well.

She told Marlene how she worked her way into the central hub of the games by becoming a stylist, originally supposed to sway public opinion through fashion for the tributes she was to work with, as well as find more recruitments along the way. Gideon and Fabian had been recruited beforehand, recruited only a few days after they came to her with humble, yet charming requests to work with her. They'd been in the Order for only six weeks—just long enough for them to have visited the Phoenix twice and gotten orders for their first, last, and only mission—before they were sacrificed for her sake.

She told Marlene how she got them killed, how it was her fault, and how she could not bear to lead Marlene to that same fate. All she wanted to do was keep Marlene safe. She never meant to put her at risk. She never meant to fall in love with her and make her a priority over the war.

She told Marlene how it happened anyway, and how she did everything she could to save her, up to and including starting a fucking war. She told Marlene *everything.*

That sat between them for a while, like a bomb about to go off in their laps, and Dorcas knew —she *knew* that Marlene was seeing right through her, thinking back on every conversation they ever had, every opportunity Dorcas could have taken to involve her, to invite her into this part of Dorcas' life, and this cause. Could have, but didn't. Chose not to.

In the end, Marlene had told her to get out, too.

So, Dorcas did, and she kept going.

In the meantime, the less injured tributes have all healed up, gotten rooms and food and a chance to adjust. Same for the previous servants. Asher pulled through, just like Marlene, but she was released three days ago. She's now in a wheelchair and seems as eager to work with Poppy on the biological warfare issue as Dumbledore and Poppy are to consult with her.

Marlene had been released from the infirmary the day after Asher, two days ago now. She'd spent five days in the infirmary altogether, because she needed more time between the bullet wound to her chest, recovering from surgery, and her broken arm. Fortunately, the Phoenix does have access to some of the same medical advancements that the Hallow does, either through what information the Order has stolen throughout the years, or from district one recruits who had a hand in creating said medical advancements.

So, Marlene's healing has made miraculous leaps and bounds. She's up and walking around, though she's a bit slow about it, and her arm is in a proper sling. It should be coming off in a few days, which Dorcas only knows because Cordelia—lovely, wonderful Cordelia—has happily given Dorcas updates on Marlene's condition. See, Cordelia *loves* Dorcas, loudly and proudly likes her and approves of her for Marlene, shamelessly grateful for Dorcas because she saved Marlene. She tells Dorcas all the time to let Marlene cool off, and they'll be fine.

It's a nice thought, and Dorcas has decided to believe that, because she simply *refuses* to accept that, after everything, what little bit of more that they were is just gone. No, she's not entitled to Marlene in any capacity just because she saved her. That's not it at all. She just…

Well, maybe she had fooled herself into thinking that she and Marlene could have more once they were here, once everything had been brought to light, once they managed to make it through.

Here they are, on the other side of hell, and what do they have to show for it other than the demons they brought with them?

But, well, Dorcas is bold and isn't one to back down, not really. She has given Marlene space, hasn't approached her, hasn't bothered her since she was told to leave. She was going to wait for Marlene to come to her, honestly, except she desperately misses her and wants so very badly to see that she's okay. That's all. She just wants to tell her she loves her.

So, Dorcas is at Marlene's door, trying to convince herself to knock. It takes her a few minutes, but she inevitably does, and then she's left waiting. She holds her breath.

The door opens, and then the door immediately starts to shut, and Dorcas chokes out, "Wait. Marlene, please wait. Just—"

The door slams, only for it to wrench right back open. Dorcas gets one second to suck in a sharp breath of hope, and then something small hits her right in the chest and bounces off to land on the floor with a cold *ting*. Dorcas glances down at the ring Marlene just threw at her, staring at it and feeling every inch of the Hallow she is for how hollow she becomes when the door slams one final time, and doesn't open again.

Dorcas picks up the ring and walks away. As she goes, she wonders what it'll take to get the ring on Marlene's finger a third time. Whatever it takes, Dorcas will do it.

For Marlene, she always does.

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"Did you check?" Regulus asks.

"Yes," Barty says, heaving a sigh, "I checked. I told you I would, didn't I? The vent is sealed in my room, too."

"And you?" Regulus demands, swiveling on the spot to narrow his eyes at Rabastan. "Did you check?"

"Sealed for us, too," Rabastan murmurs, gesturing between himself and Rodolphus. He glances at Asher. "Did you—"

"Sealed," Asher confirms.

Regulus grinds his teeth. "There's surveillance all over, no way in or out, and slipping past patrols is fucking *impossible.* If I don't get a route out, I'm going to start killing people."

"Is Pandora into women?" Rodolphus asks, turning to Regulus very abruptly, his eyebrows wrinkled.

"What?" Regulus snaps. "What does that have to do with—"

"No offense, but give it a rest, man," Rodolphus mutters, waving a hand. "You're not busting your way out of here, not unless Beard-Man says you can go, so—ya know, chill out. In the meantime, you can tell me if Pandora is into women."

Regulus stares at him.

Rodolphus coughs. "Just—that cool lady who you fought, the one who busted into the arena —"

"Lily," Rabastan, Regulus, Barty, and Asher all say at the same time.

"Right, that one. Lily," Rodolphus says, lips tipping down. "I think she's—I mean, I'm pretty sure she's hitting on Pandora right now just across the room, and I'm wondering—well, does she have a chance? Does Pandora like women?"

"Why do you care?" Regulus asks, narrowing his eyes, though a part of his brain can't believe he's having this conversation right now. He can't believe a lot of things, because they're never things involving getting to Sirius and James, and so he deems them unfathomable on principle.

Rabastan snorts. "Is she crazy? Pandora, I mean. He likes them crazy. That's why he was with Bellatrix." There's a pause, and everyone looks at Regulus. Rabastan grimaces. "Sorry."

Regulus doesn't acknowledge that. Doesn't even grant it a second thought. The most he lets Bellatrix enter his mind is in his nightmares, or when Narcissa sweeps past him. She looks at him sometimes. Andromeda softened her after all. Just yesterday, they both stopped to talk to him very briefly and very stiffly, and he'd wanted to fold himself up until he just disappeared. He managed a smile anyway, tight as it was, because Dora had crawled into his lap with a grin.

The reunion with Nymphadora had been painful and lovely, all at once. He'd heard her before he saw her, just that loud shriek of *Reggie* at top volume with undeniable child-like joy. He'd been two days out of the arena, and she'd launched herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck, and he'd just—he'd cried, helplessly. You're not supposed to cry in front of children, he doesn't think, but he did. He couldn't help it at the time. He was so fucking fragile in the aftermath of everything, and Sirius calls him that. *Reggie.*

It's a bittersweet sort of acknowledgement, just that recognition of finding his brother in the people around him. Sirius is everywhere he looks, really. In Effie and Monty. In the playful shoves and laughter shared between Rabastan and Rodolphus. In Andromeda's head held high and Narcissa's sharp, watchful eyes. In the back of Regulus' mind, talking to him always, providing running commentary that usually gets him through the day, like this is just a new arena and Sirius is still the one he trusts to help him survive.

This place lacks James, much to Regulus' bitter resentment. He only finds James in Effie and Monty, which is partially why he spends practically most of his time with them. But no one

can properly encompass the sheer enormity of James himself. There's not even fucking sunshine down here.

In any case, Dora had only hugged him and told him it was okay to cry, extending tragic company in his misery by telling him that she cried, too. Cried a lot, in fact. Cried for her dad, who is gone now and won't be returning to her like Regulus did. She'd cried with him then, and they'd cried together, and Regulus had felt like no less of a child in that moment than she did. Andromeda hadn't interrupted them.

Regulus knows she would have had every right to. Andy has been through a lot as of late. She was injured, lost her home, lost her husband, then lost her sister. Got the other back, but that doesn't change that Bellatrix is dead, and he's the one who killed her. She—along with Narcissa—would have every right to hate him, and keep Dora away from him.

Andromeda doesn't, though. When he tried to apologize to her, she had said, simply, that they would never discuss it. So, they don't. Narcissa doesn't touch Regulus anymore, not even to comfort him, or to try. She's not outright cruel, but there is a frigid distance now, one that he knows they'll never be able to cross.

He's always going to be dead to her, for as long as Bellatrix is. Just another one of those fucked up parts of their family that they'll continue on in spite of.

Honestly, to Regulus, it went as well as it could have. He is their sister's murderer. Most of the time, they still treat him as if he's just their youngest cousin. He can live with that. He does, and they do, too. They don't really have any other option.

But no, Regulus doesn't think about Bellatrix very much, not because she doesn't haunt him—she does, as do many things from the arena—but because he has other things to focus on, namely on figuring out how to get the fuck out of here.

He hasn't made much progress.

"Pandora is crazy," Rodolphus confirms to Rabastan, who immediately rolls his eyes. Rodolphus sighs wistfully, putting his chin in his hand. "And I *do* like crazy."

Regulus' fingers itch for a dagger. His eyes are narrowed so far now that he almost can't see. "You're going to leave her be."

"Mm, no, I don't think I will," Rodolphus replies, pursing his lips. "Unless—I mean, if she's not into men, fair enough. But if she *is,* then I'm shooting my shot. Is she?"

Regulus—doesn't actually know, admittedly, but regardless he will kill this man. "Okay, let me reiterate. Pandora is someone very important to me. I am telling you this *explicitly,* right now, if you shoot your shot and fuck up in any way, I will let her pick a part of your body to take as a trophy, then remove it and give it to her. Still interested?"

"Even more so," Rodolphus says, wiggling his eyebrows. "She's got crazy friends, too. That's hot."

"You know," Barty muses lightly, *"I'm* crazy."

Rodolphus pauses and eyes him. Flicks his gaze across the room where Lily is chatting with Pandora. Glances back at Barty. "Okay, I'll shoot my shot later. You first."

"I like a man who has his priorities straight," Barty chirps, hopping to his feet and glancing at Regulus. "See you?"

"Mhm," Regulus hums, watching Barty and Rodolphus leave with a sigh. He shakes his head. Lovely, now he'll have to hear all those details later when he's curled up in bed with Barty and doing his best not to cry because he's not James.

"That means I'll have the room to myself," Rabastan breathes out, sounding relieved, and Regulus does his best not to snap at him and tell him not to take his big brother's presence for granted. What Regulus would not *give* for Sirius to be around to annoy him, and invade his space, and—and—and—

"I'm coming with you," Asher says, wheeling back from the table and beaming up at Rabastan.

Rabastan's face softens. "Don't you always?"

"Have a problem with that?"

"No, no, definitely not. I just—"

"Because, if I remember correctly, it was *you* who said we'd made it through hell together, so we could keep doing that, and just fucking die together too, while we're at it."

"Right, right, I did say that. Yes, okay, come on. Do you want me to push you to the—"

"I don't need you to push. I can wheel myself."

"Yes ma'am."

Asher's lips twitch, rolling along as Rabastan follows after like a lost puppy. "So, about dying together, how do you think we'll go? I'm thinking something fun. Poison, preferably."

"Shit, I think I like crazy, too," Rabastan chokes out, and Asher tosses her head back as she laughs. Rabastan grins down at her. "No, uh, maybe…we die from old age? Wouldn't that be nice? I think that'd be nice."

"Not as fun," Asher points out, "and that's a long time to stick together, don't you think?"

The last thing Regulus hears before they're too far away to be heard is Rabastan saying, "Yeah, that's the nice part."

Regulus hates them all. Everyone who dares to have their sibling, everyone who dares to have sex, everyone who dares to feel love. He hates, hates, hates them.

Huffing, Regulus stands up and moves to go interrupt Lily in flirting with a seemingly oblivious Pandora. Lily looks deeply displeased by this. Regulus ignores her and feels something settle in him when Pandora beams at him, leaning her arm against his and taking his hand under the table, squeezing it.

For a moment, Regulus gets a little reprieve in making sure that Pandora, at the very least, is safe from anyone who could do her harm of any variety, even in the love department.

It's for the best, really. The love department hurts the worst.

He would know.

~•~

James taps his foot impatiently against the floor and grips the arms of the cushioned chair he's forced to wait in. The office is eerily silent, but the muffled sounds of protesting down past the castle grounds drifts up through the cracked window.

It's music to his ears, frankly. *Hallow is hollow, Hallow is hollow, Hallow is hollow,* they all chant. They're Hallows themselves, no doubt, but the meaning behind it speaks volumes. To know that there are some Hallows—many, in fact, by the sounds of it—that are actively protesting right outside of Riddle's castle is invigorating.

Living *in* Riddle's castle is…strange. It's opulent, for one thing. He has his own personal servant who brings him food, clothes for each day, and takes the clothes he wore the day before. He's had two servants so far. The first was killed in front of him, because he made the mistake of touching them, catching their arm to halt them and trying, gently, to talk to them. A mere few minutes later, Aurors came in to hold him in place and make him watch as that

servant was shot. The next servant never raises their head or acknowledges him, and he goes out of his way to not even get near them.

In his room, there's a very comfortable bed and a screen on the wall. He's not sure why he's allowed to keep up with current events, but he is. The day following the escape from the arena, and the Hallow, Riddle's broadcast explaining that the games were ending early for *unforeseen circumstances* was interrupted by…well, the unforeseen circumstances.

James had seen most of it already while it was happening, the arena rescue, but he hadn't seen Mary save Regulus. Hadn't *watched* Regulus make it to safety with his own two eyes. Hadn't realized how fucking dangerous it was for Mary to speak her name, or Lily's, or just how worrying it was that the others there were picked up on the camera. Some of the faces James didn't recognize, but he saw Barty there.

The Hallows know their faces now, as well as their names, because Riddle cut his broadcast short and went silent for a few days, then came back and announced that there was a group of anarchists that set out to put the safety and harmony of the Hallow in danger through war. That's when James really saw an uptick in the protests outside the castle. Either people don't believe his shitty excuses, or they're angry with him for failing to keep this from happening.

Whatever it is, the names of everyone involved in the arena rescue have been released, or at least those that Riddle could get information on, apparently. Lily Evans, Mary Macdonald, and Barty Crouch Jr. The other two—Sybill and Amos—have anonymity in that their last names aren't known, but that's hardly a consolation. Along with the others, their faces have been blown up and marked as anarchists. Riddle's broadcast made it clear; these people are wanted, and any information regarding their whereabouts is to be turned in immediately, and they're labeled as armed and dangerous.

It's not limited to just them, though. All the servants—all twelve of them—have been broadcasted as escaped convicts, also dangerous people; any information regarding them is supposed to be turned in, too. Seeing Remus on his screen had set James' heart ablaze, because all he could think about was how he was free, yes, but he'd be at the Phoenix now, and he'd know that Sirius didn't make it out of the arena.

Rodolphus, Pandora, Dorcas, and Minerva have *not* been broadcasted as anarchists, but rather prisoners of war, who the anarchists apparently abducted. It's smart, James supposes, because these are either Hallows or people that the Hallows, in some way or another, idolized. To

paint *them* as anarchists would surely garner further support, but to say they've been captured by anarchists and taken from the Hallow changes the whole narrative while still ensuring any information about them will be turned in. Frank was used in this way as well; his death was blamed on the anarchists and broadcasted as further proof that said anarchists are the 'bad guys'. The same thing had been said about Lucius and Dolohov.

No information has been released about Sirius or James.

As for James, he's been recovering, mostly. Between the fight to escape the Hallow and the car wreck at the end—a fight to stay—his body had been put through hell. He'd been given top notch healing from the Hallow medical advancements, but there are some things only a few days of rest can cure. A new cane has been provided for him, but the outside of it is wrapped in a soft, pillow-y material that means if he hits someone with any part of it, he won't do much damage.

Not much has changed with him overall, other than being absolutely capsized by grief for Frank, missing his family, missing Regulus, and just—feeling shitty, basically.

Oh, and he can now see. Yes, like with his eyes. His glasses are just *gone,* and yet James can still see. Perfectly. He doesn't have contacts in; he knows, because he checked. This means that, without his permission, someone did the operation to fix his eyesight permanently. It's such an attack against his own autonomy that he doesn't even know what to do about it, or how to feel, and all he can ever think about is how upset Regulus gets when James' glasses get taken away.

He hasn't seen Riddle yet. James isn't sure why. The man is likely very busy, but James honestly expected to be tortured every day or something. After all, James has information he wants, doesn't he? James isn't stupid; he knows that Riddle wants something from him, probably a lot of things, and he's prepared to die to not give it to him. Ready and willing to laugh through his last breath while giving Riddle *nothing.*

There's nothing Riddle can do to get anything out of him, and James sits here in this office he's been escorted to, quite sure he's about to get to prove it.

Sure enough, the door eventually opens, and Riddle sweeps in without a break in his stride. James tenses in his chair, gaze following him. His hands are free. He's not bound. He could

get up and snap Riddle's neck.

A quick look over the back of the chair immediately kills that idea, because an Auror stands by the door, gun in hand. Yeah, okay, so James would be killed before he could even fully come out of the chair. He turns his gaze back to Riddle, who swings around the other side of his desk to close the window and silence the sound of the protests, then sits down.

They sit there across from each other in silence for a long moment, Riddle surveying him with his hands threaded on top of the desk, and James sitting still with his jaw clenched.

Then, without a word, Riddle reaches in his inner suit jacket pocket to pull out a recorder and sit it down on the desk. He presses the button, and every muscle in James' body locks up when screams split the silence. Screams James recognizes. Screams James has heard in his nightmares. Sirius' screams.

It just keeps *going.* James stares at the recorder with pure horror, feeling sick and shaky, wanting to claw his own ears off or crush the recorder in his fist. He's on the brink of begging for it to stop, please stop, when the recorder stops and Riddle opens up his laptop on his desk, clicks a few buttons, then swivels it to face James. On the screen, there's a grainy video of Sirius, who is sitting in a cell on the dingy bed, literally twiddling his thumbs. There's a mask on his face.

"Sirius sends his regards," Riddle says.

James doesn't look away from the screen. Can't. He stares at it hungrily, Sirius' screams still ringing in his ears. Sirius looks fine, overall. Well, his hair is tangled, and he doesn't look his best while literally in prison, but he doesn't look like he's in pain. In fact, he just looks… bored. Yeah, James knows what Sirius looks like when he's bored, and it's that. All that restless energy, that inability to sit still, always staying in motion. But, most importantly, he's alive.

"Leave us," Riddle continues.

The door opens and closes, and James only checks to see the Auror gone when Riddle closes the laptop. Right, well, it's not like James is going to kill Riddle now, after all that. Not when doing so could end with Sirius hurt, or dead, or worse.

"Let's cut right to the chase," Riddle declares, holding his gaze with those dead, hollow eyes of his. "Sirius is in Azkaban, at my mercy, and if you cooperate, his time there will be free of further torture or future death. His life and well-being is in your hands, James, so I implore you to comply. For his sake."

"Bring him here," James demands. "Bring him to me."

"No," Riddle counters simply.

James grits his teeth. "Then how do I know you're not lying? He could be—you could have killed him already. That could be older surveillance, or you could be torturing him *anyway* __"

"Don't be a fool. Frankly, I haven't the time," Riddle cuts in sharply. "I am very aware that your compliance is dependent upon Sirius' vitality. That is my leverage over you, James, and I need not play games with you to use it. I want your full cooperation, and to get it, I have to give you something you want. I know how this works."

"I want to see him for myself," James says.

Riddle pauses, then inclines his head. "Very well, I'll permit you to visit him, but only when you've earned it. The term that applies here is tit-for-tat. You give me something, I give you something. Does that work for you?"

"What do you want?" James snaps, hating himself for it already, just how quickly he's changed his tune. Somehow, for some reason, he never considered that Sirius could be used against him in all of this. Fuck. Oh, he's so fucking *stupid.*

"I have spent the last week gathering information on the organization of anarchists that oppose me," Riddle explains, leaning back in his chair. "I have a feeling you know more."

"I don't know anything," James croaks.

"You're an awful liar, James. For Sirius' sake, you need to become a better one, or tell the truth," Riddle murmurs.

James swallows. Shit, shit, shit. "I really don't know—"

"If I reach for my laptop and press one button, Sirius will be dragged from his cell and tortured," Riddle interrupts calmly, never breaking his gaze. It's not an empty threat. "You will hear it as it happens. You will be the cause of it, because you have the power to prevent it. Choose your next words wisely."

James' heart thuds in his chest painfully, his hands shaking in his lap. He feels like a child. He wishes he was a child again. Just a young boy tumbling into his best friend for the very first time; he'd go back there, if he could.

But here he is. He's right here, and this is going to break him. It's going to tear him the fuck apart. He can't call Riddle's bluff, because Riddle isn't bluffing.

What is James supposed to do? Sirius wouldn't want him to breathe a word of anything he knows, especially not if it could put Regulus in danger. He'd rather be tortured to the point of insanity and beyond, and James knows it. But—but *Regulus*. Oh, Regulus would never—he'd never forgive James if he *didn't* spare Sirius from any pain that he could, especially not in the name of protecting him. It's so—he's just—he's caught in between them, caught in a trap he willingly walked into, because he is a fool. Riddle said it, and he was right.

All James has, at this point, is the hope that those on the other side of the war against Riddle are strong enough to defeat him no matter what James says or does. What Riddle doesn't know yet and may never understand is that he only has James, but the resistance? The resistance has James' parents, and Regulus, and Remus, and Dorcas, and so very many others that can beat him, if they'll stand together. James is one person, just one, and no matter what

he does or how he helps Riddle in the endeavor to help Sirius, the very people James loves and believes in will win. James doesn't just hope for that; he *knows* that with every breath he takes and every decision he makes.

The odds are not in Riddle's favor. If you ask James, he'll bet on his people every fucking time. It's not a game of chance, or luck, but a game of faith—and James has that in spades.

So, James exhales and lifts his gaze to meet Riddle's, then opens his mouth and starts with, "The organization opposing you is called the Order of the Phoenix…"

Chapter End Notes

for those of you who need/want to know what the procedure is, and to whom it happens to, SPOILERS AHEAD: its the procedure to fix someone's vision (i use the term "fix" very loosely, simply bc i didn't name the procedure in the context of the Hallow, but like, me nor the character nor anyone else saw/see it as something to "fix" at all) and the person it happens to is james, while he's healing up after his car crash. he has no recollection of it happening, meaning they did it before he woke up/became lucid. it's only briefly mentioned in james' pov, because he doesn't know how to feel about it/process it, because it makes him uncomfortable. it will be addressed again, and believe it or not, resolved later.

for everyone else, let's start from the top!

oh, sirius my beloved <3 you can probably tell from his entire pov, but i was genuinely so relieved to get to write his pov again. like, i missed him??? so much??? so, it probably shined through how happy i was just to see him again, because god, he really brightens everything, doesn't he?

like, only sirius could be in such a shit situation and still be cracking jokes and complaining about how bored he is 😭 if he were leaving a review, he would give azkaban a zero out of five stars. he is NOT having a good time. sirius 🤝 regulus: ending up in perilous situations and feeling wholly unimpressed with them.

also lmaooo sirius literally in prison and still killing people 😭 he really said: you put me in prison, im gonna commit crimes, duh 🙄 he's everything to me

that whole bit with riddle... ooooh, the way sirius would NOT give in, until james was threatened, and how riddle deliberately showed him that, just so sirius would know how EXACTLY riddle planned to control james using sirius. and sirius biting him and being a fucking menace, i love him so much.

cut to lily! oooh, her and mary 👀 the girls are flirtinggggggg 🥰 sorry, i just think they're neat. mary being right all the time, so true.

but oof, lily and remus, big yikes at the moment. like i said, they have some things to work through, and they WILL, but they're not working through them right this particular second because they're both Very Stubborn. this is really hard for lily especially, as you can clearly tell, bc she closed herself off, and having to open up again isn't so simple. when she does, though, she enters a whole new era. i love it for her tbh.

speaking of remus, he's clearly having a hard time as well. this is particularly hard for him coming from one life of imprisonment to another, and now knowing that sirius—along with james—could be suffering the same things he has? like, that's a huuuge hit for him. and he really needed that push from effie, because it gets the ball rolling, so to speak. but also the parallels of sirius being a mess around lyall and remus being awkward around effie is so cute to me 😭

cut to dorcas—and marlene. so. that's not going well. 😬 tbh, if i was marlene, id be hacked off too. like, imagine the girl you've fallen in love with, who acted like she was just a stylist, turns out to be a part of a secret rebellion that she KNOWS you'd want to be a part of, except she hid it because SHE decided SHE didn't want you involved. like??? ohhh, marlene is so mad yall. throw the ring right at her type of mad 😭 we'll see more of them soon, i assure you.

then there's regulus—also not having a good time. his reunion with dora 😭 also² lmaoooo, him being ready to kill anyone who comes within 5ft of pandora at all times. but just the general underlying grief he's dealing with, and how fixated he is on saving james and sirius. he's trying so hard :(

and lastly, james... sigh. giving away secrets, not very girlboss of him. he's really doing his best, but he's put in this impossible position where no matter which way he goes, nothing good comes from it, AND he's being manipulated. it's such a fucked up situation :(

the reveal that sirius DID scream hurt so bad yall, but believe me, it's...not as bad as it could be? i know that sounds insensitive, but trust me, you'll see what i mean later.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-sirius taunting probably-not-stuart and riddle 😭
-remus smoking for the first time in 6 years with lily and then just. choosing to pick up the habit again lmaooo
-lily "are you fucking stupid?" evans 😭 pls i love her
-rodolphus "i will hit every step on the crazy ladder if it kills me" lestrange living his truth and getting with the most insane, available people he meets every chance he gets
-rebastan and asher <3
-pandora literally being oblivious to being flirted with by everyone
-barty and regulus platonically cuddling together again, but make it sad
-remus got his letter back!!!

-cordelia loving dorcas <3
-james having faith in the people he loves <3

Harmony

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-gun mention (nothing for violence)
-references to past violence/gun violence
-references to past murder/death
-references to past torture
-mentions of vomiting (no one actually does, it's just mentioned)
-mentions of torture (it's just talked about)

im like. 99% sure that's all of it? im so suspicious because it's such a short list, but at the same time, this chapter is lighter than others, comparatively.

so...enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus watches in vague amusement as Lily presses herself up behind Pandora and slides her arms out to readjust Pandora's grip on the gun, murmuring in her ear. There is a slow nod, then Pandora turns her head and smiles, visibly oblivious to the fact that she's being flirted with. Lily has been flirting with Pandora for a few days now, ever since she came to him about apparently needing to have sex, and all Remus has seen her succeed in doing is become Pandora's friend.

Pandora, ever since the mission to escape the Hallow, has taken to training. She does a lot of training these days, keeping herself busy, sparring with Dorcas, or letting Lily teach her about guns, and when neither of them are available, it's Rodolphus. She generally goes to him for efficiency, Remus thinks, because she knows Rodolphus will say yes and indulge her by immediately dropping whatever he's doing to go with her instead; he's apparently done it enough times for her to be sure of it now, or so Pandora said. She told Remus all of this with the air of a woman entirely clueless as to *why* it was like that. Remus could tell her, but honestly, it's kind of fun to watch as it is, and the last thing Pandora needs is something to worry about on top of her friends and also her father. Rodolphus is respectful and just genuinely seems to like her as a friend even outside the flirting, which is primarily the only reason Remus isn't too suspicious about the whole thing.

Besides, Pandora is a big girl. She can handle herself. Sure, she's the kindest soul Remus knows, but even kindness can cut if it's sharpened—and here Pandora is, seeming bound and determined to give herself an edge someone could slice themselves on. She wants to be prepared, Remus thinks, and she wants to be distracted from being so scared. He gets it, and it soothes something in him to see that, no matter what else, she's making many friends here, people who treat her well. This includes Lily, even if Lily pretends its all about sex. Look at her over there, making Pandora laugh and struggling to hide the soft smile on her own face.

A few minutes later, Lily is walking over to him, scratching her head and looking miserable. "I think I've lost my touch."

"Not going well?" Remus asks.

"She likes me. Thinks I'm kind, for some reason."

"You are kind."

"Not really," Lily says with a snort, crossing her arms and leaning against the wall beside him. "Not like I used to be, in any case. Maybe I should just try a more forward approach."

Remus stares at her for a long moment, then murmurs, "Why aren't you kind like you used to be?"

Lily pauses, her face twitching. She keeps looking right at Pandora when she stiffly replies, "You died."

That sits between them, heavy. Remus looks away and doesn't say anything. He doesn't know *what* to say. It's been days of this. Days and days of them hovering in orbit around each other and failing to talk, failing to connect, failing to get back to the ease of what they once were. Remus wants it so badly that he's genuinely terrified to go after it for fear that he'll find out that it's gone permanently.

All they've done is slap a patch over it, really. They still walk and talk and act just as they used to, but it doesn't *feel* the same. Remus has spent six years missing her, and he still feels like he's missing her, because—in reality—he is. The Lily he knew is not the Lily who stands next to him now.

She's so different now. Rougher around the edges. Harsher. Flippant, like nothing and no one in this world can touch her. But, underneath it all, Remus sees what's there. Sees just how much she cares and loves, so much that it rips her apart, so much that she can barely accept it.

The thing is. Well, the thing is, she's still Lily at the end of the day, still his best friend, no matter what changes she has gone through. He's gone through plenty, too, but he knows that he's still himself to his core.

The very things they're afraid of, they're made of. They're fit to burst with it, freedom and love clawing on the inside of them and begging to get out.

There's a lot of love in freedom and a lot of freedom in love. Remus thinks it goes hand-in-hand, and he thinks if they can mend whatever is broken between them, the very things they're afraid of won't seem as scary anymore.

"I didn't," Remus says abruptly, turning to look at her, and he watches her shoulders get tense instantly. "I didn't die, Lily."

Lily doesn't reply.

"I didn't die," Remus whispers, "and I did. I—the person I was before did die, in a way, but *I'm* not dead. Lily, I'm still here. I know that I'm—I know it's different now—"

"Remus," Lily cuts in, "it's fine. Let's not—"

"It's *not* fine," Remus insists, "because we're not—it's all wrong. *We're* all wrong, and we're not supposed to be."

Lily rolls her jaw, squeezing her eyes shut. "Of course you want to do this now. Look, I'm not… I'm moving on, okay? I'm moving past it. Letting it go."

"No, you're not. You're holding on so tight you're only breaking yourself," Remus tells her.

"Fuck you," Lily hisses, head swinging around to pin blazing eyes on him, and he thinks it's the realest thing she's shown him since he showed up. "You don't know what this is like. You don't know how it feels to—"

"I don't?" Remus challenges, a strange heat starting to rush under his skin, and he doesn't—he hasn't gotten heated like this, like he *used to,* in a while. Not freely. Not outside of life or death situations. "Lily, don't be a fucking idiot. You think you're the only one who lost their best friend six years ago? I didn't even know if you were dead or not."

"See, *that's* the difference!" Lily bursts out. "I *did* know. I was told you died, and that it was *my* fault! You got off easy, do you know that? Because you're the one who gave yourself up; you're the one who made the fucking sacrifice, Remus. But me? I had to live with that! I had to live with the guilt! Why the *fuck* would you do that to me? I never wanted you to do that for me. I just—I *ran.* I left you there. I—"

"Lily. Lily, shut the fuck up." Remus reaches out to grip her shoulders, meeting her glare with his own. "That was *not* your fault. You're not to blame for my choices. I did what I did because I love you. It's that simple. I love you, Lily, then and now and the past six years and the next six and all the years I've got in this life. All of them will be spent loving you, and I would do it all over again; I would do it *tomorrow.* The mere *chance* that you would make it out and be safe made all of it worth it, and knowing that it worked? You can't even imagine how much of a relief it is. I don't regret saving you. I'm *glad* you ran, do you understand? I'm *grateful* that you've lived. And I'm sorry—I'm so fucking sorry that you've been hurting, and grieving, and suffering guilt. I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry."

"It's not *fair,"* Lily whimpers.

"I know," Remus says. "I know it's not, and I know how it feels. James—he—I feel like I left him behind, and like I let everyone down, myself most of all. I've been *hiding* from it, from the shame of it, because I'm blaming myself, and because I'm so *angry* at him for it. But it's not my fault, and he didn't do any differently than anyone does for those they love. Lily, it's not your fault, and I *love* you."

"I—I hated you for it, for doing this to me, for being dead. I still hate you for it," Lily chokes out, a film forming over her eyes. She raises her hands, curls them, and moves them jerkily up and down at her chest, like she wants to reach in and yank something out. "It feels like—I feel like I've been limping through life. I feel so fucking *empty,* all the time, and I can't—I can't even breathe sometimes, because I don't—Remus, I don't want to be empty anymore. I don't—I can't—"

"You're not, though. You're *not* empty, Lily," Remus mumbles, squeezing her shoulders. "Look at you. Fuck, you can't even see it, can you? You're so full you're about to explode. You can't keep it all in and shut everyone out. It doesn't *work."*

"But I have," Lily croaks.

Remus shakes his head, voice softening. "You really haven't. Do you know what I see? I see *life.* You've lived a whole life, Lily, these past six years, even if you tried not to, because you didn't want to live without me. But you did. You made friends, like Kinglsey and Sybill. You've fallen in love and didn't let yourself have that love; that'll be Dorcas. You've learned new skills, because I just watched you shoot with various guns and never miss. You lived. You had to live without me, and you did despite your best efforts, just like *I* lived without *you."*

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I left you there. I—I tried so hard, Remus. I was always trying so hard to wait for you. I've just been waiting for you," Lily sobs, and she's shaking, rattling under his hands like she is exploding now, finally, in spurts.

"You couldn't wait for me, and that's *okay,"* Remus tells her, sliding his hand up to sweep under the curtain of her hair and grip the back of her neck, pulling her into his arms. He kisses the top of her head. "It's okay. I never wanted you to."

"I still fucking *miss you,"* Lily says, crying, the words muffled into his chest. "I still—all the grief and guilt, it's still here, it's still in me. I don't know how to get rid of it. I don't know where to put it now."

Remus closes his eyes and rests his cheek on the top of her head. "Give it to me. Give it to the people you care about. Give it away, Lily. It's just love. That's all it is."

Lily makes a horrible, choked noise against him and seems only capable of crying. A lot of crying. Messy crying. Remus holds her through it, pressing his face into her hair, hating every second of it and knowing it's absolutely necessary.

They could never move forward if they didn't go back. He knows that, but knowing doesn't make it any easier. He can *feel* how much it hurts her, and he can't help her, can't fix it for her. There's all this is, the horrible process they have to go through to get to the core of who they always were, together.

It's just the start. Remus knows that, too. He'll have to take his turn as well; he can't escape unscathed. He'll have to open up and face his fears and methodically work through things he'd rather leave alone. All those years he spent wishing he could just talk to Lily and tell her everything, and now he's going to have to work at it to do so. It was never supposed to be a struggle. It was supposed to be easy.

Remus is learning that the important things in life are rarely easy, and Lily? Lily is important. One of the most important parts of his life. He wants her back. He needs his best friend.

Lily does calm, eventually. She sniffles wetly and smears her face against his chest, getting rid of snot and tears, probably. Then, finally, she pulls back and violently clears her throat.

The first thing she says is, "How'd you know about Dorcas?"

"What, that she's the one who got away?" Remus asks. Lily swallows and nods. "Because I know you." Lily looks like she's about to cry again, and Remus sighs. "I'm sorry, by the way. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"I loved her," Lily rasps. "Probably still do. Maybe always will, at least a little. The worst part is that I didn't know. I didn't know until I'd already let her slip away from me, and then… And then I still wouldn't accept it. Couldn't. I don't know what's wrong with me. There's something wrong with me."

"I don't think so. I think you were just scared. We all get scared, Lily," Remus murmurs. "I'm scared right now."

"Yeah." Lily sort of hiccups a chuckle, sniffling again and rubbing her red nose. "Yeah, me too. All the time, really."

"I think we all are," Remus admits.

"I'm—" Lily clears her throat again, blinking hard, breathing in and out. "I don't know—I have no idea what to do now, you know? Because if I'm not—because, before, I wasn't… letting myself have anything. Didn't know how. Still don't. You said I lived, but I didn't know that, didn't *feel* that, and I don't—I can't work out how to do it again, or where to go from here."

Remus hesitates, then says, "Well, the thing is, you're *still* living. You're sort of…already doing it. I mean, even with love, yeah? You're open to it. You want it, at least, because you're half in love with Mary as it is."

"No," Lily says, like a reflex. Remus raises his eyebrows at her, and she bites her lip. "Maybe? You think?"

"I do think, but only you can know that. How do you feel?" Remus asks, reaching out to poke her chest. "In here."

Lily swats at his hand, and he grins. "Oh, fuck off. Now you're just fucking with me."

"A little bit, yeah, *but* I mean it," Remus says, letting his smile turn gentle. "Just because you ran then doesn't mean you have to punish yourself by running now. Slow down, Lily."

"I'm still mad at you," Lily mumbles, "and I'm sorry."

Remus sighs. "I know. Me too."

"We're okay?" Lily whispers.

"We're okay," Remus confirms.

Lily looks at him for a beat, takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Okay. Right, okay, well…we lived without each other then. Worst time of my life, just to be clear."

"Me too," Remus admits. "But some of it was good, just like it was for you. That's okay, too. That's what living is, all the good and bad, easy and hard. We don't—we shouldn't be guilty about it, Lily. I don't want you to be guilty, and I'm sorry, but nothing in this world will ever make me regret Sirius."

"You really love him, don't you?"

"More than anything."

"More than me?" Lily asks.

Remus huffs a weak laugh. "The same, just differently."

"I'm jealous, just on principle," Lily informs him, her lips curling up in the corners. Her face softens. "You can—you know you can tell me about him, don't you? About all of it. About

every bit of the past six years. Anything."

"It's a lot," Remus admits.

Lily smiles. "I've got time."

So, when Lily holds out her hand, Remus reaches out to take it, and they leave the gun range together, leaving Pandora to keep practicing, now accompanied by Rodolphus in nearly the same exact position as Lily was in before. Lily doesn't even glance at them as they leave. They go to Remus' room and talk.

Oh, they talk, and talk, and talk. They talk and they laugh. They talk and they cry. They talk and chainsmoke, watching the cloud above their heads where they lay shoulder to shoulder with an astray between their hips. They talk and burn a hole into Remus' mattress, putting it out between catching each other up on the last six years, covering torture and fear and loss and pain, setting their lungs on fire as they trade stories of friendship and joy and love.

They talk, and they live, and they find that ease they fought to have again, both waiting for it.

Always waiting for it.

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Lily leaves Remus eventually, because she has some things she needs to take care of. Things she needs to do. When Lily sets her heart on something, when she makes up her mind, she can't be stopped. That applies to everything, whether it's a mission or simply taking steps she needs to get better.

Lily goes to Kingsley first.

"I'm sorry," Lily says the moment he opens his door. "I should have trusted you, but the truth is, I didn't. I refused to, because it was a risky form of trust, and it scared me. But you were right. You're my friend, you were the first friend I had here, and I haven't been a good friend to you. I'm sorry."

Kingsley stares out at her, not speaking. After a beat, he crosses his arms and leans his shoulder up against his doorway, raising a hand and flicking his fingers to indicate quite clearly that he's going to need more than that.

Yeah, okay, fair enough.

"You don't have to forgive me. I'd like you to, but I understand if you can't. I just—I want you to know that I am sorry. And I have immense respect for you—always have, really—even if I showed the opposite. You mean…" Lily trails off, then clears her throat. Oh, this is very difficult. "You're important to me, even if I've failed to show it. Oh, and I'm sorry I put a gun to your head. I shouldn't have done that; fuck, that's so fucked up. I'm so sorry I did that, and if you want me to stay away from you, I understand, but I want—I do want you in my life, King, and I'm sorry I never showed that either. So. Yeah."

"You know, Red, I feel like I need to go shake Remus Lupin's hand," Kingsley says dryly. "He's working miracles, clearly."

"Maybe a bit," Lily admits sheepishly. "It's sort of his thing."

Kingsley's lips twitch, and then his face softens. "You know what I could never understand about you?"

"Oh, here we go," Lily mumbles, wary now, feeling exposed. It's becoming clear to her all over again why she doesn't do this shit. If you're just leaving yourself open for hits, of course it's going to fucking hurt when you get smacked.

"I could never understand how you convinced yourself that you didn't care, when that's all you ever seemed to do. You weren't a bad friend, Lily. You made mistakes here and there, sure, but we all do," Kingsley murmurs. *"I* do, too. I made a mistake by what I said to you. I

shouldn't have, because not only was most of it about you blatantly *wrong,* but it hurt you and I knew it would. For that, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Lily whispers. "I know you were upset, and scared, and freaking the fuck out. I've always thought of you as this unshakeable man, but you're just as human as everyone else. Not just Dumbledore's soldier. I shouldn't have treated you as such. I'm sorry for that, too."

Kingsley sighs, and here Lily is, left open for a hit, but all she gets is an embrace. He reaches out and tugs her in, and they have never once hugged before, but she goes willingly now; it seems he knew she would. "Water under the bridge, Red. We'll just do better next time, yeah?"

"Yeah," Lily agrees, blowing out a deep sigh of relief. When she pulls back, she clasps her hands together and rocks back on her heels, then blurts out, "So, you and Sybill are totally going to make up, right?"

"I don't know," Kingsley says quietly, frowning a bit as he leans up against the doorway again. "I'm not sure if I can. The thought of her in the field, in danger, and she could—she might—" He squeezes his eyes shut and lets his head hit the doorway with a dull tap. "I, um. I don't know. What is it when you let someone go because you can't lose them?"

"A double negative, I think," Lily says gently, a pang in her chest when he opens his eyes and looks so sad. "King, you didn't let her go. Take it from me, you'll regret pushing her away. And take this from me, too. *Don't* let the war come between you, because before you know it, you could lose her, if not *to* the war, then to someone else. And you *will* regret it. Trust me on that. Hold onto her while you can."

"Speaking from experience, I see." Kingsley gives her a weak, weary smile. "Dorcas?"

Lily sighs. "Fucking hell, was I that obvious?"

"I'm observant," Kingsley offers mildly. Lily clicks her tongue, and he lifts his head, blowing out a deep breath. "Right, well, you…may have a point. That's good advice."

"Don't ignore it." Lily steps back. "Alright, I have to go."

"Making rounds?" Kingsley asks.

"Don't worry, you were my first stop," Lily assures him with a playful grin, then continues on to the next.

Lily goes to Dorcas second.

Dorcas looks very exhausted when she opens her door, and Lily feels sympathy unfurl within her, as well as a rising sense of nerves squirming about in her stomach. If she makes it through all of this without vomiting, it'll be a miracle.

"Oh," Dorcas murmurs. "Hey, Lily."

"Hi." Lily clears her throat. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," Dorcas says, letting her in and shutting the door before moving to plop down on her bed with a weary sigh, visibly miserable. Lily knows that things aren't very good for her overall right now, as she has been working herself to the bone, but the fact that she and Marlene aren't okay certainly isn't helping matters. Lily moves to sit beside her, staring at her hand, at the ring on Dorcas' finger. Marlene's ring. The sight of it sort of breaks her heart. "What's up?"

"We, ah, need to talk. Or, well, I need to talk to you. I mean, I need to tell you something," Lily mumbles.

Dorcas bolts up in alarm. "What is it? What hap—"

"No, no, nothing like that. Nothing to do with the war or any of that mess, I promise," Lily says quickly, holding her hands up. Dorcas settles slowly. "No, um, it's more…personal."

"Oh." Dorcas blinks. *"Oh?"*

"Yeah." Lily fiddles with her hands in her lap, her heart beating a little too fast, though she can't figure out if it's from fear or nerves, or both. Probably both. "So…I'm going to say something to you, and it's—well, I'm going to feel awkward about it. I might vomit."

"Lily, is this a love confession?" Dorcas teases, clearly trying to lighten the mood. She even leans over to bump their shoulders together, smiling at her.

Lily looks at her and breathes out, "Yeah, actually, it is."

Dorcas' smile fades. She blinks again, then just stares at Lily, then leans away like she's trying to look at more of her. Lily is doing her level best not to throw up. Oh. Oh, fuck, there it is. Well, that's just—out there now. Okay, that's fine. That's—

"Oh," Dorcas says softly. "Lily, um. It's—I'm—"

"No, no, wait," Lily blurts out. "Wait. Please wait. I'm not trying anything, okay? I swear I'm not. What I mean is, I—I was in love—I mean, I did love you, before. I think."

"You think?"

"No, I know. I just—I didn't know *then.* I didn't realize it until you were—until you said you were in love with Marlene, and even then, I didn't really…accept it fully. The thing is, I *couldn't* love you then. I mean, I did, but not all-in, do you know what I mean? I couldn't love you the way you deserved; I couldn't love you right. I wasn't loving *me* right, really, or… anything. Or I didn't know I was. This is—I know I'm not explaining myself well, but what I'm trying to say is that I wasn't ready then, for any of it. But it was there. It was there, Dorcas, and I need you to know that. I need you to know I loved you, and I still do."

Dorcas takes that in, apparently needing some time to process, which Lily is admittedly grateful for, because she feels like she just ran a damn marathon. She resists the urge to press her hands into her stomach and bend over to catch her breath. Why is she winded? She's not even trying to be *with* Dorcas. This is ridiculous. She is *not* fine. All the times she told herself she was fine were lies. Oh, she is so fucked up.

After a long moment, Dorcas carefully reaches out and takes Lily's hand. Lily feels better instantly, suddenly able to breathe as they thread their fingers together. Dorcas swallows and holds her gaze. "I get it. I—yeah. Yeah, me too, Lily."

"Yeah?" Lily whispers, her throat feeling thick, because isn't that just tragic? They had it, almost.

"Yeah," Dorcas whispers back. "I was…doing the same thing, I think. The war was my priority, and if it hadn't been, it would have been you. Before her, it could have been you."

"I'm sorry," Lily croaks, and she doesn't know who she's apologizing to. Maybe both of them. Maybe to the lost opportunity they worked together to throw away.

"Yeah, so am I," Dorcas admits. She squeezes Lily's hand and takes a deep breath. "Do you still…? You said you weren't trying anything, but do you—do you…?"

Lily darts her gaze away immediately, tucking her lips in and feeling her heart give that same strange pulse in her chest that it did when she heard Dorcas say she loved Marlene. Not Lily, but Marlene. And Lily has a name for that pulse now; she knows what it is. Yearning.

It's just—she can't help it. She knows now, and she wants… Well, that's the thing, isn't it? Dorcas was an almost lover, and Lily wants to undo everything, rewind time, and know what she missed. It's hard to let go sometimes. It's so hard.

"Lily," Dorcas says softly, a mere breath. She waits for Lily to look at her, and she looks so, so sad. "I'm sorry, but it's her. I love you—I *do* love you, Lily, and you will always, always,

always have a part of me, okay? But it's her. It's Marlene."

"I know," Lily chokes out, eyes stinging, and how is it possible to be heartbroken over losing something you never had? She didn't think it was possible, and yet, here it is.

"Oh, Lily, I'm so—I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. Come here," Dorcas rasps, pulling her in, and then the whole situation gets so much worse, because Lily clings to her and cries.

Fuck, this is mortifying.

Dorcas coddles her through it, a bit. Pets her hair. Holds her close. Tells her she loves her. Thankfully and tactfully doesn't bring up Marlene again. Lily lets her do it. Needs her to.

She holds onto Dorcas, tucks her face into Dorcas' shoulder, breathes Dorcas in. For a moment, she lets herself pretend she has her. Just for a moment. And then she lets go, and it *hurts*. Fuck, but it really hurts, far more than she expected it to when she went into this. She knew it would be shit, but she didn't know it would split her open and scrape her raw.

Lily only pulls away when she knows she's ready, and Dorcas doesn't make her a second before. It's good. It helps. In the end, it's necessary, because Lily can't go anywhere if she stays here. That's the thing. She doesn't want to stay here anymore. She doesn't want to be trapped by an almost, because she wants someone she can have, and she wants to let herself have someone when she's ready. She isn't, not yet, but she'd like to try to be. And so, this is where it starts.

It's an end and a beginning, and it leaves her a bit sensitive and exposed after. Dorcas doesn't seem surprised that Lily needs to go quickly after that, but she does catch her hand and bring it to her mouth, pressing a gentle kiss to her fingers. A Hallow gesture of admiration, Lily knows, and she appreciates it. Oddly, after all of that, she's proud of herself, too.

They don't say anything else, but they don't have to. Lily leaves, and she knows they'll be alright. They will, because the love is still there between them. They didn't let it bloom, but the seeds can't be uprooted from the garden they laid upon, and is a garden less of a garden through a drought?

No. A garden that bears no fruit is still a garden.

Lily goes to Mary last.

"No, shut up," Lily says firmly, the split *second* Mary opens her door and looks immediately unimpressed. Following these words, she looks less unimpressed and more disbelieving, her eyebrows flying up. "Sorry, that was aggressive, and rude, but I really need you to let me talk."

"Alright," Mary replies slowly, curious now. "Proceed."

"I don't know if you don't like me, or what I did to offend your apparently delicate sensibilities, even though *I* am the one who has the right to dislike *you,* because you literally shot me when we first met," Lily tells her. "And, you know, that's okay. It's okay that you might not like me. But, the thing is, I like you. I—really like you. Like, *really.* My best friend thinks I'm half in love with you, which is ridiculous because we haven't known each other long, and all we do is bicker, and I just got rejected by someone I never even let myself love properly, which was *heartbreaking,* by the way, so the entire concept of loving you even a bit, even just starting to, is so absurd that I can't even begin to wrap my head around it—"

Mary's face journey is *wild* right now, flying through so many expressions that Lily doesn't even bother trying to figure out what any of them mean. There's some surprise, a bit of alarm for sure, and it doesn't matter because Mary opens her mouth like she's about to speak, and Lily is not *having it.*

"No, no, let me finish," Lily insists, and Mary snaps her mouth shut. For once. "I know I'm just rambling and not making any sense, but that's *your* fault, because I can't think around you apparently, which is just—annoying, is what it is. Anyway, my point is, I'm a fucked up mess of a person who has been through a lot of shit, and I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing, and I'm genuinely terrified of loving in any capacity, but I've had—a breakthrough. Clearly. As you can tell. I don't think I'm handling it well, honestly, but I'm trying. I got a friend back today—two, really—and I lost an almost lover, and these are good things, so I'm —I'm sort of riding the wave."

"I see that," Mary says faintly.

Lily scowls. "I wasn't done. All that is to say, I'm not ready for love, not really. Not yet. But I want to be, someday, and none of this has anything to do with you overall, except I like you, a lot, and if I don't love you at least a little bit already, I probably could, if you'd let me. Except you won't let me, which might be for the best, because like I said, I'm not ready. But I'll probably do it anyway, because I never leave well enough alone, and I don't want to avoid it, or refuse to accept it, or run from it; I want to walk into it with my eyes wide open and do it on purpose. And I just—I just think that maybe, just *maybe,* you'd be secretly alright with that. Maybe. Would you?"

Mary is silent for a long time, and then she clears her throat and arches an eyebrow. "Can I speak now?"

"Oh. Yeah, sorry, I'm done," Lily replies, ridiculously out of breath and nervous in a good way.

"So, you've clearly had…a day," Mary states. She pauses, then huffs an incredulous laugh. "You know, good for you. I think… Well, I think that, if you wanted, you could come inside to hang out with me and Bing Bing. Maybe entertain him for a bit. I want to draw. It helps me decompress."

Lily blinks. A lot. "I—wait, no, yeah. Sure. Yes, I'd love to."

"Come on, then," Mary says simply, lips curling up as she pushes open the door and steps to the side.

"I—I still don't know if you like me or not," Lily admits, stepping into the doorway and stopping there, searching Mary's gaze like she can find the answers there and only succeeding in getting lost in her eyes, because apparently she's a walking cliche now and there's no hope for her.

"One of life's greatest mysteries," Mary murmurs, pools of laughter in the black of her eyes.

"You never answered my question," Lily whispers, her heart doing a funny little twist in her chest. "Would you?"

"Maybe," Mary says, then tugs her in and shuts the door.

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Regulus is snatched out of his near-daily daydream of taking Slughorn by the back of his head and smashing his face down against the table he sits at until he's just a smear on it by the harsh tug on his sleeve that gathers his focus instead.

"Reggie," Dora says, vying for his attention with a small frown and a tiny wrinkle between her eyebrows. That same Black stubbornness for what she wants that exists in all Blacks. It's in her blood. Her wrinkled eyebrows look like his.

"Dora, where's your mother?" Regulus asks immediately, pushing the chair next to him back and holding onto her arm so she can climb up into it.

Dora gets settled and flashes him a smile. "She's coming, but she's walking so *slowly* with my new aunt Cissa."

Narcissa has now been dubbed as *new aunt Cissa* by Dora, much to her palpable delight. Regulus hadn't been there when Andy introduced them properly, but they're two peas in a pod, from what he's seen. It's quite clear to him that Narcissa is very pleased about being with Andromeda again, regardless of anything else, and she adores her niece.

"There she is." Dora proceeds to stand up in the chair and jump up and down, waving her arms. "Mummy! Mummy!"

Regulus holds onto the back of her shirt so she won't fall, and again, her reckless zeal reminds him so much of Sirius that it's painful. It hurts in a good way. A good ache. A reminder in the form of a pin-prick that stings, yet alleviates pressure.

Andromeda sweeps over with Narcissa, both of them stopping by for idle chit-chat for a moment, inquiring what's for lunch, asking where Regulus' usual entourage is, and then they're collecting Dora and heading to go through the line so they can make plates of food and eat lunch together. They can never really linger around Regulus for too long. He gets it. If he could, he'd get as far away from himself as possible, too.

Regulus' *usual entourage* consists of Barty, Rabastan, Asher, Rodolphus, and occasionally Pandora. Well, Pandora is a bit of a social butterfly, in that she flutters around to whatever group she likes, welcomed by all. To refuse her would feel like the equivalent of a crime, but one you're horrified by committing. However, much to Regulus' eternal displeasure, Pandora is apparently fond enough of Rodolphus to be swayed into spending most of her time with him—and the whole group, by extension—but Regulus is single-handedly cockblocking that man as much and as often as he can. Pandora, of course, remains entirely oblivious to all of this.

There's sort of a mess of fractured groups at the moment, in all honesty, which is generally only noticeable at mealtimes.

One group consists of Mary, Sybill, Amos, and Lily. Every now and again, Dorcas will be with them, but she's usually sitting with Minerva and wistfully gazing over at where Marlene, Alice, and Emmeline all sit together. Joining those three is Kingsley, much to Regulus' bemusement, but apparently he came from district five and was once childhood friends with Alice and Frank, and in the aftermath of Frank's death, those two have reconnected as friends. Regulus is pretty sure that Emmeline, Marlene, and Kingsley are single-handedly getting Alice through to their grief, because as far as Regulus can tell, they're a bit of a shell unless those people are with them.

Alecto spends her time with Narcissa, and Andromeda by extension, while Majesty has taken to sticking with the large group of previous servants saved from the Hallow, as does Huey Rutledge, who tentatively offers Regulus sad smiles whenever Regulus catches his eye. During meals, it's the quietest table. When any of them do talk, they whisper like they're expecting to get in trouble for it, but each time they don't, Regulus notes they do it more and more.

Effie and Monty are generally at the same table as Regulus, close by, or down a table with Minerva, Poppy, Filius, and Dorcas. Aberforth comes and sits with them sometimes. Effie and Minerva seem to get on well, but not at first. There had been a tension between them that *everyone* was wary of, sourced from the fact that Minerva was the head gamemaker behind all the shit that went down in the arena and Effie seemed to want to beat the hell out of her for it, except Minerva—according to Dorcas—is not easily beaten.

They did not fight, thankfully. Regulus talked to Monty about it, and then Monty talked to Effie about it, and then Effie marched off to go talk to Minerva about it—which is when Regulus groaned and put his face in his hands, waiting for the entire underground bunker to collapse around them or for someone to die (he would have bet on Effie winning, but maybe he's just biased), but none of that happened. It seemed that Minerva and Effie talked like two adult women, discussed the whole matter, and came out the other side with mutual respect and a building friendship, despite everything.

There's a lot of that going around. Continuation. Pressing on. Sitting aside issues and focusing on what matters *now.* There is this big thing sitting between everyone, and it's not just brushes with death and loads of trauma. No, it's war. It's the war lingering like a shroud over them all, something that ties them all together, and everything in the past *can't* affect the present they're faced with now.

As for Regulus' *usual entourage,* they're all broken up at the moment, but will surely make their way here at some point. Asher is most likely caught up with Poppy, because Poppy is also absent from Minerva's side. Rodolphus is caught in the middle of a conversation with Alecto. Rabastan is going through the line, getting his tray of food. And Barty…

Barty is lingering around Mary, Amos, Lily, Sybill, and also Pandora at the moment. Most of the time, Barty is never too far away from Regulus, and Regulus spends any time he isn't with Effie and Monty with Barty. Not only because Barty is *Barty,* but also because Barty needs it, badly. He lost his mum, killed his dad, and hasn't been doing well in the aftermath of either. Mostly the first, admittedly, but either way, he's only just now starting to look a little better, which Regulus knows can be attested to his willingness to linger around Barty through anything, through his manic ramblings in the day, through his quiet sobs in the night; through it all, Regulus is there, because Barty is Barty, and Barty has consistently been there for him. Still is, even now.

Barty hides his issues well, carrying on as he usually does, doing all the usual things he would do. Flirts with Amos, gets Sybill to laugh when she's sad, annoys Lily, entertains all of Regulus' frantic thrown-together schemes to break out of here, no matter how foolish or

impossible. But—when they're alone, and it's just them—they'll lie on the floor in Regulus' room, and Barty will ask him to hum the tune of a nursery rhyme his mother used to sing to him, and Regulus will, and Barty will curl up on his side, back to Regulus, and cry. And, at night, Regulus will curl up against him, close his eyes, and chant his promise to himself to keep going, to keep breathing, to the consistent beat of Barty's heart.

One person who never shows up to meals is Remus. It has been over a week, and Regulus hasn't laid eyes on Remus once since Regulus made sure Remus got out of solitary. They haven't spoken. They haven't made it a point to seek each other out. Regulus doesn't know what he's supposed to say to him; he doesn't know how they're supposed to be here at the same time, together, without—without—

So, you can imagine his surprise when the chair next to Regulus that Dora was in scrapes across the floor, drawing his gaze away from his own plate to find Remus plopping down in the open seat, his jaw clenched and his shoulders back.

Naturally, Regulus freezes like a startled hare under the gaze of a watchful wolf. His mind goes blank for a moment, and it hasn't even been two full weeks since he got out of the arena, since he laid right there under his brother's fists and used Remus as leverage over him to keep those fists raining down. He couldn't do it, couldn't endanger Remus, and never even planned to, but he pretended he would have. He was going to die under that pretense and never correct it. He never apologized for that. He never apologized for a lot of things.

There's too much between them to even know where to start. Regulus has wronged Remus, but it's not just that. It's that he is here, and Sirius is not, and as much as Regulus hates that, surely Remus does, too. It's that Remus is here, and James is not, and Regulus doesn't want to hate that, and so he tries not to, and only manages by half. No, no, he wouldn't want them to trade places, Remus left there and James safe here, but—

But.

They sit right next to each other, staring at each other, and Regulus sees Sirius in Remus, too. Finds Sirius there in the love he has for Remus, and the love Remus has for him, clear as day in the bags under his eyes and that lack of something in his gaze; that something is Sirius, and Sirius is absent. Gone. Not here. Remus is here, and Sirius is not, and James is not, and Regulus could rip Remus' throat out for it, or offer up his own for the same treatment, or simply hold onto him and cry.

None of those things happen, of course. It's all feeling, pure sensation, a breath frozen in place and a moment lost to the cruel hands of time, swirling down a drain as they sit here, drained, missing the same things in the exact opposite ways. Hand-in-hand without ever touching. Mirror, mirror sitting before me, which of us could the most miserable be?

"Do you have the wrong table?" is what falls out of Regulus' mouth. "Lily is across the room."

"No," Remus says, "I'm here for you."

"You never come to meals," Regulus murmurs.

"I've been grieving," Remus replies, clipped.

Regulus looks away, staring down at his plate, appetite fully vanished. Not that he has much of an appetite these days, but he eats anyway, because he has been hungry and he knows how important nutrition is to keep one's strength up. He can't allow himself to get weak. He needs to be ready at all times, ready the *moment* there's a shift in the wind and he can get to them, get to them, he will get to them.

Regulus clears his throat. "They're not dead."

"No, but they're likely being tortured, and as someone who knows intimately how that feels, I'm a little more informed on why that's something to be upset about," Remus says bluntly.

"Thanks for saying so, really appreciate it," Regulus grits out, drawing his hands down into his lap to hide how they shake. He fists them and wills himself not to hit Remus.

Remus sighs. "I'm not—listen, I'm not trying to be a prick, alright? I'm just not going to sugarcoat it. Denial doesn't help either of us, and it definitely doesn't help them."

"I will help them," Regulus says firmly, turning to look at him almost challengingly. "I'm going to help them."

Does he know how he's going to do that? Mm, no. But he will, in fact, be doing that. At some point. Eventually. Someday. He doesn't know when or how, but if it takes finding a way to escape the Phoenix and march his way into the Hallow right by himself, then that's what he'll damn well do.

"Ah, so you've made it through your grieving period," Remus notes, flicking his gaze over him, lips curling up in one corner.

"I never had a grieving period," Regulus retorts sharply, and he hasn't. There was no grieving period. There was no transition from arena to safety, because the fighting hasn't finished; James and Sirius still need to be fought for, and that is central to Regulus' survival, so he breathes and keeps going and doesn't break down, doesn't shut down, doesn't do anything other than stay focused. For them. He clings to that, to being ready, because that's all he has now.

"Regulus…" Remus' expression twitches, eyebrows furrowing as that same curl in his lip ticks down in the opposite direction. "It's okay, you know, to not be fine."

Regulus digs his nails into his palms. "I am fine."

"Fuck's sake." Remus heaves yet another sigh and plants his elbow on the table, reaching up to swipe his hand over his face. His shoulders are hunched, and he drags his hand back and forth over his hair, then turns to peer at him, looking very exhausted all of a sudden. "You're still so fucked up."

"So are you," Regulus grumbles, like an accusation. They bonded over this, didn't they? Why is it a problem now?

Remus shakes his head. "Look, we can unpack all of that later, or…not, knowing us, but I've had—" He stops, then blows out a deep breath. "Well, I had a talk with Effie the other day, and I helped Lily out earlier, which—in doing so—helped me. So, yes, everything is fucking awful right now, but I've decided to deal with that by believing it'll get better, even if I have to *make* it get better. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," Regulus says, because he does understand. They are in the same boat, in this regard. "You're going to help them, too. If it makes you feel any better, I never doubted that, regardless of your grieving period. Have any ideas?"

"Oh, just right into it, then," Remus mutters, mildly amused.

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "Is there anything else worth talking about?"

"I don't know, is there?" Remus shoots back, holding his gaze.

"I—" Regulus stops, because he wants to say there's not, but that's not true, is it? *I'm sorry* bangs at the back of Regulus' throat, and he's never been good at saying it, but Remus is looking at him and he knows he needs to.

Remus shakes his head and almost looks fond. "Alright, fine, I'll get it out of the way first. I'm sorry."

"You—what?" Regulus blinks at him, then leans in to stare at him in sheer disbelief. "Remus, what the fuck do you have to apologize for? *I'm* the one who threatened to put you in danger inside the arena. *I'm* the one who used you to get Sirius to lose it. *I'm* the one who spit in the face of all the times you've helped me by leaving you alone in all of this now. If anyone should be apologizing, it's me. What are you sorry about?"

"I'm sorry for leaving you alone in all of this, too, because I have. I'm sorry I didn't—I tried, but James was left behind, and I'm sorry I made it out when he didn't, because I know you'd rather it be him."

"Remus—"

"And I know that because you made it out, and it's one of the worst things I've ever felt, but I wish it had been Sirius. I'm sorry, because you're my friend, and I'm—I *am* so fucking grateful that you're here and you're okay, but something in me wishes it was him, and I can't help it," Remus chokes out.

Regulus feels like something in him *pops.* Just deflates a little. He exhales heavily, shaky from relief, and he's nodding. He nods almost frantically and rasps, "Yeah. Yeah, okay, thank you. Because—because I thought—I thought I was alone in that, and I didn't want to be alone in that."

"You're not," Remus says hoarsely. "I promise you're not."

"I have so few friends and you're one really fucking high on the list, Remus, and I'm glad you're free. You have no idea how glad I am," Regulus tells him rapidly, feeling a little untamed and wild as he just—confesses. "But I wish it was James."

"Fuck," Remus declares on a laugh that sort of cracks in his throat, and he nods along, too. "Yeah, Regulus, same here."

"Oh, they'd be so angry at us if they knew," Regulus whispers.

Remus quirks a weak smile. "Our secret, then."

"Right. Right, okay." Regulus flexes his hand under the table and keeps nodding, feeling inexplicably lighter. "Right, so that's—that's out of the way. We're awful and we're sorry. Good enough for me. Good enough for you?"

"Yes," Remus admits, and he clearly means it.

"Good, because we have other shit to focus on," Regulus says, leaning in even closer and lowering his voice. "As of now, I have—no plan. I mean, I've sort of been tracking the way this place works. Memorizing rotation schedules. Finding out who goes where and does what. It's just—well, after Dorcas and Lily pulled what they pulled, the measures to keep everyone inside are infuriatingly thorough. We can't just *leave."*

"But staying here isn't an option," Remus mutters.

Regulus grimaces. "I know, but at the risk of going to solitary, an escape attempt can't be made until there's an opening, and there *aren't* openings, Remus, I've checked. I mean, you already went to solitary once, and if they try to throw you in there again, I'll kill someone. Like, actually."

"Regulus," Remus says, lips twitching.

"I'm not joking," Regulus whispers, holding his gaze. "If they try to pull that shit again, I'm *going* to kill them. Any of them. All of them. Sirius would."

"Oh, is that why you plan to?"

"Well, only partially. You're also my—friend."

"Aw," Remus coos, "look how far you've come. Remember when you said I *wasn't* your friend?"

"Simpler times," Regulus replies wryly.

Remus snorts. "Do you know how fucked up our lives are that the time after your first arena was *simpler* than this?"

"I'm very aware." Regulus sighs. "Things will get simpler if we can get James and Sirius. So, brainstorming."

"We can't fight our way out?" Remus asks. "I know Lily would come, and I don't doubt some of the others would be happy to as well. Lily can still get into the armory in the gun range, so that's an option. If we did it late at night, maybe…"

"I don't think we'd make it very far. The surveillance here is too good. We'd be caught before we even got halfway in. All I can think of is—well, Rodolphus said it, actually, but I've been thinking…Dumbledore," Regulus says.

Remus blinks. "Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore of the Albus variety, not Aberforth. If we could somehow convince him to let us out, convince him to *clear* a mission to go to the Hallow, then maybe…"

"Oh, that's never going to happen."

Regulus is about to open his mouth and tell Remus never to say never—he knows from experience that saying so usually ends up getting proven wrong, and what do you know? The universe is moving fast, or the fates, or whatever *thing* exists out there that shifts winds and throws in plot twists—because the words have barely left Remus' mouth before something happens that will set the course for exactly what he spoke against. Before you know it, never can be now, and here it is.

The loud buzzer indicating an update broadcast from within the Hallow makes the entire Great Hall fall silent. There's a large screen at the front that's usually off, but it comes on whenever Riddle is addressing the world, thanks to some untraceable, technological interference from this end.

The screen flicks on now, and Regulus is expecting Riddle, which is why he nearly chokes on air when it's James.

Oh.

Oh, it's *James.*

Regulus stares, his lips parting as he takes him in. James, James, James. There he is, alive and looking…startlingly well. His glasses are missing, and his hair is slicked down in a way Regulus has never seen before, but there he is. Right there. He looks so—put together. Dressed in a suit with a striped tie soothed down, cufflinks glinting, dripping in opulence and looking so rich and refined that Regulus feels like he's something untouchable, too expensive, too valuable.

Regulus simultaneously doesn't like it and feels his mouth water like a fucking reflex. In seconds, his chair is clattering loudly in the deadly silent room, and he nearly trips over his own feet to move towards the screen, drawn in by it, drawn in like there's a hook around his spine that drags him to James.

James is looking right into the camera, his expression calm and neutral, but it's like he's looking right at Regulus, looking like him and like he never has before, looking beautiful, always beautiful, and all Regulus can think is *oh, James, I've missed you.*

"Hello," James says softly, and Regulus chokes out a harsh breath, his shoulders jerking like he was just struck. How long has it been since he heard James' voice? Since before the arena. That horrible morning where Regulus was dragged away along with Sirius, and James was yelling then, but he sounds so gentle now. "Today, I address all of you with a very important message."

Regulus inhales sharply, and even that's loud in the otherwise silent room. Everything feels like it's coming from far away, so he's only distantly aware that Remus has followed him and is standing at his shoulder, watching with him.

"There are external forces that wish to dismantle the peaceful core of the Hallow, all in the name of wreaking havoc and causing mayhem," James declares. "These external forces are anarchists, and they are gathering to threaten the very state of the world as we know it, as we have always known it. The very state of the world as we *need* it. These anarchists wish to cause war, and I beg of you, please don't fall prey to it. Sympathizers of the anarchists, ask yourselves if you wish to encourage war and death within your own home, within your own

families. This is not a time to turn on each other, but a time to band together against one common enemy. Stand with me, stand with your fellow Hallows, stand with your Master—and stand against all those who oppose peace."

Regulus feels a chill go down his spine as he stares wide-eyed at the screen, at James, at a man he loves and knows inside and out. A man who sits before him and everyone to say things Regulus knows for a *fact* he doesn't agree with.

It's not him, Regulus knows that. Or, well, it *is* him, but those aren't his words, and this isn't his choice. Look at him there, camera-ready and giving a speech like it was scripted for him. *Oh, baby,* Regulus thinks as he gazes at James, *what have they done to you?* They have him doing something he'd never do without coercion. Riddle is making him do this, and Regulus needs no time to work out how. Sirius. He's using Sirius.

"Desist all protests and instead come together to help one another. Any information about these anarchists or those taken as prisoners of war are to be turned into the authorities. Hear me, Hallow is not hollow. Hallow is harmony." James dips his head. "Thank you."

The screen goes black and all hell immediately breaks loose.

~•~

James walks quickly through the concrete corridors of Azkaban, his heart racing as he's led through the silent, solemn prison. It's frigid here and so quiet that the sound of his steps echo off the walls. His shoes are pinching his toes, and he's so nervous and full of anxious anticipation that he's struck with the impulse to beat-box.

Naturally, James does not give into this impulse, because he's being marched past one cell after the next, revealing a masked servant in each one, full of hollow eyes and gaunt faces. His stomach churns just seeing them, so he forces himself not to look, because there's nothing he can do for them, and the urge to try only puts Sirius in further jeopardy.

And then—there. The guards leading James along come to a halt in front of a cell, and he peers around them eagerly, his breath punching out of him at the sight of Sirius, who springs

up from his bed the moment he hears James. The cell doors open with a clang, and James bursts forward, frantically pushing past the guards to run to Sirius.

Sirius, who watches him with wide eyes, the bottom half of his face covered. He's reaching out before James gets to him, and they collide into each other so hard they go stumbling back.

"Sirius," James chokes out, gasping almost, hugging him so hard that he can feel Sirius' ribs constrict under his arms. Of course, he gets no response, which immediately makes him scramble back and raise his hands to fumble at the clasps of the mask, only to find it locked. He rears back and stares at Sirius in horror, then whips his head around to glare at the guards. "Let me unlock the mask."

"Sorry, those weren't our orders," comes the dry response, and then the door shuts again. "We'll return to collect you shortly."

With that, the guards sweep off, and James grinds his teeth, glaring after them, but cold hands on his face gathers his attention. Sirius tugs on his head, shaking it a little as he stares at him with wide *what-the-fuck* eyes. His hands are trembling against James' face, and his chest is heaving, very faint sounds of sharp, muffled breathing only just escaping through the slots on the mask. It's so tight to his face that he can barely make a sound, just like with Remus.

"Okay, okay, it's okay," James chants, gripping Sirius' wrists, squeezing them gently. "You're okay. Are you okay?"

Sirius proceeds to give him a flat look over the mask.

James winces. "Alright, fair enough. I just—I meant, have they tortured you? Recently, I mean. In the last few days?"

Sirius' eyebrows draw together, and then he shrugs and pulls his hands back to tap his own wrist.

"Right, you don't know how long it's been." James bites his lip and nods. "Okay. Er, has it been a bit *since* they tortured you last, then? A notable amount, maybe?"

Sirius pauses, then nods.

"Okay. Okay, good," James wheezes, his shoulders slumping as relief pours through him. No, Sirius isn't in the best condition at the moment, but at least he's not being tortured daily.

Riddle is keeping his word, it seems. He would, wouldn't he? It's what gets James to do whatever he wants, and if he *were* to torture Sirius anyway, James would spit in his face and never comply again. By letting James actually have some control over what happens to Sirius, Riddle keeps James on a leash.

At this point, James doesn't even care. Yes, he feels absolutely *filthy* in the aftermath of getting on camera to read the speech written for him, but he'd do it all again to see Sirius and be sure that he's safe. Or, well, mostly safe. Safe *enough,* how about that? It'll have to do for now.

James reaches out to brush his hands over the side of Sirius' tangled, unkempt hair. It's a bit limp and not as shiny and pretty as it usually is, which James knows must be driving Sirius mad. Maybe James can bargain to bring a brush next time. Should that be a priority? Probably not, but whatever.

The balls of James' hands bumps into Sirius' cheeks, the part not covered by the mask, and he immediately frowns as he reaches up to press the back of his hand to Sirius' forehead.

"You're hot," James mumbles.

Sirius stares at him, then wiggles his eyebrows, which is so ridiculous and so *Sirius* that James can't stop himself from releasing a hoarse, choked laugh.

"Yes, you're always hot, but I mean *hot,"* James says. "As in temperature-wise. A bit sweaty. Clammy. Are you sick?"

Sirius nods and steps back, showing James his wrists and inner arms, where he's broken out into a rash. James grabs him and stares at it with a frown, and then Sirius points at his legs, chest, and face before pointing to the rash again.

"You've broken out all over?" James asks.

Again, Sirius nods, then taps his stomach.

"Your stomach hurts?"

Sirius snaps his fingers and nods once more, then pokes himself in the temple, gesturing to his head.

"Headaches?" James frowns when Sirius nods again, then shrugs his shoulders and waves his hands around like a man as baffled as James is. "Are you, like, allergic to prison?"

There's a beat, and then Sirius' shoulders start shaking, his eyes above the mask crinkling up, alight with laughter. There's just the quietest, faintest sound of muffled, muted laughter that breaks James' heart, because of the many things Sirius is, *quiet* isn't one, especially when it comes to laughter. But, well, it does soothe something inside James to know Sirius *is* laughing, that he can *still* laugh, even after everything.

"Alright, well, are you getting worse?" James murmurs.

Sirius shakes his head, then gives a thumbs-up.

"You're getting better?" James narrows his eyes when Sirius nods. "Are you lying to me?"

Sirius whacks him upside the head.

"Okay, just checking," James mutters, and Sirius steps back to sit on the edge of the bed, jerking out his hands in yet another clear sign of *what-the-fuck?* James glances out into the empty hall, then moves forward to hit his knees in front of Sirius, reaching around to cup the back of Sirius' head and push it down. He makes them both slouch together, the curtain of Sirius' hair falling forward as much as it can on either side from under the mask. James hides there and lowers his voice to a mere breath. "I don't know how much time we have, and I need to be careful. You're under surveillance."

Sirius' arms come around James' neck, helping block his face. It probably looks like a lover's embrace, honestly, and James could not give a fuck less. If Riddle is watching, let the man wonder—if he'll even bother to care.

"Listen to me, I'm going to make sure you're as safe as you can be. I'm going to keep you from being hurt. I'm not going to let anything happen to you, okay?" James whispers fervently.

Sirius wrenches back, his head popping up, and James lifts his head, too. Sirius is wide-eyed again, studying his face, the cogs behind his eyes turning in his mind, and he's so smart, he knows James so well, so it comes as no surprise that his eyes narrow a moment later. He immediately starts shaking his head, digging his nails into the back of James' neck in clear reprimand. Oh, he is *not* happy.

"Stop. Sirius, stop it," James hisses under his breath, only pushing closer, shaking his head along with him. "I know what you're thinking, but stop thinking it. We have to trust them, do you understand? We have to trust they'll pull through for us, for the whole world, and in the meantime, I'm doing this. You have to let me do this for you, and for me, and for *Regulus."*

Sirius' eyes visibly soften, and his shoulders slump. Even with half his face covered, he conveys guilt with ease. Of course he doesn't want to be the catalyst to what James is doing for him, but—well, sometimes that's just how it goes. There's really nothing Sirius can do from his position at the moment.

"Listen, don't worry about anything," James tells him, even though he knows that's pointless to say. "Come here." He tugs Sirius back in, this time burying his face into the curtain of his hair for the sole purpose of speaking softly in his ear. "Do you know what happened to the other tributes?"

Sirius nods against his cheek.

"So, you know Regulus is safe?"

Another nod.

"Do you know what happened in the Hallow?"

Nod.

"Frank?"

A pause, then another nod, a bit slower. Sirius' arm comes up around him, hand pressing flat between James' shoulder blades. James squeezes his eyes shut and tucks his face into Sirius' shoulder, letting them hang onto each other for a long moment, heavy grief choking him, likely choking Sirius, too. They hold onto each other like that, probably for too long, but James desperately doesn't want to let go.

He doesn't let go anyway, but he does lift his head again and start whispering once more. "Mum and Dad are safe, Sirius. They were saved, too. It's—well, a lot has happened, and I don't have time to explain it all, but they're alive and safe."

Sirius jerks against him, fingers digging into James' back, and James can feel how Sirius' shoulders wrench up on what must be an aborted sob of relief. This time, James is the one holding Sirius when he slumps a bit, like his strings have been cut.

The distant sound of steps reach them, and Sirius tenses up, his hand patting at James frantically, trying to communicate something with so much urgency in his movements that James knows what it is instantly. He drags one hand up to cup Sirius' neck and puts his lips directly against Sirius' ear.

"Your moon made it out safely. Your moon is free," James breathes out, and Sirius gives a full-body shudder before he collapses against James and clings to him. The steps draw closer, and James swallows. "They're coming."

Sirius draws back slowly, and his hand slips over James' shoulder, their gazes meeting. Sirius presses his hand flat to James' chest, applying a bit of pressure right between his lungs. James slides his hand down and mirrors the contact, feeling Sirius' chest rise and fall under his hand.

Eyes stinging, James gives a shaky smile and nods. "I know. Every breath, in and out. I'm with you, you're with me."

It's the last thing James gets to say to Sirius before the cell opens and the guards drag him away.

Chapter End Notes

alright! from the top!

remus and lily!!! oh, they kill me!!! it's just like. that whole scene of them finally kind of —arguing? like, idk, i feel like, in that situation, lily was really stuck between so many different feelings surrounding remus that she didn't know how to navigate, like she sort of idolized him in death (made him the center of her universe, if you will), resented him for how he "died" (a sacrifice), and couldn't move past any of it (hence the waiting). and it was this thing of like, they didn't want to live without each other, but they had no choice. they HAD to, and they did, and they needed to accept that before they could ever live WITH each other again.

that whole scene between them makes me so emotional, just because i love them so much, and godddd lily loves remus SO MUCH, and remus loves lily SO MUCH, and it's all just SO MUCH.

but hey, trust remus to get around lily and take less than 2 weeks to Fix Her (this is a joke, lily is and always was perfect) when other people have spent YEARS trying 😭 kingsley saying he needs to shake remus' hand GOODBYE

honestly, in this fic, remus has to things Central To His Character. one is he embodies "Be Gay, Do Crime" and two is he literally works miracles??? no you don't even know yet, but just wait, this man hasn't met a disaster he can't gift a miracle to 😭

anyway, lily riding the wave of the miracle, her breakthrough! she makes up with kingsley!!! ahhhh their friendship is so important to meeeee <3 i love them a whole lot.

and then 💫dorcas💫

okay, so listen. i didn't expect that whole scene between them to hit as hard as it did. i was so??? like, the bittersweetness of it, tragic and tender, and the way lily had to have her heart broken to help it heal? im??? and the thing about the pain of an almost lover? it's absolutely devastatinggggggg. but its also? healing? like, that was something lily really needed to do and needed to happen, so she could move forward, ya know? idk, they're just really special to me.

and dorcas, pleaseeeeee, with the whole "before her, it could have been you" and "lily, it's her. it's marlene" LIKE??? she's sooooo in love with marlene 😭 just the whole moment between them, and their love for each other past, present, and moving forward is so special to me.

oh, and marylily!!! now what the hell do you do when lily evans turns up at your door rambling about being half in love with you but also not all ready for love but also probably doing it anyway??? like what was mary supposed to DO with that? HELP SHE WAS NOT PREPARED PLS 😭 but she just rolled with it. listen, lily had a long day, she was probably rushing through things she could have taken her time with (she hasn't figured out how to Slow Down yet lmaooo), BUT there was mary to chill her out. god, i love them so much.

and then oooh the remus and regulus moment! no stop, because they're so important to me 😭 they're friends!!! they're being—mutually miserable together, but at least they're not ALONE. them sort of just, coming clean about the worst sides of themselves? like wishing james and sirius were there instead? that's rough shit, but it's also human, and it's also THEM. like, that's what they do—they show their worst to each other and help one another handle it, so they don't have to do it alone. they're very fucked up men, but that's okay. we love them anyway.

james!!!! not james on the broadcast LYING HIS ASS OFF!!! give this man a round of applause, because he just did BEAUTIFULLY—i mean, it was on the behalf of riddle, but i will ALWAYS celebrate james' achievements, duh 🙄

also regulus getting to see james again 😭 im gonna die, he loves him so muchhhh

and then, again, james!!! and sirius!!! they got to see each other!!! sirius is just vibing in jail, and apparently allergic to prison lmaoooo 😭 but james updating him on everyone

—effie, monty, and the moon. ILL CRY. they love each other sooooo much, it RUINS me.

okay, HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-rodolphus dropping everything at any time to do whatever pandora wants, he's down so bad 😭
-the pandalily hints going down like a lead balloon, but marylily being on the rise!!!
-lily and remus being okay again!!
-dorcas suffering the whiplash of "is this a love confession" "yeah, actually, it is" 😳 LIKE HELLO??? COULD YOU IMAGINE????
-kingsley being so chill with "water under the bridge, red"
-mary literally blowing right past lily talking about love and shit to be like "hey wanna come inside and calm down, maybe?" 😭
-regulus and remus my beloveds <3
-regulus having a whole entourage ajdjsksjsj 😭
-james and sirius being Number One in charades (really, there's no pair better)

alright, that's about it, but i just wanted to thank everyone for the comments and support. i really do appreciate them more than you can know!!!

Pawns

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death/violence
-references to past child death
-references to past torture
-mentions of feeling sick/vomiting (no one does, but still)
-mentions of blood
-depictions of violence
-references to past alcohol withdrawal
-depictions/discussions of addiction/alcoholism (no one relapses, it's just discussed)

i think that's about it! im gonna stop saying chapters are lighter, because i have been reliably informed that my measurement for what's "lighter" is not the same as everyone else's. in my defense, the bar is in hell, and i frequently play limbo with the devil.

so, enjoy? maybe?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus feels his leg jump up and down with racketing nerves, his gaze latched onto the door as he waits. He doesn't really appreciate having to wait, and his impatience is making him feel very fucking mean. He's not above killing an old man; the urge is absolutely there, and if Dumbledore doesn't—

"You look like you're about to come out of your skin, boy."

Wrong Dumbledore.

Regulus darts his gaze briefly to Aberforth, then looks away, staring at the door again. Aberforth moves over to sit down in the chair next to him, gazing upon the gargoyle door-knocker ruefully. Regulus ignores him, because Mayor Aberforth isn't really someone he's ever properly interacted with or gotten to know before, and he doesn't care to.

"You know that tree on the edge of my property back home, the one you became so fond of?" Aberforth asks. Regulus doesn't look at him, but he nods, and Aberforth sounds gruff when he continues to speak next. "My sister's ashes were buried beneath that tree."

Regulus does look at him then, purely because he's surprised. He didn't know that. He didn't even know there *was* a sister. He also has no idea what to say in response to this.

"Well, better to say—the tree was planted there for her, with her ashes," Aberforth corrects, clearing his throat. "Grew in memorial for her over the last five decades."

"Should I apologize?" Regulus asks, sort of just—reflexively, without even thinking, like an instinct. For fuck's sake, the tree grew from a dead girl's ashes, and Regulus was out there cutting up the bark with his daggers.

Aberforth grunts and shakes his head. "No, you don't need to. Ariana wouldn't have minded."

"Oh," Regulus says. He coughs. "Okay."

"She died in the arena, only fourteen years old," Aberforth tells him. "Nearly lived to see the end of the 34th hunger games. Second-to-last."

Regulus' stomach turns over. "That's—" He stops and gets no further, because there are really no words to encompass what that is. Tragic. Normal. Something all of them will always find horrible. Something all of them have known their entire lives. It's despicable. It happens all the time.

"The man who won instead of her is right through that door," Aberforth murmurs, nodding towards his brother's office.

And that. Well, that's something else entirely. Regulus thought he felt sick before, but no, no, this is true nausea. Siblings in the arena. Regulus and Sirius, Narcissa and Bellatrix—they were not the first. It's common for families of tributes to be reaped later, especially if the tributes become Victors. It's impossible to miss; so many from the Black family; Augusta and Frank; Rodolphus and Rabastan; Euphemia and James; so many others, those who didn't make it, and now two from the Dumbledores. It appears, when it comes to siblings being in the arena at the same time, history is doomed to repeat itself. Only one ever seems to make it out.

"Why are you telling me this?" Regulus mumbles.

"Because," Aberforth says with a sigh, "I wish I had someone to tell me then what I know now. What good does history do in secret? It just makes it easier to repeat. You and Sirius so painfully remind me of myself and Albus."

Regulus resists the urge to grind his teeth. "I don't really think Sirius and I are anything like you and him."

"No? You don't think so?" Aberforth chuckles throatily. "On the day of the reaping for 34th hunger games, the very first name that was called was mine." He swivels his head and meets Regulus' gaze. "Albus volunteered for me."

Regulus is pretty sure his stomach drops right out from underneath him. Okay, now he's in real danger of being sick. That's just…very fucking familiar.

"Albus was seven years older than me, ten years older than Ariana, and he always said he'd make sure nothing happened to us. He promised us that every year, and he intended to keep that promise, because I don't think there was a half a minute between my name being called and him raising his hand and calmly volunteering for me." Aberforth shakes his head, looking weary. "I didn't—it's one thing to think your older brother will do that for you, but something else entirely when it actually happens. *You* know that twice over now."

"Yes," Regulus whispers, "I do."

"Luck did not shine upon our family that day. Ariana's name was only in that bowl twice. It should have never been her. That saying—may the odds be ever in your favor… It originated from Albus," Aberforth informs him. "He said it to her for her first reaping and likely said it for the second. He always said it at the start. *The odds are in your favor.* But, well, they weren't. The next name that was called was Ariana's."

"The odds of that…"

"How well I know. I was taken out of the reaping when Albus volunteered for me, so I couldn't volunteer for her, and that was that. Of course, it came as no surprise to me when Albus ensured me that he would be getting Ariana home."

Regulus squeezes his eyes shut, helpless to the goosebumps that break out all over his body, a strange tingling sensation like he's a bell that's been rung, the past reaching out to him now and resonating so hard that he shudders.

"The games were a bit different back then, under Grindelwald as Master," Aberforth continues. "There was more time for the tributes in the Hallow before the games started, for one thing, and Grindelwald was…a bit more involved. It all took place in his castle. Parties, dinners, interviews, training, evaluations. The man himself would speak directly to the tributes, engage with them, and he did so with Albus."

Regulus' eyes snap open, and he looks at Aberforth with his lips parted. "Wait. Grindelwald was assassinated—"

"Don't go getting ahead of the history lesson now, boy," Aberforth mutters. "But—yes. Before that, though, you have to understand why. You see, as it turns out, Grindelwald became quite enamored with Albus. He fell in love with Albus and, against all odds, Albus fell in love with him in return."

"He—what?" Regulus blurts out, eyes widening. It feels like his brain short-circuits briefly out of sheer disbelief. How could he do that? How could someone who had their family ripped apart fall in love with the person who not only upheld the system that did it, but also had a hand in the ripping?

Aberforth doesn't look very pleased about it. "Yes, well, it never made much sense to me either. I always thought that Albus' belief that he was going to die anyway lended itself to his own acceptance of it. Because he meant he was going to go into that arena and do whatever it took to get Ariana home, and you want to know the worst part?"

Regulus doesn't want to know, because he feels ill, but he can't look away from Aberforth now, invested in this, hooked.

"He did," Aberforth says gruffly. "That's the worst part. He did absolutely everything he meant to. Got them both to the end. Kept her safe the entire time. And, when it was just them, he intended to kill himself. Said goodbye to me through a screen, started to say goodbye to Ariana, and then—" He halts, taking in a sharp breath before shaking his head jerkily. His top lip curls up in decades old resentment. "Well, Grindelwald didn't want to lose Albus, you see, and so Ariana was killed instead."

"That's why Albus killed him," Regulus whispers.

"When Albus made it home, he spent some of his new fortune on getting that tree planted for Ariana, but most of it he either gave to me or…saved," Aberforth continues. "He was—well, it consumed him. The guilt. The thirst for revenge. He went back to the Hallow and killed Grindelwald, then fled and… Hm, I don't know if he realized things would turn out as they have, all these years later, but he's devoted himself to trying to make up for past mistakes and unleash war in the name of dismantling the system that cost us our family."

"But he still had you," is what tumbles out of Regulus' mouth, painfully innocent and child-like, because it clambers through him like dissonance, just the way it's him for a moment and he's fifteen and Sirius won't see him and *you still have me, you came back and I'm still right here, why don't you want me, why am I not enough, why, why, why?*

Aberforth just looks at him, and he's an aged face, eyes wise and hard, so like his brother's and so very different at the same time, and Regulus knows then. Knows that Albus didn't have Aberforth. Knows exactly what that feels like, having your older brother volunteer for you, all that resentment and guilt that widens a divide too far too cross.

It's so much worse for them, Regulus can't help but think, because they lost someone they both loved. He tries to imagine how that would have felt. If, perhaps, Sirius had volunteered

for him and the next person to be called had been *James*. If, perhaps, Sirius had promised to get James home, only to fail in the end. If, perhaps, Sirius had zeroed in on revenge and left him in favor of war. So similar and yet not with all these different components and varying types of love, but it resonates like a ghost from another time who built the place you've taken up residence in, a home rearranged to be unrecognizable, but the frame is still the same.

"Listen to me, boy," Aberforth says gruffly. "My brother was not always a bad man. I…" He closes his eyes. "I don't know that he is now. He has done bad things, and he will do many more, but he has done good, too, and so shall he continue to. What I wish I knew then that I know now is that wrecking ourselves and the world in the name of family doesn't return all that you lost back to you. My sister is still dead, and my brother is a stranger, and he will never have me again. You can go as far as you're able and get nowhere. That's what I wish someone had told me. You'll get nowhere, Regulus."

Regulus stares at him, realizing all at once what the entire point of this was. Aberforth *is* trying to help, in his own way, though he's very far off the mark. He's trying to tell Regulus not to destroy himself in the name of helping Sirius, cautioning against going too far and doing whatever it takes, because rarely does that get the results one hopes for.

Regulus' face falls blank, eyes narrowing, and he pushes to his feet so he can look down his nose at Aberforth. "I'll get to wherever I damn well please, and do whatever I deem suitable to get there, because the difference between you and me is that my brother will *always* have me."

He doesn't wait to hear whatever response Aberforth could give to that, because no warning is going to stop him now, and he's tired of waiting around for moves to be made. With a scowl, Regulus marches up the door and tries the handle, finds it locked, then takes two bracing steps back and proceeds to kick the door in so hard that the wood splinters.

Albus Dumbledore is pacing.

Well, he was. He comes to a halt and stares at Regulus as the door swings slowly on its hinges, coming back from where it banged against the wall. Regulus steps inside and grips the splintered wood to slam it shut behind him. It won't stay fully, so it's a little cracked, but Regulus doesn't care.

"Ah," Albus says mildly, "do come in, Regulus."

"Thank you," Regulus replies sarcastically.

Albus clears his throat. "You'll forgive an old man for losing track of time. Patience is a virtue the youth often find on the outside of their grasp. I was once in the same rush as you."

"I won't forgive you, actually. You summoned me for a meeting and then made me wait an hour. I'm not a toy to play with, and I'm done waiting." Regulus moves forward to pull back the chair on the other side of the desk. He sits, then flicks his gaze between Albus and the chair on the other side, arching an eyebrow. "Let's talk."

"Very well," Albus murmurs, and he does dutifully sit and regard Regulus a beat later. "May I ask your thoughts on the recent broadcast from James?"

"He's being used," Regulus declares bluntly. "Riddle is making him do that, using Sirius as leverage against him. It's coercion, and he isn't to blame for it. Do not mark him as an enemy, because he isn't one, and if you do, you'll have more enemies from all sides as a result. I don't really think you're in a position to have another war on your hands."

"Are you threatening me, Regulus?" Albus asks, and he looks faintly amused, eyes twinkling.

Regulus shakes his head. "No, that's a promise. I'm just pointing out what you surely already know."

"I do know, yes," Albus agrees with a sigh. "James is a very important figure in this war. Regardless of coercion, the fact remains the same. The influence he has is vast and will get results, all of which will have a negative impact on *our* progress in this war. Riddle is very smart, Regulus. James is nothing more than a pawn to him, and one he's using well."

"I know," Regulus grits out. He can only imagine the loss of progress that happened in the aftermath of James' message. How many Hallow sympathizers changed their mind just because someone they idolized told them to? How many protests disbanded? How many people willing to help shut their doors, and how many people *wanting* to help started to want to help in the opposite direction?

"This is something that will require pushback," Albus informs him calmly. "We will have to combat the negative impact and allow them to gain no further ground."

"I understand that," Regulus says, because he does.

Albus is silent for a long moment, studying him, and then he finally says, "Do you? What do you understand?"

"You need me," Regulus announces, holding his gaze. "You said it was like chess, and you need your pawn, too." He spreads his hands and tilts his head. "Allow me to make this easier for you. I'll even tell you what to do. Your leverage over me is James and Sirius. *Use it."*

If Albus is surprised, he doesn't show it. He only gives a low chuckle and murmurs, "You're a very brilliant boy, you know."

"I know, and what I am not is an unwilling pawn, but for them, I will be a willing one," Regulus threads his hands together on top of the desk and leans forward, holding Albus' gaze with intensity. "A demanding one, though. You have to give me what I want if I'm to return the favor."

"I wouldn't label this as coercion, then," Albus says. "This is more of a deal, is it not?"

Regulus scoffs. "That would make you feel better, wouldn't it? But let's be honest here, because we both know what this is. You have the power to make me your pawn and move me as you see fit, all for your own benefit."

Albus frowns. "The war's benefit—"

"I don't care about the war. I don't care about a better world. I don't care about any of that, and you know it. You *know* what I care about, and you're going to use that, and I am going to *let you,"* Regulus snaps, in no mood to talk around the truth. He doesn't care for conversations that feel like verbal spars with no contact. It's strange to think of it now, but Regulus would have preferred to have discussions with Riddle, who spoke bluntly and never hid his intentions. He was self-aware and unmoored in flaunting his power, blunt and to the point, which Regulus finds much easier to deal with.

"I would at least like you to be aware of what I will be needing you for," Albus murmurs, eyebrows furrowed.

Regulus is pretty sure this man has never met someone he didn't have to manipulate in some way to get them to do what he wants when it's not what they want. Well, Regulus will just be the exception. "I am but your puppet. Go on, then, tell me how you'll make me dance."

Albus doesn't look pleased by this description, and Regulus wants to sneer at him. "What I would ask of you is to be a direct contrast to James in all of this. I have a secret informant within the Hallow, close to Riddle, who believes James will be used just as he was today. I want to give our own broadcast, one of which you will be the face of, should you agree."

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "Yes, I suspected as much. It makes sense, considering my relationship with James has been broadcasted and idolized. For us to be at odds will bring upon a significant shift. I know exactly what I'll have to do."

"You're willing, then?" Albus asks, and now he does look the faintest bit startled, as if he wasn't expecting this response. That's probably what he was pacing around about, trying to work out how he was going to get exactly this.

"Your willing pawn." Regulus gives a thin smile. "However, I do have my demands. I will do this, and I will do it well, but while I'm doing so, a rescue team needs to go retrieve James and my brother."

Albus stares at him. "That is a very tall order, Regulus."

"I'm aware, but I also know that it's the only shot we've got. Doing a broadcast will take everyone by surprise. It's the smallest window to get in and out undetected, or the only chance we'll have," Regulus says simply. "The focus will be on me. You may not be able to get into the Hallow directly, but it's not entirely inaccessible. The option to go in from district one is there, at least. Well, you can work out the details, I'm sure. That *is* your job, isn't it?"

"You ask of me an impossible mission that could get some people killed," Albus informs him.

Regulus shrugs. "I don't care."

"And if the team I send in consists of your friends?" Albus asks, a blatant challenge.

To that, Regulus has to pause. Oh. Oh, Albus is terrible. Truly fucking terrible. The thing is, Regulus *does* have people here who he cares about. Barty, Remus, Pandora, Dorcas, Effie, Monty, Andromeda, Narcissa. Some of the others he even likes. But, well, the thing is—these are the same people who would literally volunteer to go in the first place. The same people who would *demand* to go. These are the same people that Regulus believes in more than literally anyone else, and trusts, so he's not sure he'd want anyone else to go anyway.

It doesn't mean they'll all go, and going doesn't mean they'll die. It *doesn't.* No one has to die, if it's done right, if it all goes well. Regulus forces himself to take a deep breath, then release it, and he stares Albus down.

"Then you're smart, because my *friends* will get the mission done," Regulus retorts. "I *insist* on you sending them, in fact."

Albus sits on that for a second, clearly bested yet again, and then he sighs. "You realize, of course, that the odds of this being successful are nearly nonexistent."

"I've beaten worse odds, and so has Sirius and James," Regulus tells him simply. "It's a common thread between us all."

"Is this what it will take for your help?" Albus murmurs.

"Yes." Regulus nods sharply. "Allow me to persuade the leader in you. Riddle has his pawn—James—but only through Sirius as leverage. Take them both, and Riddle loses everything."

"Do you believe he will simply stand by and allow that to happen?" Albus asks. "Have you fooled yourself into thinking that Riddle will not kill them rather than let them go?"

"Riddle won't kill them for as long as he believes he can use them," Regulus replies coldly. His stomach squirms, a horrible feeling like he's about to be sick rocking within him, and it's taking all of his effort not to let his hands shake. "He would only kill them if he knew he was losing them, so obviously he can't find out about it until it's too late."

"You'll forgive me for finding it difficult to think of a way this would be possible," Albus mutters.

"No, I *won't* forgive you for it," Regulus snaps. "You're supposed to be in charge, right? So fucking figure it out. You want soldiers? You want me to fight for you? Then give me a fucking *reason.* You got the short end of the deal, because me? I don't give a shit about fighting in your stupid war, but to get them back, and I'll be right there with them—and theyll care enough to fight, to help however they can. You'll destabilize Riddle entirely. Isn't that what you want? You can have it, okay? You can have that, but I need—just—I need—"

Regulus chokes off, physically biting down on his tongue, trying not to show how desperate he is. Albus regards him in silence. He says nothing.

"This is all on you," Regulus whispers. "Aberforth told me how you volunteered for him and went into your games with your little sister, you know. How you went to Hallow and fell in love with the previous Master, the one *you* killed after he killed Ariana. Then Riddle came in, the Quarterly Memorial came about, and here we are. Everything has a source, doesn't it? At the source of all our problems, it's you. *You're* the first domino that fell, and I'm—I'm not

going to repeat your mistakes, or the mistakes of your brother. Do you understand what I'm saying? You were the start. You *owe* me."

Again, Albus says nothing. His gaze remains infuriatingly neutral, and Regulus has these horrible, violent impulses in the aftermath of the arena, just like his first. He has a visceral mental image of slamming a dagger through the side of Albus' neck, simply because he won't do what Regulus needs him to. Regulus is so desperate he wants to draw blood. He can't draw Albus', as that would be counterproductive; all that's left is himself, and so he cracks himself open and lets himself bleed.

"Please," Regulus rasps, laid bare to the bone, like all of his scars have split open again. "If I can't persuade the leader in you, then let me persuade the man who knows what it is to be in love, let me persuade the brother you are. I love James, and Sirius is my brother. *Please."*

Albus sucks in the tiniest, little breath, like perhaps he felt that cut deep, and it would, it has to, considering his own history. Regulus' pride means nothing to him now, and just as easily as the past can resonate with Regulus, the future can resonate with Albus. It tugs at something within, family and loss and ashes beneath a tree and a brother who has a brother and brother who doesn't.

Aberforth gave him history in the hopes he wouldn't repeat it, and whether or not he knows it, Regulus is using it to do just that. Maybe Albus and Aberforth lost everything, but Regulus refuses to. He won't lose Sirius and James. He just won't.

Wielding history like a weapon works. The past resonates like the butterfly effect, the man before him now who volunteered for his little brother and had no way of knowing it would cost him everything, and lead right to this, to Regulus sitting right here in front of him with demands that he fix his mistakes.

Maybe it's that, or maybe it's the way Regulus sits before him, a little brother pleading to an older one on the behalf of his own; or maybe it's the way Regulus sits before him, a man viciously in love begging one who experienced love's most vicious parts to save him from them; or maybe it's all of it.

Whatever it is, it does work.

Albus exhales, inclines his head, and says, "We have a deal."

~•~

Remus looks around at the odd grouping of people, not quite understanding what's happening at the moment. Lily is next to him, and next to her is Kingsley. Across the table, Regulus sits beside Dorcas. Dumbledore, who Remus does *not* like, sits at the head of the table.

This is about James somehow, isn't it? That's all Remus can think, because the broadcast happened only a few hours ago, and Regulus was immediately summoned to Dumbledore's office before anything could properly happen, though things did happen even after he was escorted away. The Phoenix itself has been in a state of chaos ever since, people angry, people slandering James left and right, labeling him a war criminal, a turncoat. Remus wanted to scream at them all.

Don't talk about him. Take his name out of your fucking mouths. He's one of mine, you don't know him, and I pity the state of your lives for never being fortunate enough to.

Effie nearly took a man's head off for suggesting James should be put down, and it took the combined efforts of Minerva and Pandora to pull her away. Monty had looked fit for cheering his wife on, and then when the man didn't shut up, Monty punched him in the face. After that, it was a surge of people scrambling to come to his and Effie's defense, like a wave spilling out from all sides, Mary there in a heartbeat and Barty right behind, Remus moving before he even knew what he was doing, though none of them got to actually fight. The only person who did, ironically, was little Nymphadora, who ran right in and kicked the man in the ankles, which of course brought Andromeda, and *that* brought Narcissa, and…

Well, needless to say, a clear divide had been set with all the separate parts of those who came in from the rescue missions, along with district six, standing together to stand against everyone else. They were severely outnumbered, of course, but that's a lot of fucking dangerous people in one group, enough to make any crowd hesitate. Remus is pretty sure he's never felt a rush of pure adrenaline like that in his life.

In the end, Kingsley took charge and completely steamrolled the entire situation by reminding everyone that violence and infighting within the Phoenix was *not* permitted, and everyone who did it anyway would go to solitary.

The whole scene broke up after that, but the rush had stayed with Remus after. Just that feeling. A feeling he can't even put a name to, really. All of them were there together. The servants who took their first act of freedom to move when he did, just following him without question. The tributes, too, all the way down to Alice, even, who barely has any life in them these days, yet was there like they had found their spark. And everyone in between; the rescued Hallows like Pandora, and even Huey was there, as much as he seems allergic to conflict of any sort; those in the Order, like Dorcas, Kingsley, Lily, Minerva, Sybill, and Amos.

Something about it, all of them together, it had sent a tingle down Remus' spine in a way he can't explain. A group of at least sixty people, he imagines, and it's not an insignificant number in the least. Not even half of the people against them, and yet Remus thinks they would have won. Could have won. Somewhere in all of that, in knowing that, Remus felt a rush.

But now…this. Remus still doesn't know what this is. It's not a punishment for what happened earlier, because not everyone involved is here—though, not everyone could fit into this room. It's not anything to do with the rescue missions from before, because, again, not everyone involved is here. So, it's about James' broadcast?

"I've gathered you all here because there is a mission coming up, and I would like to ask all of you to do it," Dumbledore says, and Remus is immediately not on board. Fuck this man, honestly. Remus will never, never, never forgive him for how he lied to Lily, intentional or not. He caused her such pain. Years worth. Remus would sooner spit on him than do a mission for him. "The mission, should you choose to accept it, will be to retrieve Sirius and James from within the Hallow."

Remus is immediately on board.

Unfuck this man, or whatever. Well, no, he's still awful and Remus will never like him, but this is a mission he can get behind. His hands are already shaking, and his gaze snaps to Regulus. Oh, Regulus, such a brilliant man. He did it. Remus doesn't know how, but he fucking *did it.*

"Yes," announces Lily, the first to speak. Remus can't find his voice, can't quite catch his breath, but Lily is sitting tall with her chin tilted up. This has sat between the two of them since Remus arrived, just that Lily was the one who took charge of the rescue mission in the arena and failed to get Sirius out, and Sirius is the man Remus loves. It's horrible, and they both know it, even if it's unsaid, but Lily would have cared more if she knew Remus' involvement, because she didn't care when she was declaring to the world that Sirius got left behind and was likely dead. Remus heard it from her, his best friend, like a hot brand piercing through him, so callous, and how do they ever come back from that fully? Like this, apparently, because Lily doesn't even hesitate. "Yes, I'll do it. I'm in."

"Me," Remus chokes out, practically fucking vibrating. He can't really form full sentences. "Yes."

"Absolutely I'm in," Dorcas agrees next, her eyes bright, and for the first time since they all came into the room, Lily and Dorcas actually look at each other, equally eager to do this.

"I'm willing as well," Kingsley says simply, possibly the calmest person in the room at the moment, excluding maybe Dumbledore himself. They both radiate that sense of serenity, but Kingsley's seems to be sincere, while Dumbledore's seems more sinister in nature. "Will I be taking point?"

"You will indeed be taking point," Dumbledore announces, and everyone focuses on him. "Now that I've gotten your agreement, I'll explain how this is going to go. Mr. Lupin, you are vital to this mission, because you're the only person in this room who has been in Azkaban."

Remus feels something within him wilt, his stomach dropping out from underneath him. "What do you need to know?"

"Is there an office that has the information of all prisoners, including their cells?" Dumbledore asks.

"Yes," Remus admits. "It's above the level where the—as where the prisoners get taken. The lower levels. It's—I've seen the offices before, but I've never been in them, not since I was

first integrated into the system six years ago. I just—I don't know if they'll have a list of cells assigned or not."

"For a system to run smoothly—even a prison system—having an organized database is ideal," Dumbledore murmurs. "It will be the best place to start, at the very least, and you will have as much time as Regulus can grant you."

Everyone stops and stares at Regulus.

"I—" Regulus pauses, the muscle in his cheek jumping, visibly clenching his jaw. "I won't be going. For this to be possible, I'll have to do my part from here."

"Riddle will be utilizing James in another broadcast," Dumbledore says, and Remus doesn't like how he says it. *Utilizing James,* as if James is just a tool. "I have a secret informant within the Hallow who informs me that James is willing to do these broadcasts in exchange for visits to Sirius in Azkaban. As soon as his broadcast ends, he's escorted from Riddle's castle to Azkaban, and that's the only window of accessibility to both of them that we'll have."

"That sounds like a small window," Dorcas mutters.

"It will be," Dumbledore confirms. "From here, Filius will follow James' broadcast with one of our own, which will be Regulus, who will keep Riddle—and, by extension, the rest of the Hallow—busy and focused on him, hopefully allowing the rest of you to break into Azkaban and get them out."

Kingsley leans forward on his elbows. "How will we be infiltrating the Hallow, since the station there is monitored?"

"You'll be going in through district one," Dumbledore explains calmly. "Filius has a friend there named Pomona Sprout, who works in one of the main labs for the Hallow. That lab sends out shipments of medicine and various other experimental things to Azkaban frequently. You will all be snuck in that way, hidden in the back of the container, undetected."

"Trojan Horse," Regulus mumbles, and he laughs quietly, shaking his head in a mixture of awe and incredulity.

Dumbledore flicks his gaze towards him. "Just so. There will, of course, be a stopping point at the entrance to the Hallow in which the container will be checked. Ms. Sprout has informed us that it's not very thorough, but we'll take further precaution by having one crate empty, which all of you will stay in."

"Wait, like…" Lily grimaces. "You mean we're going to be packed in a small box inside a bigger box?"

"To simplify it, yes," Dumbledore confirms.

"How are we going to *breathe?"* Dorcas blurts out.

"You will be equipped with oxygen tanks to…ease the strain, but conserving your oxygen as much as possible is ideal."

"We're going to be suffocating. That's what you're saying."

Regulus heaves a sigh. "Yes, but really slowly, so you'll live."

"Oh, well, in that case," Dorcas mutters with a scoff.

"You'll be going directly to Azkaban," Dumbledore continues. "Once you're there, Ms. Sprout will break open your crate and free you, and then the rest will be up to you."

"Okay, I can see getting in as a possibility," Lily allows, her eyes narrowing, "but what's our route *out?"*

"Far from glamorous, I'm afraid," Dumbledore says. "You will be equipped with tools to override the surveillance feed within Azkaban for fifteen minutes. *Only* fifteen minutes. That is your only window to avoid detection from cameras, but you'll still be at risk of discovery by people within the building, so—"

"There's not, like, guard patrols or anything," Remus interrupts, clearing his throat when everyone swivels their heads to look at him. "Well, I mean…it's literally a prison. Everyone is in cells. Guards mostly stay in their rec room, and anyone in administration will be in their offices. If we do it quickly and quietly, we can break into one office without alerting anyone and get the information on where Sirius' cell is, then sneak to get him. It's—it *is* possible to do it quietly."

"Yes, that is the idea," Dumbledore agrees. "It's a mission depending heavily on stealth, and the biggest problem you'll face is time. You'll be racing against the clock, even with Regulus doing what he can from here. Riddle is intelligent far more than most realize. He won't easily be fooled."

"I'm still not understanding how we get *out,"* Lily says.

"Ah, yes, that," Dumbledore replies. "Filius is working his way into servers now to retrieve blueprints of the prison, as well as what's beneath it. Azkaban operates on a lone sewer system underneath. You'll need to travel through it to where the waste runs off from the large pipes. There, Ms. Sprout will be waiting to carry you back to district one."

"Shit and piss," Dorcas declares flatly. "We're going to be wading through literal shit and piss."

"Well, Riddle won't expect it, at least," Lily mutters dryly.

"You will all be sent out to district one to wait with Ms. Sprout ahead of time," Dumbledore murmurs. "I will be notified when James is escorted to Azkaban, and that's when you will go in. If, at any time, Azkaban's breach is discovered, the entire Hallow will respond. They will put up roadblocks, send Aurors out after you, and you'll more than likely be captured or killed before you can make it out."

"There are about ten different holes in this plan," Dorcas announces, staring right at Dumbledore. "You realize that, don't you? This plan is shit. It likely won't work."

"I know," is all Dumbledore says.

Dorcas' eyes narrow. "So, why are you doing this?"

"Because I insisted on it," Regulus snaps. "Look, it's the only shot we've got, alright? It's a shitty plan, sure, but if anyone can pull it off, whatever it takes, it's all of you. I don't care how you get it done. Just *get it done."*

To that, all protests and doubts come to a halt. No one says anything, but they all look around at each other in silence. It's an insane plan. It's an insane thing to do, to go right into the heart of the very place they're labeled as anarchists, to go when the odds of making it out are very fucking slim. It's an insane idea, risking capture or torture or death, or all of it.

"So," Dumbledore says softly, "I will give all of you one more chance to opt out of this mission, because if you do not, you will have two days to prepare, and then you'll leave."

It seems no one here is sane, because—even given the chance, and knowing all they do—no one changes their answer.

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Word travels fast around the Phoenix—this, Dorcas knows well. It's sort of hard to ignore when a mission is coming up, because those involved are taking the time to prepare, and various people are rushing about to get supplies and such.

For example, they've all been training in the two days before they're all set out to leave. Brushing up with guns, brushing up on mats in the training room, brushing up on how to all

work the supplies they'll be equipped with. There was, of course, the natural spillage from those involved to those who are not, yet deserve to know. Remus told Effie and Monty. Lily told Mary. Regulus told Narcissa and Andromeda. Dorcas told Minerva. In no time, Pandora had found out about it, and then more and more people knew, and then everyone knew.

Somehow, inevitably, Marlene finds out about it, and Dorcas isn't expecting it to be the thing that brings Marlene to her door, but it is. After everything, it's this.

"Marlene," Dorcas blurts out, her heart thundering hard in her chest just from the mere sight of her, just from the proximity.

"Dorcas," Marlene retorts sharply, then pushes the door open further and backs Dorcas into the room, sweeping in so swiftly that Dorcas just naturally goes stumbling back. The moment she's in, Marlene slams the door shut. "You're leaving, then?"

"I—yes, in a few hours," Dorcas admits.

Marlene holds her gaze and says, "Swap with me."

"What?"

"Swap with me."

Dorcas stares at her. "Swap—what? No."

"No?" Marlene asks. "Why not, Dorcas? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't go instead of you."

"Marlene—"

"Go on. Give me a reason. Can you?"

"It's—" Dorcas swallows, her heart racing, a drip of dread dropping down her back. "You—for fuck's sake, Marlene, you only just got out of the arena—"

"And I'm all healed up." Marlene holds out both arms, lifts them above her head, then drops them back down to her sides. Her eyes are glinting, locked right on Dorcas without wavering at all. "I'm physically capable. I'm as mentally stable as you and everyone else. That's not a good reason, and it's certainly not *your* reason, is it?"

"What are you talking about?" Dorcas rasps.

Marlene steps closer. "You know what I'm talking about. You *know* the real reason you won't swap and let me go in your place. It's always the fucking entitlement with you Hallows, isn't it? All of you. Sure, surface level, you're not like them, but deep down? You're no different from the rest."

Dorcas is frozen in place, knees locked, every muscle in her body bunched up. She feels that accusation like a slap. It's hard to breathe, suddenly. Harder, still, to look Marlene in the eye, yet she can't drag her gaze away.

"Just like the rest, when you want something, you deem it yours," Marlene continues, utterly ruthless about it. "You claim it, you idolize it, and you don't respect it for what it is, only for what it means to you."

"No," Dorcas croaks. "No, Marlene, that's not—"

"You *don't* respect me," Marlene snaps. "You *lied* to me. All of it, everything, was a lie. And it wasn't that you *couldn't* tell the truth; it was that you were too scared to. Because *you* knew me—you got that chance, since I didn't have the option of hiding—so, you saw all of me, and I let you, and you *knew* I would want everything you didn't want for me if I knew the truth. You made sure I didn't get a choice. You *chose* to keep me in the dark; not for me, but for *you."*

Dorcas' eyes sting, her chest feeling tight, because it's true. She knows it's true. She knows and has known this from the very first opportunity to recruit Marlene that she didn't take, all in the name of protecting her, but it was a selfish desire that she indulged in, because she knew then what Marlene would want. She knew, and she didn't care. She knew, and she did what *she* wanted anyway, on purpose.

She doesn't even have the luxury of feigning innocence, or pretending not to know, and maybe things would be easier if she did, but she doesn't and she can't. She did this. She chose this. Here and now, despite everything and as horribly fucked up as it is, she still wouldn't choose differently. Hallow to the bone, entitled as they come, and running on desperate love. Aching with it. Lost in it. Trapped with no way out.

"I know you were watching the games. I know you were watching me. I know you saw my boggart, and Dorcas? I am *not* her. I will never be her, not even for you." Marlene steps that final step, so close that they're almost touching, so close that their breaths are mingling. "Is that who you'd rather me be? Is that what you want? You want to own me? Put me up somewhere, soft and safe, delicate and secure?"

Dorcas inhales sharply, gaze snapping up as she breaks out into goosebumps from the pure horror those words invoke. She shakes her head. "No. *No,* Marlene, that isn't what I want. I want *you,* just as you are."

"Really? Because I can't tell. Because I was born and bred in the arena, Dorcas. Someone died there and came out as *this.* As me," Marlene hisses, gesturing to herself harshly. "Don't you fucking get it? You did everything to shield me from war, up to and including *starting* the fucking war to save me, but I *am* war. Everything you wanted to protect me from, I was made for. It exists in me already, and you *can't* take that away from me."

"That's not all that you are," Dorcas whispers.

"Maybe not," Marlene agrees, "but a stylist isn't all that you are, is it? We don't get to pick and choose the parts of people we love, Dorcas. For me, it has to be all or nothing. I need to be loved for the monster I am just as much as I need to be loved for the monster I'm not."

"You are," Dorcas breathes out, blinking hard and fast, a lump in her throat and tears building in her eyes. "I love all of you, Marlene. I love all of you, and more."

"You have a real poor way of showing it!" Marlene bursts out, her voice raising to a shout. "You started a fucking war for me, and I didn't ask you to do that! Do you know how *heavy* that is, Dorcas?! You can't just put that on someone! I have to live with that now, and the worst part is that I have to live with knowing you didn't even do it for me; you did it for *you!"*

"Yes, okay?! You want the truth?! I did it for me!" Dorcas explodes, flinging her arms out as her vision blurs and her chest heaves. "Is that what you want to hear?! *Yes,* I started a war to save you, and *yes,* I lied to you, and *yes,* I did absolutely everything in my power to keep you safe even while *knowing* you'd want to be involved. Yes, all of it, because I'm so fucking selfish, so fucking entitled, so fucking crazy in love with you that I can't bear the thought of losing you!"

Silence rings between them like the aftermath of an explosion, the stuffy pressure of sound you can't make out over the noise of your own heart, your own breathing, the rumble of the earth beneath your feet. Dorcas feels unsteady, shaking, because she knew at the heart of her that it was this all along, she really did, but to be torn apart by the honesty in it is something else entirely. The war was Dorcas' priority for so long, and then it was Marlene, and the same ferocity in which she gave the war her all, she does the same to Marlene. Devotion to the point of detriment. A toxic waste type of love.

"There it is," Marlene whispers, finally. "There you are. Yeah, Dorcas, that's exactly what I want to hear, because I want the *truth.* Don't hide from me. Let me see all of you."

"I don't even see all of me," Dorcas croaks. "I don't want to see all of me, because some of it isn't pretty."

"You think I care about that?" Marlene asks. "In case you've forgotten, you're not the only monster in this room. But you knew that, and yet you still claim to love me anyway."

"I don't claim it. I know it."

"Don't you want that in return?"

"Yes," Dorcas confesses, "but I don't think I'll get it."

Marlene holds her gaze. "Try me."

"I—" Dorcas swallows thickly, then squeezes her eyes shut and turns her face away, ashamed. "I'm not sorry. I'd do it all again, Marlene, because you're alive and you're here. And it—it doesn't feel selfish to me. I don't *feel* entitled to you. I don't view you as spoils of war. I prioritize you, your safety, your life over everything and everyone else. I love you so much that I think, if I lost you, I would set the whole world on fire."

"Is that so?" Marlene asks quietly.

Dorcas exhales shakily, opens her eyes, and looks at Marlene tentatively. "There are no good people in war, and I certainly never tried to be. I'm not a good person, and I haven't been entirely good to you, no matter how much I wish I had been, no matter how much I wish I could be. And it—it should probably scare you. Sometimes, it scares me."

"It doesn't," Marlene murmurs, her hand coming up slowly, fingers curled, ever so gently caressing the curve of Dorcas' neck and making her breath stutter. Marlene's voice is soft, so soft, when she says, "It doesn't scare me a bit. Do you want to know why? Because I get it. Because what's worse than all that you did is that it doesn't even matter. I'm still so in love with you that, sometimes, I think I could kill you myself, just so no one could ever take you away from me. And I think, in my worst moments, I even want to. Does that scare you?"

"No," Dorcas breathes out, lips parting as her eyes flutter shut, leaning instinctively into Marlene's touch. It's mental, pure insanity, but Dorcas thinks she'd let her, thinks she'd like it, even. "I told you, I like it rough."

"It's not sustainable, though," Marlene mumbles, and her hand drops away, nearly dragging a whine right out of Dorcas' throat at the loss. Dorcas' eyes snap open, and Marlene frowns at her. *"We're* not sustainable, Dorcas. This—it doesn't work. We can't work like this."

"Marlene," Dorcas whispers, plaintive now, aching.

Marlene swallows. "I can forgive you for what you've done, because I wouldn't have done differently, and—and I know it was done out of love, not malice. But you have to respect me and my choices if this is ever going to work." She waves her hand between them. "If *we* are ever going to work, it has to be mutual respect and no more hiding. We do this *together*. I want to do this, and despite everything, I want to do it with you."

"You won't be safe," Dorcas chokes out.

"Neither will you," Marlene tells her. "You haven't been. You won't be on this mission. Give me one reason—a good one that isn't selfish—why I should have to be the one that has to stay."

Dorcas licks her lips, mouth dry, mind racing. She holds her breath for a moment, then exhales and rasps, "You have family. You have Cordelia, Riker, and Maximus. You—you go beyond this war. Whether or not you're made for it, you exist outside of it. You exist past this war. You exist for more than the war."

"You think you don't?" Marlene asks.

"I can't remember a time that I ever did," Dorcas admits, blinking past the stinging in her eyes. "Not until you. Do you understand? You have to make it through this war. I need you to, and so many others need you to. People need you, Marlene. But me? No one needs me."

"I do," Marlene says, gentle almost. "I need you."

Dorcas looks away again, or tries to, because her eyes are burning and she's nearly in tears, but Marlene cups her jaw and moves in, presses closer and rests their foreheads together like that. Dorcas squeezes her eyes shut, feeling the tears itch their way down her cheeks, feeling Marlene's thumb swipe one of the teartracks away, so careful about it.

"I need you, and I'm asking you to prioritize *us*. Not just me, but us," Marlene whispers. She kisses Dorcas, fleeting and soft and so very loving. There's so much desperation to be found in the way Marlene's fingers tremble and her breathing shakes, just as desperate as Dorcas feels. "Swap with me. Please."

"Is this an ultimatum?" Dorcas croaks.

"At least I'm giving you the choice," Marlene replies.

"I'd rather you kill me, I think," Dorcas tells her, and it comes out as a whimper, her heart clenching violently in her chest.

A shaky laugh spills out of Marlene's mouth. "Honestly, that could be arranged."

"Make it hurt," Dorcas mumbles.

"No, for you, I'd be so gentle," Marlene whispers, breath spilling out hot and trembling along Dorcas' jaw. Her mouth follows, slow and sweet. "Swap with me."

Dorcas sucks in a sharp breath and holds it, reaching out to grab the sides of Marlene's shirt, fingers flexing in the fabric. She stands there on the precipice, trembling, selfish with Marlene in so many ways, selfish enough to know that refusing her would keep her protected but make Dorcas lose her, yet wanting her so badly that she's on the edge of risking her just to keep her. She hangs in the balance for a long moment, teetering from side-to-side, in equal parts desperate in either direction, clashing on the inside, made up of war as much as the woman touching her.

It is an impossible situation, but the solution has been given to her. Marlene said it. Marlene was right; they're not sustainable as they are, and they won't make it through the war anyway, if they continue like this, at least not together. Dorcas wants to make it through together, both of them. She started the war for Marlene, and she wants to end it at her side. She doesn't want to set the world on fire. She wants to do this right.

There are no good people in war, but there are people who try to be, and it's not the war they'll fight that Dorcas wants to be a good person in, but rather the war within them both that they can never win—and that's why she pulls Marlene close to hold her tight, keeping her, as she says, "Okay."

Marlene goes still against her, then reels back to meet her gaze, studying her. "Okay? We'll swap?"

"We'll swap," Dorcas confirms, swallowing harshly. She carefully eases the ring—Marlene's ring—off her finger, then slips it onto Marlene's thumb while holding her gaze. "We'll swap, but you have to promise me you'll come back. Promise?"

"I promise," Marlene vows immediately, fiercely, and then she kisses her, holding her face in her hands and kissing her like that's enough to make sure that promise never breaks.

The war within wages on, yet here they are, trying for peace.

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Lily shrugs her pack on her shoulders, letting her gaze sweep across the bustling activity around her at the underground station. Her lips curl up at the sight of Sybill and Kingsley, hugging each other in a tight goodbye. To the right of them, Regulus stands with Effie and Monty, talking to Remus, who gives a weak smile when Monty reaches out to squeeze his shoulder. Farther to the left, Dorcas is standing in a circle with Minerva, Poppy, and… Marlene, which is surprising.

Lily watches them for a long moment, admittedly curious about the dynamic. Marlene seems a little uncomfortable around Minerva, which is fair. Lily thinks it's commendable that Marlene hasn't tried to kill Minerva at any point, because despite her true loyalties, she still did her job as the head gamemaker *very* well, right up until she didn't. Making the right choice in the end can't change all the wrong she did before. Dorcas can forgive her, and has, but Marlene has every right to not want to. So, Lily can respect the restraint Marlene shows by being in Minerva's presence without lashing out.

In a way, Lily gets it. She had lashed out at Dumbledore when she found out he'd lied about Remus. Planned to shoot him. Would have if Kingsley hadn't gotten in the way. She'll never forgive that man, and she'll never again be the weapon he forged her into. Everything she does now, all of it, isn't fueled by the absence of love, but built upon the foundation of it.

It's new. She's still getting used to it, honestly. Just that insane concept that she isn't empty, or careless, or loveless; the reality that she's full of how much she cares and overflowing with how much she loves. Fuck, it's terrifying just how many people she cares about, how many people she loves, how many people she wants to let get close to her.

This was something she was accustomed to, before. Six years ago, she loved fiercely and with no fear. Fought for that love, and then lost so much. Lost herself, too, in the process, but she's getting it back. Slowly but surely, she's getting some of it back. Herself, most of all.

The sound of heels reaches Lily's ears, making her lips curl up. She knows that sound. She can always hear Mary coming, and these days, she's always listening for her.

"You'll be careful, won't you?"

"Worried about me, Mary?" Lily asks, turning around, letting her smile stretch wider.

Mary, as always, looks unimpressed. "Worried about your knack for doing insane shit, more like. I hear it's a stealth mission. You don't strike me as someone who knows how to be quiet. Everything about you is loud."

"There's a compliment somewhere in there," Lily muses, and Mary's lips twitch. "But, if you *must* know, I'm actually very good at being quiet. Sometimes."

"When your mouth is otherwise occupied, you mean?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Not more than you'd like for me to find out," is Mary's calm, casual response.

Lily purses her lips. "Well, that's a given. *Not more,* you said. Maybe just as much, then?"

"Stop flirting," Mary chides. She has a 'teacher voice' that's just on the edge of scolding, a little firm, and Lily isn't into it in abstract, but Mary has added a special little flare to it when talking to Lily, *specifically* for Lily and Lily alone, in which there's a little bit of a condescension in it, as well as warm exasperation somehow—and *that* is something Lily is into. Oh, mercy on her soul, she's *so* into it. "I mean it, Lily. This is—I know it's going to be dangerous."

"Well, now you actually *do* sound worried," Lily murmurs.

Mary sighs and mutters, "Bingley would be sad if you died."

"Oh, *Bingley* would, would he?" Lily teases, though she knows that's actually true. Bing Bing is Lily's little buddy. Practically her partner in crime, at this point. They're always whispering and giggling together, just to make Mary look at them with suspicion, a smile hidden at the corners of her mouth. Bingley keeps giving Lily less-than-subtle hints on how to woo Mary, because he thinks his older sister should have a cool partner.

It's cute, really. Lily doesn't need *help,* exactly, but she takes his tips in stride. Bingley really loves Mary, and in the wake of them losing their parents, they're very close. Mary hasn't said explicitly that she and Bingley are a package deal, but she doesn't have to, honestly. Lily is very aware that Mary is raising her little brother, and it doesn't keep Lily from wanting to be around at all. If anything, it makes her want to be around even more, like a moth drawn to a flame.

She can't help it. There's something special about them and their bond. Bingley is a hilarious kid, kind as well, but he's not without his troubles. He went through a traumatic event and lost his parents, watched his sister kill people, and now finds himself stuck in an underground bunker that will never feel like home. Lily has seen him in a sour mood, snapping at Mary,

cursing her. She's seen him yell at Mary, say things only young teenagers say because they're angry at the world and the people closest to them are the only targets they have, and she's seen the exhausted, worn look on Mary's face that grew more tense and strained with each word he said until she asked Lily to leave, her voice clipped and her hands shaking.

So, Lily left, and the next time she saw them, they were fine, as if it never happened. Lily knows all about that, fights with your sibling and the love that still exists thereafter. Mary and Bingley are a small, broken family now, and they're trying, and Lily is addicted to the sight of the love she can see holding them together, even through everything. Perhaps selfishly, she craves acceptance within the fold. She just—all she wants is to be around them all the time. It's like they have their own gravitational pull, and Lily is desperate to be tugged in.

Mary invites her in, or has been since the first time she did. Only three days ago, but Lily has been back multiple times. When she's not with Remus, she's with Mary and Bingley. Ironically, they don't do much. Mary draws sometimes. Lily and Bingley fold up paper and make goals with their hands, thumping it through and laughing when they score.

Sometimes, they all talk about ridiculous things, like would they rather take a bath in rice or pudding—a question posed by the ever-brilliant mind of Bingley. Sometimes, they avoid talking about serious things, like the war and death, trying to skirt around the subjects for Bingley's sake, and maybe a little for Lily and Mary's, too. Most of the time, they're just wasting time with each other, doing nothing much at all.

It's probably Lily's favorite thing to do. When she thinks about what she *wants* to do, it's always that. And, since she's trying to let herself want things and have the things she wants, more often than not she lets her feet take her right to them.

Only once was Bingley off with his friends when Lily showed up, which was yesterday. Naturally, Lily's mind had pretty much immediately went to sex, but Mary wasn't having it. She let her in, sure, but told her to sit on Bingley's bed across the room and *stay* there. Lily did.

They didn't talk about sex. Well, no, they did, but not sex between them. Just their sexual history, sort of. As it turns out, Mary doesn't *do* casual sex, not the way Lily does, or did. She doesn't mind casual sex, but she doesn't have sex that doesn't mean the same thing to her partner as it does her. All she ever saw from with Lily is that sex never meant anything to her,

nor did the people she was having sex with, because that's how Lily presented it and that's how Lily liked it.

Lily found out that Mary was with Sirius Black once upon a time (ironic, Lily couldn't help but think, and she immediately went back and gossiped with Remus about it, who knew and found the partner shuffle hilarious), and the relationship between Mary and Sirius had been new. It was special, according to Mary, and could have been something—except they got that taken from them.

Mary had to watch that wither and die, through no fault of their own, and ever since, sex and relationships are things she treats with care. She needs to have control in it, an input in it, and she needs it to be an equal exchange. Lily was not someone who could give her that, from what Mary saw at the start, and *that's* why Mary turned down her advances.

Lily can respect that. She does respect that. The thing is, after that, there's the natural next step in that line of thinking. Lily *couldn't* give her that then, but can she now? Mary didn't outright ask, and she talked around the subject overall, but Lily had wanted to tell her the truth, which is that she doesn't know if she can give Mary that, doesn't even know how anymore, but she does know that she really, *really* wants to.

Is that enough on its own? Lily has no idea. She didn't say it, didn't say anything, and instead, she changed the subject.

It turned out to be good, in the end. They didn't have sex, but they laughed. Mary drew Lily a pretty picture. Lily learned that Mary started transitioning before Bingley was ever born, and she chose her name after her Gran who had passed away a few years prior. Mary listened when Lily told a story about Petunia. Lily made Mary toss over her pencil and drawing pad to leave a little message, which was the not-so-original: *Lily Evans was [X]*. It made Mary laugh again, so fuck originality.

In any case, Lily hasn't seen Mary since, because today has been rather busy with the upcoming missions and all. Yet, here she is now, acting like *Bingley* is the only one who would be sad if Lily died. Oh, Lily doesn't buy that for a second.

Mary seems to realize this, because she gives in with a roll of her eyes and says, "Yeah, well, I'd be a little let down if you weren't around to keep Bingley company, too."

"And you?" Lily asks, amused. "Wouldn't you be at least a little let down if I wasn't around to keep *you* company?"

"Maybe," Mary says, lips curling up.

Lily snorts. "Alright, well, in that case, I'll make sure I get back in one piece. Can't leave you disappointed, can I?"

"You disappoint me daily, pretty much every time you talk."

"Well, it's not my fault you're not otherwise occupying my mouth. Modern problems, timeless solutions."

"I opened myself up to that one, didn't I?" Mary asks wryly.

"You did, yeah," Lily teases.

Mary shakes her head, a smile breaking out across her face, which steals Lily's breath every fucking time. "Don't let it go to your head, but I would be disappointed. Really."

"I'll be careful, Mary," Lily murmurs, turning serious now, and a tension Lily didn't even know was there sort of falls away from Mary, her shoulders inching down a little. It makes Lily's heart clench. She forgot somehow that this whole caring and loving business is a two-way street, usually. It feels good to let people mean something to her again, and it feels just as good to mean something to someone else, to a lot of people.

"Thank you," Mary whispers, stepping forward, so close that Lily inhales sharply and goes utterly still.

Mary cups the side of her jaw and carefully dips in, ducking her head to brush a soft, fleeting kiss to Lily's cheek. Lily feels like the contact is burning a hole right through her. She's so tempted to tilt her face up and seek more, or even grab onto Mary and pull her closer, hold onto her, but this moment is gossamer-golden and fragile for how terrified Lily is to break it. She wants to keep it, just like this.

"I'll see you when you get back," Mary says as she pulls away, her lips curling up again as Lily stares at her, lips parted, likely looking like a fool on the edge of fainting, because she has forgotten how to breathe in the last five seconds.

It takes a moment, but then Lily clears her throat violently and nods. "Right. Yeah, that—you will do that. See me. That will happen. You'll—yeah."

"Alright?"

"Yes. That was nice. What you did. I liked it."

"I can tell," Mary replies, chuckling. She reaches out and gently brushes her fingers over the side of Lily's hand, slowly and casually grabbing onto two fingers, the pinky and ring finger, swinging her hand almost playfully. "Your reputation around here… They have you all wrong, don't they? And so did I. You're a softie. A total marshmallow."

"People are rarely ever one thing," Lily points out.

Mary's eyes sparkle, glimmering like the glint of volcanic rocks in the glow of lava, or simply the reflection of Lily's hair in her gaze. "Oh, and she's *wise,* too."

"And only getting wiser," Lily quips, flashing a smile.

"Time to go!" Kingsley calls out.

Lily's smile fades. "Ah, that's my cue. Hey, tell Bingley bye for me, okay? And that I'll see him soon."

"Alright." Mary squeezes her fingers, just for a second, then lets go and steps back. "Be safe."

"You too," Lily replies, then forces herself to go, turning to meet Remus as he pulls away from a hug with Effie, who immediately reaches out to give her arm a reassuring squeeze. Regulus nods at her, but doesn't speak. Monty tells her and Remus to be careful and make it back safely, and that's that.

Lily and Remus head towards the train together, sharing a long look between them, not having to speak to explain what they're saying at all. Just a simple unit. Doing this together. They'll get on this train together and—

"Remus!" At the call, Remus and Lily turn in perfect sync to watch Regulus jog up to them, looking a little strained. When he does stop in front of Remus, he just opens and closes his mouth, eyebrows furrowed.

And then, Remus sighs and says, "I know, Regulus. It's okay."

"Just—let me say it. I need to say it." Regulus lets out a deep breath, then meets Remus' gaze with a firm sort of glint in his own, looking less like a lost boy with no idea what he's doing and more like a man who has something to say that's actually worth hearing. "I know we both said we'd rather them be here instead, but that doesn't mean I want you to take their places. When they come back, you better be with them."

Remus' face softens, and he huffs a weak laugh. "Yeah, alright. That was sweet, Regulus. Should we hug again? Come he—"

Regulus turns and leaves.

Remus looks so fond. He glances at Lily with a grin, and she stifles a laugh before they turn to get into the train together, him first and her following. She looks back quickly, just to locate Mary standing with Effie, Monty, and Regulus. She meets Mary's eyes, smiles, then looks away.

Kingsley is already on the train, and Remus takes the open seat next to him when he gestures at it, already settling in to study the blueprints of Azkaban. Remus keeps peeking at it, so Kingsley turns to hold it out so they can both go over it. Lily sits across from Remus and kicks her feet up into his lap, slumping back lazily and considering a nap.

A beat later, boots clomp through the aisle, the doors shut, and the train jerks into motion just as someone falls into the seat directly next to Lily. Instinctively, Lily looks up to smile at Dorcas and feels her smile immediately drop the moment she finds Marlene McKinnon glaring at her instead.

"Last minute change of plans," Kingsley explains carefully when Lily whips her head towards him, and he looks like he's only *just* holding back a wince. "Dorcas opted out after all, and she said Dumbledore cleared Marlene to go in her place."

Lily immediately knows that's not true, but if there's one thing Dorcas is good at, it's being convincing when she needs to be. Very persuasive, that one. Lily flicks her gaze to Remus, who raises his eyebrows and cocks his head just a smidgen. Lily holds his gaze for beat, then swivels to look at Marlene.

"Do you have a problem with that?" Marlene asks, arms crossed and jaw set, every inch of her visibly screaming that *she* has a problem, and that problem is Lily.

"No, that's…great," Lily mutters, resisting the urge to groan as she lets her head tip back against the seat. Remus squeezes her ankle gently, and Lily closes her eyes. "Just great."

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"The mission to go get *James Potter—"*

"It's a fucking disgrace—"

"—and bringing him *here—"*

"We don't *want* him—"

"—nothing more than the Hallow's *bitch—"*

"Regulus," Rabastan says, his voice low, "don't."

"Regulus *do,"* Barty counters gleefully. "That's your fiancé they're talking about. Fuck them up! Defend your man!"

"Oh, *don't.* Regulus, just—shit, shit, shit—" There's the hasty clatter of Rabastan's chair, along with Barty's, because Regulus has already sprung right out of his. Rabastan follows warily, while Barty follows in delighted anticipation. "This doesn't solve anything. This is only going to—"

"Who are we fighting?" Rodolphus asks, moving to catch up with them as they pass the table he was chatting with Alecto at. He blinks when Rabastan glares at him. "What?"

"No one's fighting *anyone."*

"Are you sure? Because by the look on Regulus' face, I think it'll be a miracle if he doesn't *kill* anyone."

"Yeah, that's his *I'm-ready-to-kill-you* face," Barty agrees.

"No one can kill anyone!" Rabastan bursts out.

"I mean, we absolutely can. We all have. We're *capable,"* Rodolphus argues.

"None of you have any sense whatsoever," Rabastan grinds out, groaning as Regulus whips around one table to grab the back of the chair one man is sitting in, bracing himself there and using his free hand to fist the man's hair so he can slam his head down, making his face bounce off the table.

"What the fuck?!" the man bursts out, hands flying up to cup his bleeding nose. "What—"

"Hey!"

"What the hell?!"

Regulus snatches the man by the back of his hair and glares down at him as the surrounding tables fall silent. "Let me make something very clear to you—to *all* of you—" He raises his voice enough that people stop what they're doing to pay attention, everyone alarmed immediately, "—James is *no one's* bitch, and if you talk badly of him—if you so much as *breathe* wrong in his direction when he gets here—I *promise* you and everyone here that I will snap your fucking neck."

"Regulus, honey, don't kill anyone," Effie calls out, bustling over quickly with wide eyes, Monty rushing right behind her, and Mary on the way. "You can't do that. It will only make things worse for James, and for you."

Regulus pauses. Sighs. "Okay, original statement retracted, then. It's your lucky day; James' *mother* just saved your life. Let that sink in for a moment." He tugs sharply on the man's hair, making him grimace and grit his teeth. "Good, now that that's settled, I'll amend my statement. I won't snap your neck, fine, but I'll fuck your face up every time you insult him until your own mother won't even want to look at you. Either you'll learn to keep your mouth shut, or you'll get brain damage, and trust me, I genuinely don't care which one comes first."

The man glares up at him, blood streaming from his nose. "No one is scared of you or your bitch of a boyfriend—"

"Fiancé," Regulus corrects harshly, then bangs the man's face into the table again.

"Yeah, careful with that. He's *really* touchy about that," Barty calls out, sounding like he's having the time of his life.

"Regulus, stop," Rabastan says firmly.

"No, keep going, this shit is hilarious," Barty announces.

"You know what? *Fuck* you!" The man tries to clamber out of his chair, and Regulus immediately kicks him in the back of his knee and slams him face-first into the table (again), wrenching his arm behind his back and holding him there.

Rodolphus clicks his tongue. "He just told you he has a fiancé, man, take a hint. I get it, he's crazy, it's a shame he's taken, but no one likes a sore loser."

"Fuck," the man chokes out. The other people look horrified and also way out of their depth. They've never been exposed to violence in their home like this. "He *betrayed—"*

"James didn't betray *anyone,"* Regulus hisses. "He's the most loyal man on this planet, and you don't fucking *know* him. I'd like to see how well you'd handle being in his position. Here, let me give you a taste. You're going to say that you're very sorry right now, or I'm going to hurt something very important to you. Got it? Go on."

The man struggles and spits out, "Fuck off, I'm—"

Regulus wrenches on his arm until something *cracks.*

The man *howls,* and people cry out, trying to rush forward as he starts wailing, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Okay, I'm sorry!"

"Oh, not handling it so well, are you?" Regulus snarls, and then he's being pulled away by Rabastan and Mary, everyone yelling at once while the man weeps and slips to the floor.

Needless to say, Regulus ends up in solitary.

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"Move," Aberforth grunts, glaring at the guard standing in front of the door. "I'm here to get the boy."

"Er," is the awkward reply. "Sir, he—he broke a rule—"

"And I've decided he's been punished enough, so move."

"He's been in here for an hour. For assault, the sentence is—"

Aberforth scowls. "Do I look like I care? Don't make me go get Albus—you know, the man running this whole organization and also my brother. Remember him?"

After a beat, the guard moves.

Aberforth heads down the silent hall. There aren't that many rooms and they're not often used, but apparently the damn boy lost his mind and attacked someone, so here they are. This doesn't have anything to do with Aberforth, but Euphemia came to him requesting his help, and threatening to also lose her mind. Best to derail that before it even starts.

Besides, it doesn't sit well with Aberforth either, the boy being in here. He's a good kid, mostly. Troubled, sure, and rather violent, but Aberforth was much the same in his youth. And, well, he wasn't lying. Hasn't the boy been punished enough?

When the door opens, Regulus is sitting on the floor and looking entirely at peace.

"Get up," Aberforth says.

"That was fast," Regulus murmurs, pushing to his feet and moving forward. He looks very calm. Relaxed, even.

"Enjoy solitary?" Aberforth asks dryly.

Regulus shrugs. "Honestly? A little bit. I like the quiet."

"You're a solitary creature," Aberforth mutters, shaking his head and closing the door when Regulus steps out of it. He supposes he gets it. Some people like being alone; Aberforth himself has always liked it, and it only becomes a problem when you start to feel lonely.

"Are you going to tell me that was stupid?"

"Do I look like your father, boy?"

"Far from it."

"Exactly. It isn't my job to tell you anything, and I can guess you already *know* it was stupid."

"No, it felt justified," Regulus counters.

Aberforth gives him a flat look as they move up the hall together. "You broke that man's shoulder in three places."

"I told him I'd hurt something very important to him if he didn't apologize. It's not my fault he didn't listen," Regulus replies, arching an eyebrow.

"Well," Aberforth grumbles after a moment, "can't say you don't have a point."

"I'll do it again, if someone else doesn't listen."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem. Word travels fast around here and now no one wants to even bring James Potter up in conversation. Safe to say, no one will bother him if he makes it here. Nothing to worry about, thanks to you."

Regulus' lips twitch, and then he says, "Effie send you?"

"Uh huh."

"Ah."

"Besides," Aberforth adds, "you wouldn't stay too long anyway. Albus needs you on standby for the broadcast."

"I know."

"I'm surprised you volunteered for that. Doesn't seem like you."

"You don't know me."

"Boy, I watched you grow up. I picked up on a few things, and I know for damn sure I'm not wrong about this."

"I—" Regulus grimaces, then huffs. "I'd rather be there. I want it to be me going in to save them, but—but I can only save them from here. It has to be me. I know that. This is all I can do for them, so even though it's something I hate, I'll do it for them. I'll do whatever I have to."

"Like I said," Aberforth tells him gruffly, "you can go as far as you're able and get nowhere."

Regulus scowls at him. "Then I'll go farther."

It's like looking into a damn mirror.

"Alright, boy, you do that," Aberforth replies, leading him past the guard with a sigh, looking away and shaking his head. It's foolish, but some part of Aberforth hopes—deep down—that the mirror shatters and the boy gets somewhere, after all.

It'd be nice if at least one of them did.

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Pomona Sprout is a cheerful, lively woman with a big smile and a bigger wine collection, which Lily only knows because the wine cellar below her home is where the group has to stay.

It's thankfully connected to the garage on the side of her house, just below, so they never had to go into the house to get to the cellar. Best not to risk them being seen by neighbors, and with a war on, everyone's paranoid. Lily gets it; Pomona is risking a lot by doing this.

The cellar isn't so bad, really. There are four cots down there, complete with a pillow and blanket each, and Pomona brings them meals and checks on them frequently. She does threaten to skewer them if they touch her wine collection and promises that she knows each bottle, all unopened, and will absolutely throw them to the Hallow if she finds out they had any. Lily would love nothing more than to steal a bottle or two and get absolutely sloshed, and Remus wistfully admits the same, though they get over the urge quickly. Marlene is the one who acts like the cellar is her own personal hell.

She makes it very clear she hates it here. Well, actually, she seems to hate everything, *especially* Lily. Honestly? Lily would never admit it, but it kind of hurts her feelings.

It's just—well, Lily fought so hard to save her life. Maybe it's a little fanciful, but Lily can't help but feel *something* for her. A connection of some sort. She had Marlene's unbeating heart beneath her hands, making it beat. She had Marlene's mouth against her own, breathing for her when she stopped. Is Lily not supposed to care for her after that?

Lily does, though. She cares for Marlene, inexplicably, and not just because Dorcas loves her. She cares for Marlene the way she cares for all those she took the time to help, anyone she has ever gotten her hands on to be the barrier between the death that wished to take them. She's not divine intervention; she's simply a woman who does what she can, and she *did* what she could, and she's proud of that. She looks at Marlene and is proud, so fucking proud, that she's alive.

Lily looks at Marlene a lot. She fails to understand why Dorcas ever came to the conclusion that Marlene has to be protected. Frankly, Marlene seems like she can protect herself just fine. She's quiet, most of the time, but her silence is always sharp, like she's a perpetual edge ready and willing to make others bleed. There's almost a natural instinct to keep your distance away from her, but Lily is pretty sure she likes it that way. Lily is also pretty sure she hates it that way, too.

The thing is, Lily understands why Marlene doesn't like her. Or, she thinks she does. It has to be Dorcas, right? That's the only thing that exists between them.

Lily pretty much confirms it for herself on the first night, when she finds her gaze latched onto the ring on Marlene's finger, only for Marlene to curl her hand into a fist, tucking her thumb in as if Lily might attempt to take it from her again. It's the glare of all glares Lily is met with when she looks up, a very clear sign that Marlene is more than willing to punch her if she even dares to try, and Lily looks away with absolutely no desire to try whatsoever. She isn't sure how to explain that.

How does one explain it? What Lily and Dorcas had, and have, and never had, and will always have. How Lily and Dorcas were merely a *could have been,* a garden with nothing to show for it but seeds, and it's heartbreaking, sure, but Lily wouldn't change it for anything. She likes it, she likes how things have ended up, and she's at peace with it.

Lily sort of wants to sit her down and tell her about Mary. Tell her how Mary makes her feel, and how it's wholly different from how Dorcas has ever made her feel. Tell her that Dorcas isn't the one Lily truly wanted to try with, but she's so fucking desperate to try with Mary that it's driving her mad, and maybe Marlene could give her advice on how to come out on the other side of a major metamorphosis and settle into the changes, because she's good at that, isn't she? That's what Lily sees when she looks at Marlene, a woman who rolls with the punches, and keeps going, and wears her bruises like jewelry.

But, well, talking to Marlene is practically impossible. She stays to herself, mostly, never too far away from her cot that she dragged towards the back corner where there are no shelves of wine and where the rest of them aren't. She doesn't really talk or provide opinions when Kingsley is talking about the plan; she just looks at the blueprints with keen eyes and listens with focus when he's going over something.

In any case, the second night goes much like the first with them waiting for news of James' broadcast, keeping an eye on the notif, checking their supplies and going over every angle of the plan until their eyes are crossing. At this point, Lily is just gritting her teeth through the hurry-up-and-wait suspense of it all. She wants to get it over with already.

They all retire when evening bleeds into night. Everyone murmurs goodnight to each other, even Marlene, though hers is more of a grunt, as it always is. Lily is treated to yet another glare before she departs; at this point, Lily is starting to grow fond of them. Maybe that's just Marlene's face.

Lily nudges Kingsley's shoulder before bed, ruffles Remus' hair and gently shoves his head playfully before kissing his brow, and then she settles in for the night.

She doesn't sleep, though. Can't, really. She closes her eyes and gets lost in little fantasies of Bingley's smile when she returns, and the way Mary will smile as well, but she'll do her best to hide it. Remus' breathing eventually evens out, and it's not long before Kingsley's does the same. Lily listens to the sound, drifting for a while, not asleep yet not quite awake either.

Until, abruptly, she is.

Lily's eyes snap open as awareness creeps in, late in the night, her brain catching up slowly to what dragged her out of the clutches of sleep. A noise. The scuff of a shoe against the floor, across the cellar. So quiet no one asleep would hear.

Carefully, Lily props up on her elbow, then eases off her cot and makes her way towards the sound. She weaves around shelves of wine and steps around one stand to blink in surprise at the sight of Marlene standing there already.

Holding a bottle of wine.

Just staring at it.

Lily flicks her gaze in between the bottle and Marlene's face. She can't quite make out her features in the dark, but from what she can see, Marlene looks…strained. It's at this exact moment that Lily remembers what Molly told her happened in the arena, how Eli Zatish was going through withdrawal and Marlene apparently stated that she knew what it was like, making it clear that she got sober at some point in the past.

Ah, no wonder Marlene seems to hate this place. That makes sense, actually. She's quite literally surrounded at all sides by constant temptation and showing immeasurable restraint by not giving into it, especially in the wake of everything she's been through recently. Lily figures she'd be pissed off all the time, too, if she was in Marlene's position.

"It was the second thing I thought of when I woke up in the infirmary," Marlene says quietly, and it doesn't surprise Lily that she knows she's here. As a previous Victor, mentor, and tribute twice over, she's always aware. "Dorcas was the first thought I had, but right after that, it was *fuck, I could really use a stiff drink right now."*

"Well, you were just shot, so…" Lily clears her throat and steps closer. "Can't really blame you there."

"It drowns out the pain. External, internal, physical, mental, or emotional—any of it. But it… ah, it doesn't help, not really. It's still there," Marlene murmurs. "Doesn't go away. You'd think, knowing that, I wouldn't instinctively want it when everything fucking hurts, and yet I do. I still do."

"Yeah, that's—that's how addiction works," Lily replies.

Marlene turns the bottle over in her hands, humming. "You ever dealt with anything like that? Addiction, I mean."

"We're all addicts, Marlene. Just some of us are addicted to more destructive things than others." Lily shrugs and eases closer, gaze sharp on the side of her face. "I'm addicted to smoking, which is shit on my lungs, so there's that. I'm addicted to grieving, I think, and that's worse for me. Can't quite quit that one cold-turkey, but it's an ongoing battle."

"It's always an ongoing battle. You can quit, but *it* never does."

"But it's a fight worth fighting, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Marlene says softly, "but sometimes you get tired."

"Which is when you let someone else help you fight," Lily replies, equally soft as she stops next to Marlene and gently holds out her hands. "We don't have to do it alone. That's the beauty of it. Give me the wine, Marlene."

There's a long beat, and then Marlene exhales explosively, her arms moving stiffly as she places the bottle in Lily's hands. Her fingers tremble as they slip away.

"I wasn't going to drink it," Marlene declares gruffly.

"Okay," Lily says.

"I *wasn't,"* Marlene snaps, turning her head, and ah, there it is. There's that glare of hers.

"Okay," Lily repeats, simply nodding as she eases the bottle back into the slot on the shelf. "I believe you."

"I'm going back to bed," Marlene mutters, turning abruptly and stomping off to do just that.

Lily turns and goes back to her cot, but she doesn't lay down. No, she gathers her pillow and blanket, then folds the cot up and carts it across the room. As soon as she comes in range, Marlene props up on her own cot to glare at her some more. Lily ignores her and sets the cot up right next to her, in between Marlene and the rest of the room.

"What are you doing?" Marlene hisses.

"Helping you fight," Lily tells her bluntly, flopping down on her cot and settling in with a sigh. "If you want to get up and go stare at wine again, you'll have to crawl over me to do it, which is fine. I'll get up and go do it with you, then take the bottle when you hand it to me as many times as you need to. Sometimes, when we're tired, being reminded that we *can* fight is enough to keep us fighting."

Marlene scoffs, but she settles back down again. She's silent for a while, and then, "Lily?"

"Yeah?" Lily asks.

"Emmeline told me what you said," Marlene confesses. "About me having to live because you can't love Dorcas right."

"Yeah, well, that's not all someone is worth, I'm learning. You're not here just to do what I couldn't then and don't want to do now, at least with her," Lily mutters. "You're here to be here until you're gone, just like the rest of us. And I'm glad you're here, not for her or me, but for you."

"But you do love her," Marlene points out.

"I—" Lily sighs and turns over to peer at Marlene through the dark. "Marlene, Dorcas and I missed our opportunity long before you came along, and we were never going to get it back, whether she fell in love with you or not. We were always going to be exactly what we are, and I'm okay with that, and so is she. We're better off for it. Do you get what I'm saying? There's no race, I was never running in it, only running from it, and there's—well, I'm running to someone now, I think."

Marlene is silent.

"So, um, you can stop glaring at me now," Lily mumbles, clearing her throat. "You don't have to treat me like a threat, or be jealous, because I—"

Marlene snorts. "You think *that's* why I'm glaring at you? Lily, Dorcas rebelled against the rebellion to break into the arena and start a fucking war for *me.* Trust me, you're the least of my worries." Lily makes an inquisitive noise, because if it's not *that,* then Lily wants to know what the fuck it is, and Marlene heaves a sigh. "No, I was pissed off with you because of why I thought you fought so hard to save my life. I'm not going to be someone I'm not, even to fit myself into someone who would love her the way other people think I should. I'm going to love her exactly as I do, and fuck anyone who thinks it's not right, or *I'm* not right. I thought, you know, fuck you, too; I just assumed you fought so hard to bring me back to be someone I'll never be, but I take it I was wrong?"

"What? For fuck's sake, *no,"* Lily blurts out, eyes bulging as she leans up on her elbow. "That's not—I don't want you to be anyone other than who you are. We all deserve that, yeah? I just—I have a bit of personal issues surrounding the subject of love. I'm, ah, sort of afraid of it, if I'm honest. I'm—I'm getting better, or trying to. I've sort of been through a lot of shit."

"Yeah, I get that," Marlene offers. "Same here, honestly."

"Right, but…you're unapologetically yourself," Lily says, her voice softening as she lays down again. She swallows thickly and threads her hands on her stomach. "You're not scared to be who you are. I'm envious of that."

"Well, I am scared of who I am, sometimes. I'm just *more* scared of being someone I'm not," Marlene replies. "Because if I'm that, and the people I love feel love *for* that, then it means they don't love me. And that—well, that scares me the most."

Lily exhales slowly and murmurs, "Yeah, okay, that's a fucking terrifying thought, now that you mention it. I guess, for me, it's less that I'm afraid of being who I'm not and more that I'm afraid of being who I was."

"We're never who we were," Marlene tells her. "It's not a bad thing, being who you are instead of trying to mold yourself into someone you can never be again. You're scared of the impossible, Lily. Because you can only ever be you in the moment you're living in, and when that moment passes, you're a whole new you—but you're always you, and never who you were. So, don't be scared. Just be you."

"Wow. Inspirational."

"It was, actually. You just don't appreciate my particular brand of optimism."

"Never took you for an optimist, McKinnon."

"Mm, well, now's the time for it, isn't it? It's the bleakest moments in our lives where we learn to survive. Everyone always paints it as this horrible, gruesome thing, but personally? I like knowing how to survive."

"You're not scared?" Lily asks.

Marlene pauses, then says, "No, not really. I know *how* to survive, but that doesn't automatically mean I will. Sometimes, we just don't. So, I either will, or I won't. Simple as that."

"Just not afraid to die, then?" Lily mumbles.

"No," Marlene says, "I'm rather used to it, actually."

To that, Lily has no reply, blinking slowly at Marlene through the dark. After a few beats, Marlene turns over on her cot. She doesn't say goodnight, so Lily doesn't either, but they sleep.

They sleep until morning with no interruptions.

Chapter End Notes

okay, from the top!

regulus my loveeee <3 he's so sexy when he's bitching at old men and kicking doors in 😍 he's got me giggling and kicking my feet fr

no, but that moment between him and aberforth!!! the fact that albus volunteered for his little brother like sirius did!!! do yall know how long ive known that, and had it planned to be revealed by aberforth to regulus??? the whole background of the dumbledores has been floating around in my head forever, and i was so excited when i finally got to write it.

like, it adds so much dimension to albus and aberforth and the strife between them—why aberforth resents albus so much, and why albus is so hellbent on winning this war. just, it's like, imagine sirius and regulus went into the arena, and remus was the gamemaker/master sirius fell in love with, and then remus had regulus killed bc he loved sirius and couldn't bear to lose him—and then sirius came back, abandoned james, and went off to kill remus and devote his entire life to war in regulus' name and out of guilt for loving remus??? like that's so fucked up??? wild, wild shit, lemme tell you.

anyway, moving on! we have an azkaban rescue team! and a plan! a shitty one, but a plan all the same! lily, remus, kingsley, and marlene (it was supposed to be dorcas, but we'll get to that in a minute!), what could possibly go wrong? also, regulus! he's gonna help, too! well, actually, the whole plan sort of relies on him.

right, dorlene!!! ahhhh, i love them so much. they had to have it out, they had to, there was no away around that, because like. they genuinely couldn't sustain as they were without having this discussion. they're a little toxic at the moment—they're going through things, cut them some slack—but they're working on it! they wanna do it together!!! also yes, i slipped the "no one needs me" "i do. i need you" in possibly the last place anyone expected it to be, and i have exactly Zero Regrets.

moving on, marylily my beloveds <3 they're making progress!!! lily is head over heels already, poor girl. i love this transition for her going from having sex with a lot of women to being like I'm A Family Woman Now 😭 she really said, i found a wife and a kid, and im done with the drama HELP GOOD FOR HER LMAO. her and bingley have a special place in my heart, and so do mary and bingley!

also that moment between regulus and remus 😭 GOODBYE regulus was actually being a good friend for once and remus literally couldn't miss the opportunity to be a little shit, i love them so much.

right, then we cut to regulus fighting people with barty hyping him up in the background, rodolphus providing fun commentary, and rabastan being the only one to try and de-escelate the situation. poor rabastan, he tried so hard. but i mean, like, regulus stands for no james potter slander. only HE can perpetuate james potter slander 😤

not him ending up in solitary, staying for an hour, and enjoying the peace and quiet 😭 that miserable little shit really was just chilling and had Zero Remorse for assaulting someone. also the aberforth and regulus dynamic is giving Reluctant Mentor Vibes. i didn't mean for that to happen, but then it did. them>>>

and then lily and marlene. lmaoooo marlene just Hating Everything, she's so real, i love her. dorcas, about marlene: she must be protected at all costs! everyone else about marlene: this woman could snap my neck in a second HOW DOES SHE NEED PROTECTING??? 😭

i love the marlene and lily dynamic, because like. sure, dorcas exists between them, but their dynamic isn't dependent on that, ya know? like, lily cares about marlene because she's marlene, and marlene isn't jealous or threatened, just fiercely defensive of who she

is, and now that she knows lily isn't someone who expects her to be someone she can't and won't be, she's just Chill. they are similar in some ways—needless to say, dorcas has a type 😭

minor spoiler for the next chapter: we're going to prison

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-effie getting ready to beat someone up for slandering her son
-monty punching someone in the face for slandering his son
-nymphadora running up and kicking someone in the ankles 😭
-remus' doing an immediate 180 from "fuck this man" to "unfuck this man, or whatever" when he found out what the mission is HELP HE'S SO FUNNY TO ME
-regulus "james is my FIANCÉ, get it right" black
-mary calling lily "I try to shoot people i don't like" evans a marshmallow 😭
-marlene being like: i love you so much i could kill you. and dorcas being like: that's so sexy, babe <3
-regulus changing his threats ONLY because effie told him to (the ONLY person who ever gets him to, btw)
-regulus "i follow through on my threats" black and aberforth "fair enough" dumbledore 😭
-lily helping marlene, and marlene helping lily <3

Azkaban

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone <3

warnings for this chapter:

-references to child death
-references to death/murder
-references to past torture
-depictions of claustrophobic settings/mild (???) suffocation (???), or just—low oxygen??? its so brief, but i still wanna warn for it.
-heavily implied/fade-to-black torture (it's not explicitly described/shown, but you know it's happening)
-depictions of dissociative amnesia (from an outsider's pov)
-depictions of wounds/injuries
-mentions of blood
-mentions of vomiting (no one does, but it's mentioned)
-mentions of people having to be cut (not for violent reasons, and it's not described in detail)
-graphic depictions of violence
-depictions of biological warfare
-depictions of guns/gun violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Severus escorts Potter to his seat in front of the camera, shoving him roughly down into it when he doesn't move fast enough, which earns him a glare. Severus ignores it, because he can't focus on hating Potter today.

Especially today.

It's going to be such a busy day. Playing both sides of this war puts him in this position where he is essentially battling for and against himself on rotation. He'll be helping get Potter and Black out of the Hallow, then he'll have to turn around and do everything he can to keep them trapped, should this mission go wrong. Severus hopes for the state of his headache that it doesn't go wrong.

Angering Riddle is a bonus, at least. The man has been a thorn in Severus' side since the arena break-in. He gives Severus orders that spreads his Aurors thin, a constant pushback against protests within the Hallow, harsher monitoring within the districts, gathering information at all costs, and more.

Within the Hallow, Severus has teams of Aurors on rotation at the abandoned area at the back of the city, in which those that escaped disappeared into. Where they went, Severus does not know. It's as if the very van they were in simply vanished. The entire place is empty. They did discover that the sinkhole was simply an illusion, but even past that, there was nothing to find. Regardless, Riddle has that area constantly on watch and thoroughly guarded.

How Albus plans to have Black and Potter rescued from the Azkaban without that escape route evades his understanding. He can't envision a plan that would ever work, so he suspects today will indeed be a busy day. Severus doesn't need answers, however. His only job to help Albus is to notify him once Potter has been safely dropped off at Azkaban for his promised visit to Black.

But first, yet another message from Potter. It burns through Severus that it's happening, purely because it's *working.* A good portion of the protests are disbanding, and now more people are coming forward with the desire to help their Master, offering information—usually false—that Severus then has to follow up on. Two days ago, a woman reported that she spotted suspicious behavior around the alley near her home, convinced it was anarchists coming to abduct or kill her family. Upon investigation, it was simply a pack of rodents digging through her trash. He had to call an exterminator.

However, there remains some protests, and there was activity within Hallow servers picked up recently that Riddle is very displeased about, only more so because he can't trace it or locate who was behind it. He only knows that whoever it was didn't go past public servers, meaning only things that are public records, such as prison blueprints. Severus isn't an idiot. If they're going to be breaking in, knowing the layout of Azkaban is just the logical next step.

So, naturally, Riddle wants Potter to be his mouthpiece yet again. This time, his reach is meant to go farther. The districts have grown restless in the aftermath of the released footage of the arena break-in. Riddle hasn't addressed it, far too distracted with the issues within the Hallow, far too obsessed with preparing for war.

In the meantime, riots have broken out in all districts except for one, two, three, and seven. Four, five, eight, nine, ten, eleven, and twelve have been on lockdown for two weeks now. Riddle has the Aurors in each district spread thin as well, all immune and weaponized with biological warfare already, but restrained to instilling curfew and turning each district into nothing more than a prison. People are allowed to work, but only work that benefits the Hallow. Many people within the districts are slowly starving. The militaristic grip in those districts are so strong that the numbers drop by the day.

He knows if the Hallow didn't depend on the districts to flourish, then Riddle would wipe them all out and be done with it. This, at least, convinces Severus that most of the districts will take the immediate opportunity to overthrow the Hallow, no matter what message Potter gives. Regardless of dwindling numbers, they will surely fight back and lose more.

Severus sometimes wonders, by the end of the war, who will be left to see the outcome.

"What, are you joking?" Potter blurts out, his head snapping up to stare at Riddle incredulously, who just swept in and handed him his script on a lone, crisp piece of paper. There's a monitor right beside the camera that plays a slow reel of his script, but letting him read it beforehand is supposed to prepare him so he won't fumble. Any misstep will result in Black's torture, so he simply doesn't falter.

"I'm not asking your opinion, James," Riddle replies. "I don't care what your thoughts are. Simply do as you're told, or shall I have Sirius taken from his cell in preparation?"

Potter shakes his head quickly. "No, that won't be necessary."

Riddle hums and steps back to go sit at his desk, opening his laptop to pull up the camera feed of Black sitting in his cell, as he always is. It's just a reminder to Potter what pressure he's under. As usual, Potter greedily stares at the screen, but he drags his gaze away when the camera crew sweeps in and begins setting up for the broadcast.

And then, without further ado, Potter begins speaking.

When addressing the districts directly, Potter starts by once again giving the message about the anarchists, listing them all off and making it clear that any and all information about them is to be brought forward. That's not the ironic part. No, the ironic part is that Riddle has apparently decided that it's entirely *unironic* for him to call for peace there as well, and ask that the districts stand with the Hallow as, apparently, the Hallow has *always* stood with them.

Potter struggles with the next part, his voice too tight, and his body too tense. Riddle reaches for the laptop until Potter's face smoothes out, and his voice softens. The message Riddle is forcing Potter to give claims that the Hallow cares for the future of the districts, a plea for the people within to think of the youth who will be endangered by the anarchists, as if the Hallow hasn't been slaughtering their children for decades.

Riddle continues to work with the belief that fear will get compliance. For some, it will. For most? After decades of facing the system the Hallow runs on and only losing because of it? Well, for most, this will only inspire them to fight back even more. Some will cower in fear, but there comes a point where cowering in fear will only end in death, and the districts are subjected to the hunger games. Survival is something they have been conditioned to fight for, and so fight they will.

Potter is a fool, no doubt about it, but he isn't the biggest fool in this room. No, that honor goes to Riddle.

When the broadcast is over and the camera turns off, Potter stands up swiftly and says, "Alright, take me to Sirius now."

Riddle flicks his fingers at Severus. "Take him."

"Yes, sir," Severus murmurs, showing no signs of how they may just make a fool out of him yet again very soon. He's not a laughing man, not since his mother died, but for the first time in years, it's more difficult than usual to remember.

~•~

If Remus wasn't claustrophobic before, he certainly is now. This will go on the list of things that haunt his nightmares, that's for sure. Slowly suffocating will do that to a person.

Imagine this. You're in a crate. It's big enough for four people to squish together in, but only just. It's cramped, lined with a fuzzy material that goes over the top to hide those within, and there are no slots or holes on it. The top is nailed firmly shut. This crate is wooden and boxed in by other crates in the back of a moving truck, and you're staying silent and breathing shallow to conserve your oxygen. You have oxygen tanks to make sure you don't fully suffocate, but those will eventually run out, and if the crate never opens, you will die. Oh, and panicking will only kill you faster.

Yeah, imagine that. Sound like a good time?

Take it from Remus, it's not.

The only way he gets through this is literally closing his eyes and chanting *it's fine, it's fine, it's all fine* over and over in his head like a mantra. The air is stale and stuffy, and it's *hot.* He's sweating. He can feel the blistering heat of Lily's skin where she's pressed right up against him. They were holding hands, but then their palms got too slick with sweat, so they let go. Kingsley looks like he's fucking meditating or something, and Marlene is curled up with her head ducked, sitting very still.

If this wasn't for Sirius and James, Remus literally doesn't know if he'd think it was worth it. This is fucking *awful.* And he has to go back into the underground bunker after this? Just another prison? For fuck's sake, Remus wants to be *outside.* He wants a little house with a porch, windows up to let in fresh air, a home he can come and go in as he pleases.

What he wants more than that, more than anything, is Sirius in his arms again. He'd give everything up for their something. So, yes, this is worth it.

Remus knows when they reach the checkpoint from district one into the Hallow. He *hears* the muffled sounds of the truck being opened, people perusing. His hand finds Lily's again, and they cling to each other despite the sweat. They're all breathless, and they still hold their breath until the doors slam shut and the truck begins to move again.

Unanimously, they all take in some oxygen after, as a treat.

Step one: getting into the Hallow. Check.

Step two will be getting out of this crate and getting into Azkaban. In a very strange turn of events, Remus—for the first time in his life—is *eager* to go back to prison.

~•~

"Bet you didn't expect I'd be doing this again, huh?" Dorcas asks quietly, gently applying makeup under his eyes.

Regulus hums. "I didn't, no. Did you?"

"Honestly, I thought my days as a stylist for the war were over," Dorcas admits, her tone dry. She sighs and pulls her hand back. "Have you been sleeping, my love?"

"I get by," is all Regulus says, because no, obviously he hasn't been sleeping. When he *does* drift off, it's always fitful rest, littered with indistinct nightmares, usually involving Sirius or James, or both. Sometimes, he'll get the occasional nightmare of Bellatrix, or the crimson river, or dead hands. He never gets the only nightmare he wants. He hasn't dreamed of Evan in a long time, not since the victory tour. Regulus still misses him.

"Good job," Pandora comments, offering Regulus a gentle smile. She reaches for his hand carefully, and he lets her take it, lets her hold it. "That's all we can do, for now. And right now, you need to do the broadcast. Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Regulus mutters with a grimace.

Albus didn't give him a script, but *did* give him a few points he wanted Regulus to cover as cohesively as possible, and he waited until the last moment to warn Regulus that there was a

chance Riddle could piggyback onto his broadcast and speak directly to him, depending on what technological team he has at his disposal. Regulus doesn't want to speak to him, anxious that he'll somehow fuck something up, or give away the coup.

"It's going to be okay," Pandora murmurs, tugging him to his feet. "Everything is going to be okay."

"We sent in four of the best people in the world," Dorcas tells him, holding his gaze. "They'll get this done, Regulus. They'll be fine, and then they'll come home."

Regulus finds that he can't speak past the lump in his throat, so he just nods. Pandora tugs on his hand again, guiding him through the room and down the hall. Dorcas walks beside him, their shoulders brushing. It's still so startling to know all that he does about her now, but regardless of all the things he didn't know, she still feels like a friend. James would say that's the most important part, and Regulus decides to agree.

The next room they enter is a little more full. Albus, Aberforth, Filius, Minerva, and Barty. Regulus had asked for Barty specifically during the meeting where Albus had found out that Dorcas swapped with Marlene under his nose. He wasn't pleased, clearly, but she just shrugged and smiled with all teeth as she stated she felt it best that she stay here to make sure Regulus was camera-ready because, really, it was tradition, wasn't it? And, to hear her tell it, her girlfriend was *more* than capable of taking her place.

In the end, Albus let it go and gave in, simply because, once again, Dorcas didn't really give him a choice in the matter. He also wearily agreed to let Barty be there for Regulus' broadcast at his request. They'll all be sitting behind Filius' computer, within Regulus' line of sight, as if he's just talking to them.

It's supposed to help his comfort levels or something, but really, it does a terrible job when he's guided to a stool in front of a camera. He's already tense, which causes Pandora and Dorcas to fuss over him like he's still their tribute, and well, maybe a part of him always will be. As ridiculous as it is, *that's* what helps him relax. He's done this before. He has them. All he's missing is James, Sirius, and Remus.

They're coming back, Regulus tells himself, forcing himself to breathe as Pandora and Dorcas retreat to settle next to Barty. Those three sit together, watching him, steady, while Albus sits

in between Aberforth and Minerva.

"Ready, Regulus?" Filius asks. This time, Regulus only nods, and Filius begins to count him down. "You're going live in five, four, three, two, one…"

Filius presses a button on *one* and points at him, and Regulus watches a red light begin to blink on the camera. For a second, he doesn't speak, doesn't move, doesn't even breathe. Then —

"Hello," Regulus says, which is probably stilted and awkward, but he's absolutely not the best person for this. He is the only person they've got for now, though, so…here goes nothing. "I would introduce myself, but I hardly think that's necessary."

This is true, and it makes him uncomfortable, because there's literally not one person in this world who doesn't know his name. He can perfectly picture so many faces turning to the screens near them to see him there, recognizing him instantly, eager to hear what he has to say.

Regulus has no idea what to say, suddenly. All he can think about is James, who is likely moving through the halls of Azkaban right now, heading for Sirius, completely unaware that Regulus is following his broadcast with one of his own. It's as he thinks about James, and James' broadcast, that Regulus realizes exactly how to *begin* his own.

"Only a little bit ago, my fiancé presented the world with a broadcast," Regulus announces, and then his voice turns wry as he continues to speak. "Now, I present you with my own to do something that's very on brand for James and I, which is me arguing with literally everything he just said."

Regulus sees Barty clap a hand over his mouth, his shoulders shaking. Dorcas breaks out into a grin, and Pandora beams at him. Regulus feels his shoulders relax. Yes, okay. This, he can do. He's been doing it for years.

"You see, James is an idiot," Regulus continues, fixing his gaze on the camera without wavering. "Let me tell you why."

~•~

Sirius glances up when he sees movement outside of his cell. His eyebrow furrows just before the door gets thrown open, guards moving in to immediately tase him, cuff him, then jerk him to his feet and march him out.

Well, okay, *rude.*

If Sirius were capable, he would huff and complain as they shove him along. If they expect him to have a broken spirit, they're very mistaken. For one thing, he's only been tortured the once, and for another, he doesn't even remember the whole thing, because when he finally *did* give in and scream, the sound of it triggered him into slipping away. So, score one for his fucked up head, he guesses.

In any case, a shithole of a prison and a mask locked on his face and one torture session isn't enough to get him down. That's *nothing.* Sirius would laugh about it, if he could.

He knows James is behind it, that idiot. Sirius loves him dearly, he really does, but James giving Riddle whatever he wants isn't something Sirius is on board with, *especially* not for his sake. But, well, Sirius also gets it. If their positions were switched, Sirius would do the same.

So, really, Sirius definitely could have it worse here. He knows that. He's not even sick anymore, despite the conditions. Mostly, it's just the boredom that's torture. Fucking hell, how did Remus do it? Literally what did he do to occupy his time?

Oh, yeah, Sirius remembers what he did. He got sexy. It's a small, stupid thing, but Sirius would give just about anything to feel Remus up right now. Fuck, he misses him.

Sirius feels confusion whip through him when he's taken down to the lower levels. Down, down, down. He's not supposed to be down here anymore. This means one of three things.

Either Riddle is breaking his bargain with James, or James has broken his bargain with Riddle, *or* James is…

Okay, now Sirius is worried. His mind races along with his heart as he's dragged into the same fucking room he was tortured in before. The mask is left on, but he's strapped into a chair just like last time. The guards leave him there with the same exact man who tortured him the first time. Bastard. Sirius glares at him, watching him like a hawk.

"You remember me, I see," the man says dryly, rolling over on his stupid rolling stool. He reaches up towards the mask on Sirius' face, and Sirius' head jerks away. "Relax, I'm just getting us set up as a precaution. Might not even be necessary, but I want to take a long lunch, so I'm getting ahead."

Sirius squints at the man, but dutifully holds still as he unlocks the mask and sits it aside. Sirius automatically exhales in relief and rolls his jaw, staring at the man suspiciously. The wild thing is, he's a fairly normal man overall, even friendly when he spoke with Sirius last time. This is literally just his day job.

"What do you mean it's a precaution?" Sirius mutters.

"Probably shouldn't say, but…" The man clicks his tongue as he sets a recorder on the stand next to them, the same one as before that he used to record Sirius' screams. "Well, your brother just came on screens with a broadcast. A right shock, he was, and I sort of assumed Master Riddle would have you tortured as a punishment. It's kind of his thing."

Sirius stares at him. "My brother? Regulus? What?"

"Yeah," the man continues, "he's with the anarchists, as it turns out. Bully for you, I guess, because you'll take the heat."

"Is he okay? Did he look well? Safe?" Sirius blurts out.

The man blinks at him. "I tell you I might be ordered to torture you, and *that's* the first thing you ask?"

"Let me guess, only child?" Sirius asks flatly.

"No, actually. I have a little brother and a little sister. Hate them both," the man replies with a snort. He fixes Sirius with a wry look. "If it was me, and I was you, I'd be begging to make them suffer instead of me."

"You're sort of ruining the integrity of all older siblings everywhere. Come on, it's a bad look," Sirius tells him.

"Not all siblings love each other, you know." The man reaches out and pats his shoulder. "Good for you and him, though. I mean, it ended with you here, but…"

Sirius sighs. "Okay, but—really, how did he look?"

"Well enough, I suppose," the man offers with a shrug, and it's not much, and Sirius doesn't actually trust this man, but he wants to believe it bad enough that he slumps with a gusty sigh of relief. "If it cheers you, Master Riddle might not even give the order, so you could be fine. Let's just hope it's quick either way. My pasta is calling my name, you have no idea."

"Great," Sirius says bitterly, dropping his head back and glaring at the vents in the ceiling above him. The man keeps setting up next to him, and Sirius eventually clears his throat before looking at him again. "So…what kind of pasta?"

~•~

Lily has no idea *how* the device works to override the surveillance feed in Azkaban, but she trusts it will. Filius said it only needed to be within twenty feet of the building, turned on, and then they'd have fifteen minutes.

They turned it on two minutes ago.

Getting out of the crate had been simple enough, thanks to Pomona, who busted the lid open and ushered them out with a promise to go wait by the sewer runoff pipes. They have a system for this in the Hallow, in which Pomona would usually drive in a full truck, leave it to be sorted on the night shift, and take an empty truck already sorted back to district one. It's a smart rotation and runs smoothly, Lily has to admit, and it allows them the perfect route back to district one.

After that, it was almost laughably easy to sneak into the prison, because…well, who the fuck sneaks *into* a prison? Azkaban is a formidable building, looming high and gloomy, a heavy quiet hanging eerily over it. There are many entrances, and Remus guides them to the one that involved prisoner transport, the one he was taken through when leaving Azkaban and then returning.

It's deserted with only the cameras to worry about, but if they were going to be discovered, they would have already. The device is clearly working.

Inside Azkaban, they start on the ground floor, which is where Remus said the offices are, as well as the rec rooms for the guards are. The higher levels are where the prisoners are kept, while levels below are for the torture and experimentation.

It's cold in the prison, cold enough that Lily shivers as she slinks along the empty hall behind Kingsley. Remus is behind her, and Marlene brings up the rear. They all move silently, keeping a sharp eye out, but Regulus is doing his broadcast, so surely everyone is distracted by now.

Sure enough, as they creep past one room, Lily lifts her head to peek through the blinds, finding multiple guards standing around in front of a screen. She thinks the rooms are sound-proof, because she can't hear any of them, but she can see them moving around, pointing at Regulus and nudging each other. She ducks her head and keeps moving.

"We're looking for an empty office, or one that has less people in it than us," Kingsley whispers, holding his hand out, then flicking his fingers to gesture to them to start spreading

along the hall to look, keeping low and out of sight.

Lily breaks away to go to the other side of the hall, moving along and stealing quick glances into rooms. Some of the rooms seem to be for storage. Others are break rooms, clearly for the guards. There's one room with lockers and uniforms hanging up, also for the guards. She passes a room that most definitely isn't an office, but one that makes her stop anyway.

"Um, hey," Lily breathes out, flapping her hand to get their attention. "Hey, uh, we—we have a problem."

It takes a moment, but Kingsley slinks over with Marlene and Remus, and then they all stare into the room. Lily bites her lip, her gaze latched onto James Potter, who is clearly ranting at four different guards, all of which have their backs to the door and window, keeping James inside.

"Why…?" Remus' eyebrows furrow, lips tipping down, and Lily shares a wary look with him.

James is supposed to be en route to Sirius' cell right now. That's where the team was supposed to find him, that way they could sneak in, snatch them, then sneak out. But, if James is here, and Sirius is in his cell, the plan has to change.

"Maybe they're waiting for Regulus' broadcast to be over," Marlene breathes out, inching closer with her eyes narrowed.

"Which is less than ideal for us," Lily mumbles. "Regulus' broadcast is what's going to help us sneak *out.* Kingsley, how the hell are we going to get James quietly, but also get Sirius?"

Kingsley is silent for a long beat, then he murmurs, "We're going to have to split up. Two are going to need to go retrieve Sirius while the other two stay here to watch James. The goal is to wait for Sirius to be retrieved *before* we get James and go, just to minimize chances of detection."

"So…get Sirius, come back, get the drop on the guards, take James and sneak out quickly?" Lily summarizes.

"Pretty much," Kingsley murmurs. "Who—"

"I'm going to get Sirius," Remus cuts in.

"Okay, I'm with him," Lily says automatically, at exactly the same time as Marlene says, "I'm going to get Sirius, too."

Lily and Marlene stare at each other. Their fragile peace from the previous night wobbles a little precariously as their eyes narrow at the same time, equally stubborn.

Kingsley sighs. "Marlene, you go with Remus. Lily, you're staying with me in case we have to fight those guards. We know how to fight together, and we can do it quickly and quietly. No, don't argue. Remus, Marlene, go now."

Now isn't exactly the time to protest, as they're all trying to be very quiet, but Lily grinds her teeth in frustration about it. Remus pauses only long enough to squeeze her thigh with a grimace of apology, and then he and Marlene continue on to find an office to slip into so they can figure out which cell Sirius is in, break him out, then get back here and help get James, all within ten minutes and without being discovered.

Right, okay. What could go wrong?

~•~

Severus steps into the room, already tired and not at all surprised by the flurry of activity in Riddle's office. The plan is underway. Severus ordered Potter's escort to Azkaban and notified Albus the moment he was informed that Potter had arrived. Shortly after, the younger Black began a broadcast.

It would have been nice if Albus had warned him of that, but of course he did not. Severus understands why, because it's very crucial for the war, but it is agitating. The only thing that makes it less so is how visibly furious Riddle is about it.

"Severus," Riddle snaps, eyes cold.

"Yes, sir?"

"There's a situation."

"I see that, sir."

"Have the team you sent that escorted James to Azkaban bring him back. I want him on the way back here by the time this broadcast ends."

Severus resists the urge to sigh. "Yes, sir."

"Before you do that, however—" Riddle halts when someone steps up beside his desk, head ducked. "What? *Speak."*

"Sorry, sir, it's just—we've set up the camera, and we're ready to connect you to Regulus Black's broadcast," is the quiet, shaky response. "Ready whenever you are, sir."

"One moment." Riddle reaches out to press a button on a device on his desk. The line connects, and he says, "Make Sirius regret ever being related to Regulus, and if I give the order, kill him. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," comes the cheerful response.

The line clicks, and the person next to Riddle's desk shifts nervously and says, "But—but sir, won't killing Sirius mean that James won't do broadcasts anymore?"

"James won't be there, so he will not know that Sirius is dead. I have old footage I'll use for him. He will comply, even without the visits. He's desperate enough," Riddle replies sharply, eyes narrowing. "Severus."

"Yes, sir?" Severus asks.

"As I said, before you have James brought back, there is something of more importance I need you to do," Riddle tells him, and Severus waits for his orders.

When he gets them, his headache grows worse.

~•~

"Welp, you heard Master Riddle."

Sirius sighs and drops his head back against the headrest of the chair, gazing up at the vents again. He did, in fact, hear Riddle. So, he guesses there won't be any more talk of pasta.

"You know I'm not going to scream, right?" Sirius asks idly, just like he did last time. That turned out to be a lie, but hey, maybe the second time's the charm?

"Everyone screams. No shame in it, really," says the man who did, in fact, make him scream last time. He's rolling around in his chair, gathering what he needs to. "You're the stubborn sort, though, I'll give you that. I reckon you can last longer this time, yeah? We'll make a game out of it."

"Oh, will we?" Sirius asks, his voice flat.

The man chuckles and rolls to a stop next to him, reaching out to pat his shoulder. "Might as well. You can do it, I believe in you, and hopefully I don't have to shut you in here and kill you. Either way, I'll think of you when I'm eating my pasta."

"Thanks," Sirius replies sardonically. "Really appreciate that."

"Oi, don't blame me, yeah? I'm just doing my job," he says, shrugging. "Now, let's get started, shall we? Round one. May the best man win."

Sirius snorts. "Oh, I'm definitely winning round one."

~•~

Regulus thinks he's doing pretty well, honestly. It's easy, almost, to deconstruct Riddle's script with James being the person Regulus bounces off of. Genuinely, he and James can argue for *ages,* and he's literally spent years insulting him, both lovingly and not, so in a way, it's almost like he's had practice.

With James as a guide, Regulus counters every single thing that Riddle has had him say so far. Explaining that, no, those that left the Hallow are not prisoners of war, but rather those that are *aligned* with the resistance. Releasing the truth that Frank was murdered ruthlessly on Riddle's orders, and that he, too, had been on the side of the resistance, even in death.

It doesn't stop there. Albus gave him things to share, and share them Regulus does. He tells the whole world how there *is* a resistance, one that waits in the shadows, not to hurt anyone but to help those in need. It's not war they seek, but a better world for all, and if it takes war to get there, then it's worth fighting, isn't it? The war isn't against people; it's against power, against the system, and against Riddle.

Regulus reminds everyone of the games, how brutal they are, how awful they've always been. Blood, agony, and slaughter. Has the Hallow not been waging war for decades? How can Riddle claim to care for the children in the districts when he sees them slaughtered for entertainment year after year? Is everyone meant to simply continue to accept mass murder and a true imbalance in power and equality forever? Shouldn't the world change to be a safe place for all?

And the Hallows. Well, their Master does not listen to them. He cares nothing for them either. Did he not ignore them when they protested against the Quarterly Memorial? Did he not have many of them slaughtered during the interviews for the Quarterly Memorial, then lie to the public about it? Did he not try to lie about what actually happened in the arena? Has he ever stopped lying to his own people; has he ever listened to them; has he ever cared for their safety and well-being?

There is no harmony in this world, and Riddle has only contributed to that, but there *could* be harmony in this world. Doesn't everyone want harmony in this world?

Regulus isn't sure that this world will ever find harmony, but he's willing to lie to everyone and say there can be, if that's what it will take to bring harmony back to him in the form of James and Sirius. And so, he turns himself into Albus' pawn, sure that he's lying and daring to hope it's true anyway. He doesn't care if this world has harmony. He's selfish enough to only care for himself and those he loves.

There's little to no warning for the broadcast being interrupted by Riddle. A monitor sits off to the side, showing Regulus there, and then it flickers to show Riddle instead.

Regulus falls silent. Everyone in the room straightens up, paying attention, waiting with a bated breath. This is where things get dicey, because the team in Azkaban are still relying on him to keep everyone distracted and buy them time.

He can see Riddle, and Riddle can see him. Filius said that if Riddle interrupted the broadcast, the world watching would see him instead of Regulus, but Regulus' audio would remain. The only person who can see Regulus now that isn't in this room is Riddle, but the whole world can still hear him.

So, they hear him say, "I was in the middle of something."

"Yes, I noticed," Riddle replies. He looks calm, all except for his eyes, which are cold with fury. He's sitting at a desk, hands threaded together on top. "You'll forgive the interruption. This discussion seemed incredibly one-sided."

"I think you've said enough," Regulus announces.

Riddle hums. "I disagree. I've said very little, Regulus, if you recall. James—your fiancé, need I remind you—has been the one who felt it necessary to speak. I wonder how much it will hurt him to find out that you oppose him and his beliefs."

"As I said, arguing is something James and I are accustomed to," Regulus says shortly. "Though, as his fiancé, I know him better than most. I can safely say that his beliefs mostly mirror mine, but of course you don't allow him to speak freely, do you? His words are not his own. They're yours."

"Why would he speak them if he did not agree?"

"Are you familiar with the concept of coercion, Riddle?"

"I am," Riddle murmurs. "It strikes me to be concerned about you in that regard, Regulus. Are you in danger? Are they forcing you to spread such misinformation?"

Regulus gives a thin smile. "That's your weapon of choice, I believe. Tell me, what misinformation have I spread?"

"This belief that I wish for war," Riddle says. "I do not. You talk of war as if I started it, when I did not. I'm left in a position where I must end it. People oppose me, threaten my home and my people, and intend to dismantle the very way of life as we have always known it. Regulus, I must ask you, why do you think I wish you any harm? You or anyone? I don't."

"Then what are the hunger games?" Regulus challenges.

"Tradition," Riddle answers simply.

"Can tradition not be broken?"

"When it's the foundation of the very structure that runs this world, it can't. You speak of a better world, but tell me, what will this world look like? Tell the people, tell the Hallows, tell everyone how economic collapse will treat them."

Regulus pauses, gaze darting to Albus, who shakes his head. After a beat, Regulus looks away. "I ask you, are the districts not trapped in the vestiges of economic collapse already? If you mean to say that you would take issue with the districts flourishing as the Hallow does, simply speak your truth."

"The districts have been the same as they always have been, and they shall remain so," Riddle retorts. "The world is as it needs to be. To oppose that will only bring further ruin to us all. This is not a time for war, Regulus."

"Then present us with peace," Regulus snaps. "End the hunger games, step down from your position, and come together with those who oppose you to *make* a better world—one that benefits us all, not just the Hallow, and not just you."

"Or," Riddle counters lightly, "you and all those who oppose me stop seeking bloodshed. Even you, Regulus. You're not a prisoner there, are you? If not, you can leave. I will grant you safe passage into the Hallow. James is here with me; he surely waits for you. Do you not want to be reunited with your love?"

Regulus resists the urge to swallow, his heart thumping hard in his chest. He'd go, is the thing. If that was his only option, he'd go in a heartbeat. It's not his only option, though, so he looks Riddle right in the eyes and says, "No, I think I'll stay right here. If it takes a war to be reunited with James, then I'll be sure to do everything in my power to see the end of it."

"If you continue to oppose me," Riddle informs him, never breaking his gaze, "I assure you, you will not."

~•~

James is about to lose his fucking mind. His entire body is vibrating, muscles wound tight, and if he doesn't get answers here in a second, he's going to start swinging.

He remembers a time when he was a softer James. Before his hunger games. Before he ever felt violence touch him. He's never been the same after that; quicker to anger, quicker to lash out, quicker to act when it comes to protecting those he loves. That's always his greatest motivation, isn't it? *Nothing* gets James to fight faster than defending those that are his.

Sirius? Sirius is his. His best friend, his constant, the very breath in his lungs. So, naturally, James is ready to start flinging shit, because he's here to see Sirius, and they're not *letting him.* Why? Why can't James see him? Where is he?

No matter what James asks, or how often, the team that escorts him on these visits will not answer. The last time, they brought James in, passed him off to Azkaban guards, then waited for him to be brought back down before escorting him the same way they came. *This* time, they brought James in, then the Azkaban guards brought them to this room, talked to one of the members of the team, and then left. They've been blocking James in here ever since.

They don't harm him. They also don't acknowledge him. They just watch him rant and rave, demanding answers, and they do nothing else. James just wants to know that Sirius is okay.

That's the crux of it, isn't it? Why James can feel himself slipping. That worry, that dread, that utterly paralyzing fear that something has happened to Sirius, that maybe Riddle has decided to break the bargain, that maybe Sirius is—

"Come in, Shaw."

James halts and snaps his head over to stare at the radio on, presumably, Shaw's hip. The voice—James recognizes it as that Auror he doesn't like, the one Riddle always gives orders to directly. James recognizes the dry lilt of his voice.

"Sir?" Shaw asks, speaking into the radio.

"Escort Potter back to Master Riddle's castle. Now."

"Yes, sir."

James steps back automatically when Shaw starts to move for him, radio still in hand. "No. *No,* fuck that. I'm not leaving until I see Sirius. I'm supposed to—"

"Don't resist, Mr. Potter," Shaw says. "We have orders. Now, come with us quietly. You'll have your answers when you return to Master Riddle, I'm sure."

"I said *no!"* James bursts out, stepping back again. "I'm *not* leaving this prison until I know Sirius is alive. If he's not alive, I'm not complying, so prove to me that he's alive, or—"

"Or nothing," Shaw cuts in, gesturing to someone else on the team with his free hand. Immediately, the person raises their gun and points it at James. "Come along now."

James pauses, considering. He flicks his gaze between the team. There's four of them, all armed with guns, and all likely trained to fight. Only Shaw has a radio. James is one person with a cane that's practically covered in bubble-wrap.

Well, he's had worse odds.

"Thing is, Riddle wants me brought back alive," James says lightly. "I'm sort of important, you see, and I know this, so I know you're not supposed to shoot me."

Shaw sighs. "Mr. Potter, don't—"

James doesn't let him finish. He tosses his cane at the person pointing a gun at him and surges forward to grasp Shaw's radio, slamming it into his face to get him to stumble back. The rest of the team start yelling, starting to move forward, but James uses the momentum of Shaw's stumble to run him backwards. He slams him back against the wall, then slams the radio into it as well until it falls to pieces on the floor.

And then, right after, James whirls Shaw away from the wall and proceeds to tackle him through a window.

~•~

There's no warning for it. Lily is just crouched next to Kingsley one second, admittedly pouting, and then James Potter comes flying out the window with another man in the next.

Glass shatters, of course, so Lily instinctively covers her head. She misses James landing on the floor, but she *hears* it, hears his grunt and the wheeze of the other man.

Well, there goes the element of surprise.

The door to the room bangs open as the rest of the team pours out, and Lily rises up at the same time Kingsley does. As this was supposed to be a stealth mission, everyone was equipped with stealth-related weapons, such as daggers, while these people have guns. Kingsley is not a known 'anarchist', but Lily is. However, they're not really expected to be here, so they do have the element of surprise for a moment longer.

Lily grabs one person and knocks the gun out of their hands, kneeing them so they'll fold over a little bit and meet the dagger she slams directly into the side of their throat. She wrenches it right back out as they choke and whirls around to help Kingsley with the two he's fighting, though that turns out to be unnecessary. He stabs one when she reaches him, elbows

the other in the head and moves fluidly to sweep their feet from under them. They hit the ground, and Kingsley follows to slam his dagger in their chest.

Alright, three down, one to go.

That last one is who James is struggling with at the moment, so Lily moves over to help him instead. The man knocks James onto his back at the same time she reaches him, so before his fist ever comes down to connect with James' face, she buries her dagger in the side of his neck. He gurgles, goes limp, then falls to the side when Lily yanks the blade back out.

James blinks up at her from the floor, looking dazed, his lips parted. He's dressed smartly like he was for his last broadcast, but rumpled now, the suit torn from the glass. There's still glass in his hair, in fact, and he's a little cut up. He hardly seems to notice, gaping up at her in disbelief as he is.

Lily would like to take the time to fuss at him for botching the stealth mission, but the doors along the hall are opening as guards come flooding out to investigate the sound of the window breaking. So, for now, she leans over to grab the gun off the man she just killed, snagging James' sleeve as well.

"Get *up!"* Lily orders, and James scrambles to do just that.

"Okay," Kingsley announces with a heavy sigh, backing up towards them, having claimed a gun for himself, too. James stumbles back as Kingsley guides them, and Lily distractedly kicks him a gun as they go past another dead person. James takes cues well, because he scoops it up. "Right, so the others were just heading to the staircase to go get Sirius—"

"Sirius?!" James demands immediately. "You're saving—"

"Shut up, no time for questions," Lily cuts in, raising her gun as the guards locate them and start pulling out tasers. "King, what's the plan here?"

"The others were heading to the stairwell, so I'm assuming they found what cell he's in from the office. They only *just* went in, from what I saw," Kingsley says. "If the guards reach the stairwell before the others make it back down, we're all—"

Kingsley never even gets to finish because, from somewhere down below, there's a very loud scream.

~•~

Remus freezes the moment he hears the scream. Just for one second, his whole body locks up as he registers it, and his gaze finds Marlene's. Neither of them breathe.

And then, at the same time, they whip around and start pounding down the stairwell in the opposite direction. Not going up. No, going down.

Following the sound of screaming.

Following the sound of Sirius.

~•~

Regulus tenses up when he sees Riddle's gaze flick away from him for the first time since he interrupted the broadcast. It makes the small hairs stand up on the back of Regulus' arms, his heart thumping hard. No, Riddle shouldn't focus on anything else but him. What if that's someone coming to notify him that there was a break-in at Azkaban? What if—

"Is it done?" Riddle asks, not addressing Regulus. There's a pause, and Riddle hums. "Good. In that case, there's no need to continue with the farce. Isn't that right, Regulus?"

Riddle's gaze latches onto him again, and the gleam of satisfaction in his eyes makes Regulus' chest go tight. No. No, there's no possible way Riddle knows. The others haven't

even been in Azkaban that long. It hasn't even been ten minutes.

"What farce would that be?" Regulus asks with forced calm, arching an eyebrow at him.

"You think I don't know that a team of anarchists have broken into Azkaban?" Riddle asks, and Regulus freezes immediately, his whole body going cold. Riddle leans forward to press something on his desk, mouth ticking up in one corner in a sure sign of victory, holding Regulus' gaze as he speaks to the device, ordering, "Kill them all."

The screen goes black.

Just like that, the broadcast ends, and Regulus is left frozen in place for a long moment, ears ringing. He sees the red light on the camera pointed towards him go off.

"Wait," Regulus whispers, the word escaping him on a fucking wheeze as he stands up, his insides shaking like he's about to fall apart from within first. "Wait, no, no, no—"

Dorcas goes stumbling back with a choked noise, Pandora moving towards her quickly. Minerva, Filius, Albus, and Aberforth are all talking all over each other, loud and disorganized. Barty is moving right for Regulus.

"He—he knew," Regulus gasps out, his hands shaking. "The whole time, he knew. He was—"

"Regulus," Barty says, reaching for him, gripping his arms. Desperately, Regulus grips him back, almost gagging as his stomach heaves, and he makes a high-pitched sound of pure hysteria. Barty shakes him. "Regulus, it's—"

"He was *taunting* me. He—it wasn't my diversion. It was *his,"* Regulus whines. "Barty—"

"Breathe. You have to *breathe* ," Barty tries, sounding strained.

Regulus is hyperventilating, vision blurring as he clutches at Barty and dissolves into an immediate meltdown, voice rising with panic as every part of him *quakes*. "He knew the whole time. He said—he wants to have them killed. Barty, Barty, he said—did he—did I just lose all of them? Did I just—"

"Shh, breathe, just breathe," Barty whispers in his ear, wrapping him up and holding him close.

Regulus collapses into Barty with a raw, guttural sob and can't figure out how he's supposed to breathe ever again.

~•~

Remus doesn't care about the mission. He doesn't care that he can hear gunfire up ahead as he steadily makes his way down, and he doesn't care that he can hear Lily and what sounds like James shouting as they come barreling down after him and Marlene. All he cares about is getting to Sirius. Immediately.

Remus and Marlene are farther ahead than the others, and they're running together, so they break out of the stairwell first on the level Sirius is. The screaming has stopped for now, but it still rings in his ears. He knows exactly where Sirius is, and he doesn't slow down on the way to him, not even when guards come running down the corridor towards them.

Marlene doesn't even hesitate, not for a moment, fully just launching her dagger forward and launching herself with a snarl right after. One guard goes down with a choked noise, and the next takes a hit to the face so hard that they cry out and slam into the wall. Marlene keeps slamming their head into it until they slump down, silent and still.

Remus can feel the blood rushing in his veins as he dodges a taser and throws out his fist, making a guard stumble back. He follows the motion and keeps hitting the guard, legitimately forgetting that he also has a dagger until the guard is already a crumpled heap on the floor. Remus rushes past, knuckles bloody and throbbing, a sensation that shouldn't feel so good but does anyway. As he takes the final corner that will get him to the room—he can

see it down at the end of the corridor, so close, so fucking close—more guards come rushing at them.

"Marlene, Sirius is in there!" Remus bursts out, taking a hit to the side of the head like it's nothing, not even flinching, just swiveling with the motion to grab the guard and pick them clear up off their feet to slam them back down to the floor.

"Go get him!" Marlene shouts. "I got this!"

Remus heaves out a deep breath and carelessly digs his boot into the side of the guard's head until he hears a crunch that probably means the guard won't get back up again. There are still others, but Marlene sounds so sure that she'll be fine, and Remus knows Lily, Kingsley, and likely James are on the way and will be able to help her if she needs it. He's seen her in action; she can hold her own until they get there.

So, Remus leaves her. Doesn't even glance back. Doesn't slow down or wait or think past getting to the end of the hall where the screams originated from. He starts running.

Before he can make it all the way, the door opens, and a man steps out. Oh, Remus knows this man. Remus has been in the chair for this man when getting punished. If that alone wasn't enough to make Remus want to snap his fucking neck, this man being the one to hurt *Sirius* certainly is.

The man shuts the door and locks it. The only way to see the room is through the large window beside said door. Remus can see the chair there, just the back of it, the very top of Sirius' head.

"Open that fucking door," Remus declares harshly, starting right for the man, his stride never faltering.

"Can't do that, I'm afraid," the man replies, holding up a little remote and clicking his tongue. "I just got my new orders."

Remus lunges forward at the same time that the man presses the remote, knocking it out of his hand a moment too late. The man gets slammed back against the window, a thick plane of glass that seems to absorb the sound of his head hitting it with a thump. Remus hears him gasp and doesn't care, just wrapping his hands around his throat and *shaking* him.

"What did you do?!" Remus bellows.

"You're too late," the man gasps out, clawing at Remus' hands, trying to breathe. "He's—he's already….dead…"

Remus refuses to accept this, and also he doesn't like this answer, so he finds his grip around the man's neck tightening. He knocks his head back into the glass repeatedly, clenching his jaw as the man wheezes and tries to push him away, tries to fight him off, tries to struggle. His efforts get weaker, mouth opening and closing as he releases raspy noises, slowly going limp as his eyes roll around uselessly. The blood vessels in his eyes have popped, and it's brutal, it's absolutely gruesome the way Remus is literally just squeezing the life out of him.

Remus doesn't stop until he's squeezed him dry, until he's limp and staring vacantly at nothing, which just so happens to coincide with the exact moment Remus notices the green fog flooding the room through the window.

Remus' hands go slack, his whole body locking up.

The dead man flops to the floor.

From the vents right above Sirius, Remus can see the green fog pouring out, and his breathing goes thin almost immediately. Something sort of just—cracks within him, because he's right here, he's so fucking close, and this can't be happening to him. This can't—it can't —no, it can't, it can't, it can't—

The only thought Remus has as he dives for the door is a constant, desperate stream of *Sirius, Sirius, Sirius.*

"No! Remus, *no!"* Lily screams from down the hall, arriving in just enough time to witness this, too far away to stop him, because he can't be stopped, because he isn't stopping.

Remus knows distantly that this green fog has been created to kill people, to kill them in the most excruciating way possible, and that he's likely in a long line of experiments used to make that happen—he knows this, and he doesn't care. He can't think past *SiriusSiriusSirius,* and that's all that accompanies him as he rushes right into the room; that, and the sound of his best friend screaming his name desperately.

Naturally, the room is full of green fog now, and Remus covers his face, pressing his forearm over his nose and mouth, not breathing as he stumbles quickly to the chair. Sirius is still trapped there, but Remus can't see him, can't even hear if he's screaming over the loud hiss of the fog being released and the ringing in his ears. So, frantically, still holding his breath, Remus feels his way along the chair, removing the restraints.

The moment Sirius is free, things go awry.

Remus hasn't breathed, so his chest is burning, his lungs are on fire, and he really doesn't stand a chance when the full force of a hand slams directly into his chest. He can't stop himself from wheezing as he stumbles back, gasping for air and expecting to immediately feel pain and approaching death, only to feel—nothing. He feels nothing.

Remus blinks rapidly, tentatively sipping in air, breathing in the fog and getting no response. He feels fine. What the—

"Fuck!" Remus bursts out, purely from surprise, because hands have grabbed him by the arms to take him for a ride.

Remus goes whirling around, the stand next to the chair clattering to the floor as he goes crashing into it. He tries to get his bearings and only *just* makes out a fist coming right for him through the cloud of green. Yelping, Remus jerks back to avoid it, his eyes bulging in reflexive disbelief because *Sirius is fucking attacking him.*

It's so surreal that Remus doesn't even know how to wrap his brain around it, and for that, he takes an elbow to the chest and nearly gets punched again. Remus is admittedly a little affronted that this is happening right now, because he doesn't want to fight the man he loves, *obviously,* but then he realizes that Sirius has no fucking idea it's him.

Oh, right. Shit.

"Sirius!" Remus shouts, catching Sirius' wrist when he goes for another hit. "Sirius, can you —"

No, apparently Sirius can't hear him, because he proceeds to yank Remus around and shove him into a wall. Okay, well, that's—yeah, now really isn't the time, but Remus can't deny that it's a little thrilling. Sirius is so—fuck, he's so *fast,* and he's really strong, holding his own in a fight he can't even see in and can't be breathing in.

However, Remus wants to get the hell out of here, sooner rather than later, so he grunts in frustration when Sirius yanks on him again, and he does something he genuinely never even imagined he would do. He uses his strength to slam right into Sirius, coming right at him through the fog and pushing him back against whatever available surface is closest, which turns out to be the window. Remus can hear Sirius' back thud into it, and he feels relief course through him, because that means the door is close by. Okay, they just need to—

Sirius finally lands his punch now that Remus is in range, and Remus curses sharply, because *fucking hell,* Sirius hits like a damn brick. That shit *hurts.* Remus' jaw immediately blooms with an ache, and he suddenly has a lot of sympathy for Regulus, who literally had Sirius beat the shit out of him once. It's just—well, Sirius hits with his whole body, with all the force in him, like he's trying to kill you with one hit, and it almost seems like he comes really close to succeeding.

Remus shoves forward to knock Sirius back into the window harder, arms wrapping around him tight enough to hold him, because he just needs Sirius to know it's him. As soon as Sirius knows it's him, he'll stop. Of course he will.

"Sirius! Sirius, it's me! It's Remus! It's okay, it's—" Remus halts at the noise that reaches his ears, just the faintest sound of breathing from someone other than him. He can feel it, Sirius'

chest rising and falling, Sirius' breath hitting the side of his neck. Sirius is breathing. He's breathing in the fog.

Again, Remus doesn't get any time to ponder this, because Sirius slams his hands against his chest to push him off and whip him around. Remus grunts as his back hits the door, and he only gets one second of warning before the boot moving through the air collides against his chest. Sirius proceeds to kick him so hard that he's kicked right through the door, which bangs open as he goes sailing back and slams against the opposite wall, legs buckling as he tries to catch his breath.

Sirius comes stepping out of the room looking like something ethereal and wild, green fog billowing out around him, hair tangled and untamed, hands and jaw clenched, and—

Oh.

Remus' breath punches out of him as he meets Sirius' eyes and realizes that Sirius isn't even here right now. No, this is—this won't be something Sirius remembers, and Remus isn't scared, exactly, but there's absolutely no recognition in Sirius' gaze as he looks at him, as he moves right for him. He seems to be on one setting at the moment, and it's that single-minded focus to demolish whatever is in his path that leads him to grab Remus by the collar and crawl right into his lap, bracing his hands on Remus' head with clear intentions to snap his neck. Quickly.

And, the thing is, it's not even his fault. He's seconds away from breaking the neck of the man he loves, gripping the top of Remus' head and the underside of his chin, and he won't even remember doing it. This is just—this is how it works, Remus thinks. When Sirius slips away, whatever is left behind continues like an extension of his last need.

If he's running, he keeps running. If he needs comfort, he asks for it. If he can't process something, then he rocks in place. If he's in danger, then he fights, and there's no stop-gap with him like this; he fights to *kill.*

"Sirius," Remus croaks. Sirius isn't even looking at him. He's disinterested. Blank. "Sirius, look at me."

The fingers gripping him grow tight, flexing, and nothing happens for a long second. Remus tilts his head a little to meet Sirius' dull gaze with his own. They stare at each other for a second—Remus, on the precipice of death; Sirius, empty-eyed.

"It's okay," Remus breathes out, shuddering. "I know you won't remember, but I—I forgive you, sweetheart. It's okay."

Because it is okay, because it's not Sirius' fault, because this is what he was made into, and it was wrong, and he didn't deserve it, and Remus forgives him and wants, desperately, for Sirius to forgive himself for anything he's ever done, and what he will do, and Remus loves him, he loves him so much, even like this, because it's something, because they're something.

Sirius stares at him, and he's still not here, he's not, but he's *looking* now. He's looking right at Remus, right into his eyes, and his eyebrows wrinkle together slightly. He blinks, slowly, fingers growing a little softer where they grip Remus, just a sliver of tentative hesitation like he's prepared to get right back to what he was doing at a moment's notice. He looks less blank and more confused now. His head tilts, and then his hand drifts down from the top of Remus' head to cup his jaw as he leans in a little, staring into his eyes like he's curious.

Remus' throat bobs on a harsh swallow, his mouth so dry that he doesn't even try to speak. Sirius blinks again, and then there's a shift in his eyes. Remus thinks he's imagining it until it sparks like a flame and starts to spread, both eyes eventually filling with recognition. Sirius rears back, his lips parting around a soft exhale, and when he blinks again, his eyes are wide and entirely his own. It's him. He's here.

"Remus," Sirius rasps.

"There you are," Remus mumbles, managing to crack a shaky, weary smile. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Hi," Sirius chokes out, sounding and looking stunned. Both hands fly up to cradle his face. "You're here. You're—"

Sirius inhales sharply, and then he folds forward to catch Remus in a kiss so deep, so intense, that Remus forgets everything else almost instantly. It doesn't matter that Sirius absolutely needs to brush his teeth, or that green fog is slipping out of the cracked door behind them in wisps, or that there's distant sounds of grunts and gunfire down the hall, or that they're here, in a prison, in the middle of a mission to escape. Nothing else matters but this, because it's everything, because Sirius is absolutely fucking *everything*.

Remus is clutching at Sirius as desperately as Sirius is clutching at him, kissing him hard, and then left breathless when they do break apart. Sirius looks fit for diving right back into yet another kiss, but then he flinches and scrambles off of Remus with a gasp. He fists Remus' shirt and drags him along as he goes, making Remus yelp and try to get his bearings.

"Sirius—"

"The—the fog. It's—there's—we have to *move!"*

"Sirius! Sirius, it's *okay!"* Remus bursts out, reaching up to grab onto Sirius' arms to wrench him to a halt, which is actually a feat, because Sirius is legitimately dragging him along the floor, the muscles in his arms bulging. Remus eases Sirius' grip and slowly stands. "It's—I promise it's okay. We, um. Well, we sort of…just came out of it. The fog, I mean. I don't know why, but it doesn't hurt us."

Sirius blinks. "What? Is it—not bad?"

"No, it is, I think. Just—" Remus swallows and glances at the dead body of the man he killed, still slumped on the floor. "Ah, well, he said…it would kill you. I think it was supposed to, and probably me too, but it…didn't? For some reason?"

"Didn't," Sirius repeats faintly, his gaze crawling to the dead man. He blinks again, then says, "Did you do that to him?"

"Kill him, you mean?"

"Yeah."

Remus holds his gaze. "Yes."

"Oh," Sirius mumbles, then blurts out, "He never got to eat his pasta."

"What?" Remus asks, startled, but Sirius doesn't get to elaborate.

"Remus!"

The shrill call of his name makes Remus' head snap to the side, and he mindlessly snags Sirius' hand before promptly taking off at a sprint. All his mind focuses on in that moment is Lily, and the desperate plea that just escaped her, because she sounds scared, and Remus needs to get to her *now.*

The others have been backed down a corridor branching off from this one, fighting guards, severely outnumbered by them. Remus' hand falls away from Sirius the moment he sees Lily being dragged along the floor by her hair, Kingsley and Marlene too far away, and James entirely surrounded.

Fuck.

"James!" Sirius shouts, and then he's snatching the dagger out of Remus' belt holster right before he runs full tilt into the fray without even stopping.

Remus stumbles, then goes with the momentum to reach the guard holding Lily, slamming them back into the wall. The guard lets out a shriek, which is when Remus looks down to see Lily slam her dagger into the side of their knee, twisting and *yanking.* The guard crumbles, and Remus gets his arm around their neck, squeezing and wrenching at their head until there's that telltale *snap* before the body sags.

Lily scrambles to her feet, chest heaving as she stops and gapes at him, cheeks stained with tears. "You're—but you—I saw you—how are you—"

"I don't know," Remus admits, because he doesn't know, and it fucking terrifies him. He searches her eyes for a long moment, hoping maybe *she'll* have the answers somehow, impossibly, but she looks as shocked as he feels.

There's a shout, followed by a yelp, and Remus jolts back into motion, because oh, right, there's still a lot of fighting going on at the moment. There's really no time for reunions.

Remus and Lily surge forward to offer help to the others, deflecting hits and throwing out their own. Sirius is cutting a path to James, killing swiftly and effortlessly as he goes, or just shoving people aside, or knocking them out. He's a flurry of desperate, determined movement. Remus goes to aid Kingsley, while Lily rushes to Marlene, who has one guard on their knees with their own taser down their throat, making them choke on it before she turns it on.

There's no way to know how long they fight for, and it doesn't matter, besides the fighting doesn't come to an end. They just all push in together, reaching for each other, drawn into the instinctive need to be in a group. When they're in range, Kingsley yells to run, and they do.

They have to. They can't just keep fighting forever. Getting out is the main priority now that James and Sirius have been located, and yes, the whole stealth bit of the mission has gone entirely to the dogs, *but* the mission to escape is entirely still on. So, they run, with Kingsley taking the lead.

Kingsley, who has been studying the blueprints of the prison and the sewer system beneath so much that he probably has it memorized. Kingsley, who is trained on how to shake off those who pursue them. Kingsley, who keeps them at a pace that borders on agonizing to keep up with, even for them, let alone those that are chasing them.

They take all the winding turns that Kingsley guides them on, and then follow him right into a room without even a stutter. He bursts in through the door, frantically waving them in, then slams it shut and immediately takes off for a vent in the corner.

"Block the door," Kingsley orders sharply, and so Remus, Lily, and Marlene automatically go for the large desk in the middle of the room, working to move it against the door.

James and Sirius are a bit too busy being caught up in staring at each other in disbelief, clutching one another's shoulders and talking rapidly over each other. James is standing on one leg, Sirius is leaning so close to James that it looks like he's about to kiss him, and they sound like an overturned mess of jumbled, mutual confusion.

"Hey, hey, you okay?" Remus mumbles as he pulls away from the desk to turn to Lily, hands coming up automatically to cup her cheeks and look for injuries. He slips one hand over the round hill of her cheek to ease it into her hair, being careful because it was just ruthlessly yanked on. Lily winces, but she tilts her head into his hands, letting him gently get the tangles out that the guard put there. "Hurts?"

"I'll be alright," Lily whispers, reaching out to press her hands flat to his chest, seemingly just to feel it rise and fall beneath her palms. Her fingers shake. "You—I thought you were—"

"I know, I know, but can we not talk about it now?" Remus asks, his chest pinching at the stricken expression on her face. She starts to lean away from him, and he shakes his head, tugging her closer and dipping down to press his forehead to hers, because he can't. He just can't do it right now. "Please. Just—I can't, right now. I need you. Please."

Lily seems to hold her breath, then exhales and sags into him, hands settling on the outside of his arms, squeezing. She nods against his forehead and says, "Okay, Remus. Okay."

"Shit!" Marlene yelps when the desk thumps as the guards reach the door, trying to burst their way in. "Kingsley, we're sort of cornered here!"

"Not for long. Come on, time to go," Kingsley calls out, sitting aside the vent cover and waving at them to join him as he crawls in.

"King, where the hell are we going?" Lily hisses, the one to follow in behind him, while Remus goes next. Sirius makes James go after, then seems to get into a bickering war with

Marlene about who will go last. Marlene ends up winning, because Sirius crawls in after James, while Marlene follows.

It's cramped inside the vent, and they're all squished and sort of shuffling in a slow crawl as they go, shoulders bunched up and heads ducked, making their way on hands and knees. It's stuffy, and when Kingsley speaks, his voice sounds muted and echo-y at the same time.

"There's a, um, body deposit?" Kingsley replies. "Like, it's built towards the back of the prison like a trash chute, but it's where they dump bodies so someone else can pull up a carriage and haul them off. It's—a way out. Technically."

"Don't tell me we're sliding down a dead-body chute."

"Sorry, Red, but we can access the sewers from the back. It wasn't the original plan, but I can't see the guards expecting it, and Filius' device should still be working."

"It hasn't been fifteen minutes?" Remus asks incredulously.

"Not quite, but we're cutting it close," Kingsley mutters. "As long as we get to the sewers, we'll be fine."

"Sewers?" Sirius mutters. "We're traveling through *sewers?"*

"Oh, sorry, shall we escort you back to your cushy life of luxury in prison?" Lily snaps.

"Who the fuck are you?" Sirius snaps back.

"Sirius," Remus says, a warning.

"Who the fuck is she?" Sirius repeats, harsher this time.

"Is now the time?" James asks, strained.

Lily scoffs. "No, it's not. Shut the fuck up and be *grateful* about escaping Azkaban, instead of —oh, I don't know, complaining about the circumstances in which you have to."

"Oh, just you fucking *wait* until I get out of this vent," Sirius hisses. "I don't know who the fuck you think you are—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in, "this is Lily."

There's a beat of silence. Awkward silence. Sirius coughs and mumbles, "Oh. So, um, not dead, then?"

"No," Remus confirms, lips twitching as he stares down at the tread of Lily's boot ahead of him. He can't really make it out fully in the dark. "Still alive. Very lively, as you can tell."

"Brilliant," Sirius says weakly. "I'm—ah, hi. Shit. Wait, no, I'm really glad you're alive. It's great to meet you. I mean—well, it's shit circumstances, and I have *definitely* looked better, so this isn't my best impression, but—"

Lily huffs a laugh. "Relax, Sirius, believe it or not, I feel the same about you. Sorry I couldn't get you out of the arena, by the way. I, um. I really tried."

"You're the one who…?"

"Yeah, I was running the team who went in. Again, I'm really sorry that I—"

"You got my brother out," Sirius cuts in. "Thank you."

"Oh," Lily says softly, and then she clears her throat. "Remus, you're right. He's precious."

"Isn't he?" Remus agrees, ridiculously smug and oddly proud, struck with the urge to shout from the rooftops how Sirius is so fucking precious and *his*. He has him, he has him, he has him again; oh, oh, he has him again. Remus is fucking *rejoicing*.

Kingsley shushes them all urgently, so they fall silent, crawling about in a ventilation system that, apparently, Kingsley has mapped out all in his head. He seems to know where he's going as he leads them along, taking a turn here or there, which is actually a bit difficult to deal with in the cramped space. It's a relief when Remus hears Kingsley bust out the opening to a vent with a clatter and lead them all out.

The room itself is very compact and sparse when Remus tumbles out of the vent, which is a little high off the ground, so coming out head-first is a bit disorienting. Lily helps steady him by his elbow, but she still looks displeased with him when their eyes meet, though at least she isn't being harsh about it.

Remus waves Lily and Kingsley off to go inspect the chute in the room, choosing instead to help the others out of the vent. James grunts when he flops out, looking mildly ridiculous in his fancy, cut-up suit. His hair is a wreck, while his glasses and cane are absent. He blinks at Remus, then takes his hand with a crooked smile, one that fades when Remus glares at him.

"Remus," James rasps once he's on his feet, "I—"

"Not now," Remus interrupts, clipped. "Later."

Remus turns away from him, ignoring him in favor of helping Sirius out of the vent. Now *really* isn't the time, and Remus would prefer to be safely inside the Phoenix before he and James talk about what happened. They will need to talk about it, because Remus is tired of having nightmares about that moment of being trapped in the back of a van while James remained behind.

Sirius takes his arm gratefully and leans onto him as he comes out of the vent, and he's there for a moment, gazing at him in that way he seems to be stuck doing here. Just unhindered awe in his eyes, lips parting as he stares at Remus like he's a miracle. His hand comes up almost mindlessly, fingers gently brushing the bruise Remus can feel aching on his jaw.

"Someone hit you really hard," Sirius whispers.

"Yeah," Remus mumbles. "It's okay."

Sirius frowns, eyebrows furrowed, concern in the tenderness of his touch. Remus can only look at him, starved for the sight of him. Oh, just look at him. Here he is. Look, look, look.

And, even like this, Sirius is still such a beautiful mess. He reflects the toll Azkaban takes perfectly, his hair tangled and limp, his clothes shabby and unflattering. He's shivering, sporting bruises of his own, his knuckles raw and busted the same way Remus' are. Remus can feel the ache in his chest where Sirius kicked him and suspects he'll have a gruesome bruise there in the shape of Sirius' boot, along with many others where Sirius tossed him around. They're *both* less than their best, but that's hardly mattered to Remus ever before. He just doesn't care. He wants to kiss Sirius again. He wants to hold him, and keep him safe, and never let him get hurt again.

"Thanks for the help," Marlene grumbles as she flops out onto the floor, and Remus jolts with a wince, grimacing in apology as he moves over to help her up.

"So, you're just going to…?" Lily sends Kingsley a look of disbelief as she peers into the… body chute.

Kingsley heaves a sigh and climbs up to sit on the edge, gripping the top as he glances around at everyone. "Count to ten and listen for my whistle. If you don't hear it, I'm either dead, or it's not safe to come down."

With that and nothing else, Kingsley tugs himself forward and proceeds to slide right into the darkness of the chute, fully disappearing. They can hear the shush of his clothes against the steel, but that eventually fades, too.

"Cheerful guy," James comments awkwardly, as they all wait, and Marlene snorts at the same time that Lily does. James looks visibly pleased to have gotten tokens of their approval, or perhaps he's just always grateful to lighten the mood.

By five seconds, there's a quiet whistle that reaches them, and they all immediately start moving. They're all eager to get the hell out of here, and they're in the homestretch now.

Lily has to practically shove Remus into the chute next, and it takes genuine effort to not make a sound on the way down. It's literally like a slide, so he sails down quickly, breathless when he shoots out the opening into a free fall right to the floor. It's not too far, thankfully, so he manages to mostly land on his feet, though his ankles smart for it and he stumbles. Kingsley is right there, helping steady him.

Marlene follows next, though she doesn't look pleased about it, and she takes the fall with more finesse than Remus did, absorbing the impact by bending her knees, spry and agile on her feet. James comes down next, and he falls right to the floor, his leg buckling underneath him. Marlene and Remus are there immediately to help him up, but a whine escapes him, and he's most definitely limping now.

"Fuck," James hisses, his arms thrown over Remus and Marlene's shoulders, teeth grinding as he glares down at his leg. When he tries to put weight on it, he crumbles again. "Ah, well, that's not good."

"It's okay, James, we're almost there," Marlene murmurs, briefly glancing up as Sirius drops down, hissing between his teeth as he collapses as well. Remus starts to pull away, but Kingsley beats him to it, and Lily comes sailing down right after. As soon as she has her bearings, she goes to check on Sirius. "Kingsley, how far are we from the sewers?"

"Not too far. Come on, we'll take it nice and easy," Kingsley replies quietly, walking past with Lily, Sirius hobbling along between them, looking very exhausted.

"Alright, James?" Sirius mumbles.

"Been better," James admits. "You?"

"I might vomit," Sirius offers conversationally. "As turns out, adrenaline can only carry you so far. But I'll live. Probably."

"Yeah, same here, I suppose," James says wryly.

The entrance to the sewers—or one of them, anyway—is just on the outside of the body deposit, underneath a heavy grate that shows nothing but darkness down below. Kingsley halts them outside of it, gently helping Lily ease Sirius to the ground, then instructing them to do the same with James. Sirius and James both seem grateful for the second of rest.

"Okay, Lily, get ready," Kingsley says, and she nods as she drags her bag off. He crouches down in front of James and Sirius, calm as always. "My name is Kingsley. As you've likely guessed by now, we're here to get you two out. To do that, we need to make sure Riddle doesn't have trackers in you."

"They never took the one out of my arm," Sirius mumbles, looking a bit pale. "They didn't see the point in putting a new one in, so they just left that one."

"I have one," James admits with a sigh. Face grim, he reaches down and taps his injured leg, giving a rueful smile as he grips his own thigh. "Same place as yours, Remus."

"Let me guess, you have to cut them out?" Sirius asks.

Kingsley nods. "Unfortunately, yes, we do. However, Lily is a medic, and she's prepared for this. She has some medication that will help both of you with pain and discomfort, but removing the trackers and leaving them here is necessary."

"I'll be quick," Lily says as she kneels down next to them to pass out water and medication. "Who wants to go first?"

"Me," Sirius declares. "Get this fucking thing out of me."

"Remus, Marlene, I need you to help me move the grate," Kingsley orders, gesturing them over.

Reluctantly, Remus shuffles away from Sirius and James, leaving them with Lily. They're in capable hands, he knows that, but he wants to be with them. He wants to stay with Sirius. Hold his hand through the procedure. Let Sirius lean on him, hide his face against Remus' neck, and block it all out.

Instead, Remus puts his efforts into helping further them along in their escape. They're still on a time limit. The only reason the guards haven't located them yet is because the surveillance feed has been jammed, and they don't have a lot of time before they need to get down in these sewers. Once they're there, no one will be able to find them.

The grate is rusted iron and very fucking heavy, so it takes the combined efforts of Remus, Kingsley, and Marlene to lift it and shift it aside to leave the opening. By the time they make it back over to the others, Lily is dabbing at Sirius' arm and carefully wrapping it in gauze. The tracker is discarded on the grass, covered in blood.

"Me next?" James says wearily when Lily shifts to him.

"Yes. Drop your pants, Potter," Lily replies.

James cracks a weak smile and holds up a hand. "Listen, I'm an engaged man—"

Lily rolls her eyes and starts taking his pants off. James makes a quiet yelping sort of noise and smacks her hands away a bit frantically, taking over quickly to handle it himself. Remus leaves them to it and kneels down next to Sirius.

"Let me see," Remus murmurs, reaching for Sirius' wrapped arm, his lips tipping down.

"I'm fine," Sirius says softly, his other hand coming up to cradle Remus' jaw, fingers trembling. "I've had worse."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it," Remus mumbles.

"One of the worst things I've ever felt was being without you, Remus," Sirius tells him, "and here you are. How can anything hurt now that you're here?"

Remus could fucking *cry.* He makes a small noise and leans in to press their foreheads together. "Sweetheart."

"Hm?"

"Sirius."

"What is it?" Sirius whispers, fingertips trailing over Remus' cheek, wiping the tears away. "Oh, the tides are going wild. Calm waters, moon of mine, I beg of you. We're almost to the port. Almost there. We're almost there."

"We have a whole war to fight," Remus croaks, his eyes stinging. "This isn't even the half of it."

"Say the word and I'll run away with you," Sirius murmurs. "We'll abduct everyone we love and take to the seas. Throw them under the deck until we're too far away for them to swim back."

"We wouldn't have to do that to Regulus. He can't even swim."

"Oh, you're fucking awful. I'm so in love with you."

Remus smiles against his cheek and tries—and fails—to stop crying. "I love you, too."

"Say it again," Sirius mumbles into the crook of his neck, hiding there now like he has no desire to ever resurface. "I've been telling the moon every night how much I love you. Say it back. *Say it back."*

There is nothing in this world Remus would not give Sirius, and so he winds his fingers into Sirius' hair and says it again, and again, and again. He says it back, soft and repetitive like a lullaby, a precious offering for the most precious thing to him. He says it until he stops crying, until they're just there, tucked into each other while everyone else politely ignores them, focusing on their own things. That's where they stay, finding each other again.

And then it's time to leave.

"Alright, we're cleared to head out," Lily declares, helping James stand once he has his pants back up.

"Ready to go?" Remus asks Sirius, easing back.

Sirius nods wearily. "Yeah, I—I'd like to leave now."

"Alright, sweetheart, we'll go," Remus murmurs, taking his arm to help him stand. "We're almost there, and it'll be a struggle, but we'll make it. We're going to make it."

Remus says it because he wants to soothe Sirius, who sinks into him, suitably soothed. He says it, not even knowing if it's true, having no knowledge of what waits for all of them. He says it because he believes it, because he has to believe it.

He says it, and he's willing to do whatever is necessary to make sure he's not wrong.

But, that's the thing, he's never really wrong, is he?

~•~

Three hours later, Severus steps into Riddle's office, finding the man sitting behind his desk, gaze latched onto his laptop. He doesn't look up when Severus comes in, not at first. It takes a second, then he lifts his gaze. Oh, this isn't going to go well.

"Explain to me," Riddle begins, "how I ordered you to place roadblocks all over the city, form a perimeter around Azkaban, and the anarchists still managed to escape?"

Severus resists the urge to sigh. "We—"

"And," Riddle continues sharply, "explain to me how they managed to *blow up* the blockade checkpoint between us and district one on their way out."

"We've been investigating, sir, and it seems that the team of anarchists traveled through the sewers," Severus says, and Riddle curls his lip in visible disgust. "By the time the surveillance feed was back online, they had already escaped all points of visibility. They traveled back through the city with the help of someone from district one."

"Who?" Riddle grits out.

"A woman by the name of Pomona Sprout. She worked in the main lab in district one, including transport in and out of the Hallow. The anarchists were escorted by her."

"Why was she not investigated at the roadblocks?"

"She had clearance, sir," Severus murmurs.

Riddle looks fit for murder. "You mean to tell me that the anarchists were loose in the city, and those at the roadblocks simply *waved her through?"*

"When she traveled through the city, we were under the impression that the anarchists were still in Azkaban."

"So, they slipped out from underneath everyone's noses."

"Yes, sir," Severus admits.

"At what point, exactly, did you figure out that they had managed to leave Azkaban's grounds?" Riddle asks.

"When they reached the blockade," Severus says. "There is a routine check on the way out from the Hallow into district one, and the anarchists were discovered there."

"And?" Riddle demands.

Severus once again resists the urge to sigh. "And the driver, Pomona Sprout, busted through the blockade, which ended in a crash. She didn't survive. The anarchists fled through the opening the truck left, and the truck was leaking fuel. Someone shot it. There was an explosion as a result."

"Did any of the anarchists die?"

"We recovered no bodies if they did, sir."

Riddle stares at him, hands threaded tightly on his desk. His eyes are cold with rage. "What happened to Sirius Black?"

"He was with them," Severus says simply.

"Of course. Of course he was." Riddle exhales, splitting his hands and laying his palms flat against the desk. His fingers twitch. "This is an unacceptable display of incompetence, and it will *not* happen again. Escort James Potter to me. Now."

Severus shows absolutely no signs of malicious vindication on his face, but he perhaps takes a little too much pleasure in getting to say, "I can't do that, sir."

"You can't do that," Riddle repeats, going still. "Why?"

"He was with them, too," Severus informs him. If he were a laughing man, this would keep him laughing for years to come.

"I ordered you to have him escorted back here."

"I did. The team escorting him was killed in Azkaban, sir."

Riddle abruptly stands up with a snarl, slashing his hands across his desk and sending everything flying all at once. He picks up a book there and launches it at the wall, looking the most undignified Severus has ever seen him. Severus has *never* seen him lose control like this, and it's invigorating to watch.

Severus never looks away, taking it all in, how very human Riddle looks. Simply a man. An angry one, his chest heaving, teeth bared and eyes blazing. Even in the midst of all his mistakes, he's never once shown his frustration, because Severus thinks he hasn't realized that he is losing, that he *can* lose, until this very moment. It makes him wreck his own space, and then—abruptly—it's like a switch flips.

Riddle stops. He surveys his own mess almost blankly, then steps up to his desk and leans down to pull something out of a drawer. A beat later, Riddle straightens up with a jar holding a Horcrux Hornet in his hand. Slowly, he walks around his desk and approaches Severus, holding his gaze.

"This was planned," Riddle murmurs, stopping in front of Severus. The Horcrux Hornet remains still in the jar, no response from it at all. "They didn't simply choose today to have Regulus give a broadcast in response to James, then attempt to utilize that as a diversion. It wasn't just about saving Sirius. No, they knew James would be there."

Severus says nothing. Riddle reaches up and slowly screws the lid off the jar, holding it against the glass with a clink. He eases his hand inside and draws out the Horcrux Hornet, which remains still in his palm. Is it meant to frighten Severus? How can it, when Severus is immune?

"I know this can bring you no harm now," Riddle says, gazing down at the Horcrux Hornet with… It's almost reverence, or as close to reverence as he's capable of getting. "Regardless of that, they can still sense fear and respond to it. Anyone who has betrayed me should be afraid of what I will do to them, wouldn't you say, Severus?"

"Yes, sir," Severus replies.

Riddle holds his gaze. "Do you have a family, Severus?"

"A father," Severus tells him, and the wings on the Horcrux Hornet give a faint flutter. It settles immediately after, just a minor slip, but Riddle catches it.

"Ah," Riddle says softly, reaching up to gently stroke one of the wings. "Your father. What's his name?"

"Tobias Snape."

"Located in district two, I imagine?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you love your father, Severus?"

Severus pauses, just for the second it takes for him to realize that it's in his best interest to lie, then he says, "Yes, sir."

"Hm." Riddle looks at the Horcrux Hornet, then at Severus, then back to the hornet. "How did they know James would be in Azkaban today, Severus?"

"I don't know, sir," Severus replies.

The Horcrux Hornet remains still. Riddle watches it, then lifts his gaze to study Severus' face. Then, calmly, Riddle tips the Horcrux Hornet back into the jar and screws the lid back on.

"Then find out," Riddle orders, pushing the jar against his chest, letting it go the moment Severus takes it. "And, if you do not, your father will pay the price."

"Yes, sir," Severus says.

Once dismissed, Severus leaves with the jar in hand, thinking of the funeral he will have to plan for his father, wondering if he will be given the order to kill the man himself. Idly, he can't help but think of the irony in that, his only true fear defeated at the order of the man he's never feared at all. Not once has a Horcrux Hornet responded to Severus in Riddle's company, because regardless of power, Severus doesn't fear fools.

Riddle is one of the most powerful, dangerous men in the world, easily qualified to be an exception, and yet the only exception to Severus' rule to never fear a fool is his father.

Only when Severus is alone in his car does he allow himself to sit the jar in the passenger seat, grab the wheel, and laugh.

Chapter End Notes

alright, from the top!

we started with a snape pov for some info-dumping, and also him internally shitting on riddle. hate him, love him, whatever—but as the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend and all that. him mentally roasting riddle is lowkey so funny to me 😭

then we've got the mission underway, and regulus being a little shit and roasting his fiancé on live broadcast 😭 GOODBYE HE'S SO FUNNY.

not sirius chatting with the man who tortures him, like you KNOW this man is so bored. but also, him being worried about regulus 😭 I MISS THEM

in the next snape pov, sorry but "severus" "yes, sir?" "we have a situation" "i see that, sir" fucking KILLS me lmaoooo. and its not explicitly shown (on purpose), but riddle knew then that there was a break in to azkaban by that point, so his unshown orders to snape was to order up the blockades and stuff; he knew like a minute after filius' device was used—it worked (obviously), but the system sent out an alert, basically, that pretty much was like Hey There's An Outside Device Being Used, and so riddle knew then, which is why he ordered to have james brought back, and to have sirius killed—because he'd rather kill him than risk losing him to the phoenix. so yes, riddle knew before he ever interrupted regulus' broadcast.

also riddle and regulus going in circles. fun stuff! i like that bit a whole lot, if im honest. just regulus kind of stretching his muscle of going head-to-head with people in powerful positions.

cut to james, who—after being used and stretched so thin and worried about sirius—finally snaps and loses his collective shit. when he gets impulsive, that's it. like, its over for everyone immediately. he didn't even hesitate; he literally just tackled someone through a window 😭 I LOVE HIM SO MUCH.

and then we get the whole bit of everyone trying to reach sirius and remus going for his man!!! that final remus pov—gahhh, so much happens in it. like, we got remus literally

brutally murdering people to get to sirius, which... remus lupin, one chance, please, i am BEGGING.

and then he just. dives into the green fog, having absolutely no idea that he's immune. do you know how fucking insane that is? he SAW eli die to that, and he STILL just ran right in to save sirius. like??? oh, he's so "dont blame me, love made me crazy" this chapter.

also, sirius and remus fighting.... no because remus' whole journey with that, like he was lowkey affronted at first, then he was kinda into it, and then he was just sad 😭 and sirius...has absolutely no recollection of any of that. like he has No Idea that he fought remus (yet), so this is something that they have to deal with in the future. also², sirius being immune, too! some people guessed it already, but we get more on it in the next chapter, i promise!

but actually, sirius not really being able to kill remus, even as he was. and it boils down to, like, he was on Kill Mode, but remus wasn't fighting him, remus was talking to him gently, remus even said he forgave him, and sirius, in that state, was like Okay Something Is Different, bc like. he didn't feel like he was in danger in that moment, and so he...paused. like, its kind of established that he slips away when hes overwhelmed and doesn't feel safe, so remus making him feel safe in that moment literally saved remus' life.

then the final push—again, a lot happened. we didn't see all of it, like snape summed it up, mostly, but we get more information on it in the next chapter, too.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-james "listen, im an engaged man" potter 😭
-remus "look at me sirius, this isnt you" lupin (im sorry aksksksk

To Have Again

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

without further ado, the warnings:

-references to past death
-references to past torture
-references to past child endangerment (because of what happened in district six)
-references to past use of biological warfare
-references to past dissociative amnesia
-references to past violence
-depictions of wounds/injuries
-vague descriptions/depictions of burns on the body (its from outside perspectives)
-medical inaccuracies (yes i know this is how none of this works in the real world, but we're ignoring that. to those in the medical field, you have my apologies)

i...think that's it? im pretty sure that's it. this one is an emotional one, everyone. yall stay safe out there and take care of yourselves!

(special shoutout to jude (aka moonymoment on ao3; aka author of melodrama, sober thoughts, when its warm again, disintegration, closer to heaven, hey dorcas, synonymous, the aching kiss before i feed, tis the damn season, an ode to october (i know the end), saccharine, of memories and milk thievery, lessen my load, operation: toebeans, new prospects, pair of tossers with a cat, and never have i ever; aka the light and love of my life—happy birthday, judebug!!! <3)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dorcas is the one who's waiting at the station when they return, because she's the only one who believes they're not dead. Her reason for this is because Marlene promised she would come back, and Dorcas refuses to move until she does.

It's a bold belief. Desperate, some would say. Pathetic and pitiful, some likely think. Dorcas doesn't care. She simply doesn't accept any other outcome, so if she has to stay in one spot forever, until her very last breath, that's what she'll do.

In the end, it pays off.

She's up and moving the moment the train rolls into the station, convinced that there's more than just the driver on it, and her breath catches when the doors rattle open.

There's an immediate flurry of activity as Sirius, Lily, and Remus pour out. Lily is giving orders, frantic and loud, clothes singed and James' slack body laid out on a backboard. There is no help waiting, no gurney, and Lily doesn't waste time; she just takes off running towards the infirmary with Sirius and Remus going with her, carrying James between them. Kingsley comes darting past, not even stopping to speak to her.

Dorcas stares after them, her eyes wide.

They all looked like hell, quite frankly, suffering bruises and burns, smelling repugnant like they were still in the sewer they came out of, a frenzied air about them that suggests they're all still stuck in survival mode. And James… Dorcas only caught one glimpse, really, but he looked very fucking bad. Not dead, though, at least not yet, because they wouldn't have been so urgent to get him to medical help if that was the case.

Dorcas is taking it as a win, because that's really all she's got, at this point. He's still alive, and he's here. They're all here. They all made it back. She knows that.

She knows, because when she turns, Marlene is wearily exiting the train, looking fucking *exhausted.* She's covered in dried blood, as well as superficial bruises of her own, and she has clearly fought very fucking hard. The look in her eyes is clear, though. Sharp. Calm, almost.

Dorcas' breath catches at the very sight of her, and something within cries out in triumph, joyous with *I knew you'd come back to me, I waited for you, and I was right.* She knew, because she's the one who's always late, but Marlene is always right on time.

It's only a second that keeps her trapped in place, her entire fucking being just rejoicing at Marlene's return, and then she's moving. She's *running.* She doesn't even care, not about anything but getting to Marlene immediately. Marlene can't seem to go much faster than she is, but she's moving to meet her halfway, reaching for her the moment Dorcas gets close.

And then Dorcas has her. Dorcas throws her arms around her with a stuttered gasp, dragging her close and shaking with it, with the gift that is having her again. She wants to be gentle and has forgotten how to, clinging too tight, gripping too hard. It doesn't matter. Marlene is rough with her, too.

Like the others, Marlene smells fucking awful, and Dorcas doesn't care. They clearly did all they could to clean up on the train, but the smell lingers, and Dorcas doesn't care about that either; she wouldn't care if Marlene *was* still covered in shit and piss. She genuinely couldn't care less, because she has Marlene in her arms once again, finally, safe and sound.

Marlene holds her like she's trying to crush her into nothing, and Dorcas loves it. Dorcas feels like a tube Marlene is trying to get everything inside out of, leaving nothing behind, pushing the very breath out of her lungs until she's hanging in the balance between breathing and never breathing again, kept there like that and never wanting to leave. It feels so unbearably good, like a physical manifestation of how important it is for them to have each other to hold.

The moment Marlene's grip eases, just a little, Dorcas rocks back just enough to shakily cup Marlene's face, searching her eyes as she whispers, "I knew. I knew you'd be back."

"I promised, didn't I?" Marlene tells her, lips curling up faintly, still visibly worn out. "How else could I be sure I'd get the chance to give you your ring back at least one more time?"

"Oh, was that it?" Dorcas chokes out on a shaky laugh. "In that case, keep it for my peace of mind. As long as you have it, I'll know you're making it back to me."

Marlene hums, eyes drifting shut, that tiny tired smile still on her face. "I think I'll do that. Although, I have to admit, I'll miss you finding ways to get it back on my finger."

Dorcas leans in to press their foreheads together, eyes slipping closed, just breathing. "Three times I got that ring on your finger. Sybill says some of the best and worst things come in threes, Marlene. Let's leave it at that. That's enough, yes?"

"Yeah," Marlene whispers, "that's enough."

"I love you," Dorcas breathes out, fingers on Marlene's cheeks, a warrior worshipping war.

Marlene responds to this by kissing her, hands on her hips dragging her in, pressing them tight together. Dorcas can feel the echo of *I love you, too* in the way she kisses her, putting in the effort to be gentle, delicate about it, slow and sweet. It feels like a first kiss, somehow, though it's not. Just how it's tentative and careful, like at any moment it could end.

It does end when Dorcas squeezes Marlene closer, tighter, trying to fold her up and keep her locked away inside her chest, wanting so badly to keep her safe, because this was the hardest thing she's ever had to do; the worst thing she's ever experienced, simply because she was not there, and Marlene was in danger, and Marlene could have died, and the only thing that kept this world safe was Dorcas' bold belief that she hadn't. What if she had been wrong? She'd raze this world to the ground, she thinks, so it's for the best that she wasn't. But a part of her can't ignore that she could have been, and so she holds onto Marlene too hard, kissing her like she's oxygen, and then Marlene hisses and winces, and Dorcas jerks away.

"It's okay. I'm okay," Marlene mutters, still grimacing. "I just probably have some bruised ribs. Really, I'm fine."

"Shit, we need to get you to the infirmary," Dorcas says, feeling like a fucking idiot. "Okay, come on."

"Fucking hell, you must really love me if you're standing this close to me when I smell like this. *And* letting me kiss you, Meadowes?" Marlene shakes her head, releasing an incredulous huff of laughter. "Wonders never cease."

"I told you, I love you all of you, even when you're carrying the scent of sewer with you wherever you go," Dorcas murmurs, and Marlene hums in a pleased fashion, grinning, only to wince when she moves too quickly. "Easy. Take it easy."

"Dorcas, I promise I'm alright," Marlene grumbles, but Dorcas won't hear it. Marlene rolls her eyes and heaves a sigh when Dorcas wraps an arm around her to gingerly help her along to the infirmary. "It doesn't matter, really. Lily checked me out on the train, did what she could, and they'll all be focused on James anyway. He needs more help."

"He—he didn't look good," Dorcas murmurs, swallowing past the lump that forms in her throat.

Marlene is silent for a beat, and then when she does speak, her tone is heavy and her eyes flash with ghosts of war. "There was an explosion. Well, the mission went tits up pretty much the whole way through, but we almost made it out easily in the end. Just…the checkpoint back into district one… They're, um, usually more lax, Pomona said, but the city was basically on lockdown, and while they just waved us through at all the roadblocks, they were more thorough at the checkpoint."

"You were discovered," Dorcas whispers, her heart sinking.

"Yeah," Marlene replies, her voice flat and empty. "So, uh, Pomona rammed right through, but—but there was a crash. We were all thrown around, and I—I remember the screams and the gunshots, Kingsley shouting for us to run. We tried. We just—we couldn't get out of range before the truck exploded. I could smell the fuel, and they were shooting, and Pomona was knocked out in the front. She—she didn't—"

Dorcas exhales slowly, refusing to let her expression twist the way it wants to, hardening her heart to it. Because it's war. This is what happens. "She didn't make it out?"

"No. She was in the truck when it exploded," Marlene says. There's a moment of silence. "She was nice, you know? I didn't really like her cellar, but she…" There's another, longer pause, and then Marlene sighs. "In any case, there was nothing we could do. James was—he was closest to the truck, because he stayed back to help everyone crawl out of it. He was so urgent when he told us to run, and Kingsley was yelling it ahead, so we just—we *did.* And James was, too, but he took the brunt of the explosion. It was—I thought he was dead. I thought—"

"He's not," Dorcas reminds her gently.

Marlene nods curtly. "I know. It was just really bad. Sirius was a fucking wreck, trying to crawl for him, and it was… And then Remus just—he went back for him. Ran right at the gunshots, into the smoke, and Sirius and Lily were screaming, there was shrapnel

everywhere, everything fucking *hurt,* and then Remus came back. He's strong, yeah? I mean, he had James tossed over his shoulder and was yelling at us to run, and we did, and it was just—it was so fucking chaotic. We didn't even know he was alive until we made it to the train."

Dorcas can perfectly picture it. The adrenaline. The desperate need to survive. The pressure to run as fast as you've ever ran in your life, knowing that if you're caught, you'll die. A part of her rails against the fact that Marlene had to suffer that again. She can only imagine the thick smell of smoke, burning metal, the knowledge that the woman who helped died doing her best to. She knows the sound of screams and gunshots, the sound of death, and can still hear it ringing in her ears to this day.

"James is going to be okay," Dorcas says, finally. "The mission went off the rails, but—but it was a success."

"Tell that to Pomona," Marlene murmurs.

"She knew the risks, Marlene." Dorcas grimaces as soon as she says it, because she sounds like Dumbledore. Those are his words. Those are the words of a leader who knows it's true, that people take the risk of dying, and people do it with the hope that they won't die, and then people die anyway.

Marlene glances over at her, eyebrows furrowing. All she says is, "Yeah, I know she did. We all did. But we made it out, and she didn't, and so the mission wasn't a full success."

"I'm sorry," Dorcas rasps. "I know that's insensitive, but you can't expect me not to be grateful that you made it out."

"The world doesn't revolve around me, Dorcas."

"Mine does."

"That's not true," Marlene murmurs. "What about Minerva?"

Dorcas clears her throat. "I once held a gun to her head with all intentions of shooting her if she stood in the way of saving you. Trust me, Marlene, it's true."

"She's like…your mum," Marlene says, blinking at her.

"I—well, maybe, sort of," Dorcas mumbles, feeling hot in the face, ridiculously bashful for no reason.

Marlene blinks at her some more. "You—you don't talk about your parents. It's just Minerva and Poppy."

"Some things are better left unsaid," Dorcas tells her quietly, dropping her gaze to the floor. "It is just Minerva and Poppy. That's all that needs to be said about it."

"Alright," Marlene allows, not pushing, and why would she? It's not like she ever wants to talk about her parents.

As much as they want to see each other, all of each other, there are some things that are folded away into the dark corners of one's mind, tucked into a box with the lock rusted shut, dust a thick film over the top. It's the sort of box you can only open when things are calm, and things aren't right now, and may not be for some time. Dorcas thinks, one day when the war is over and they're safe, she'll sit Marlene down and tell her all about her parents, and she'll listen if Marlene wishes to talk about her own. Because there's so much to see in each other, and they'll need a lifetime to discover it all.

They're going to fight to have the lifetime they deserve to see every part of one another.

"We do need to work on that, though," Marlene adds, wincing and cupping her side as they take the corner towards the infirmary. "Your world revolving around me, I mean. It's not

healthy, you know. That's—Dorcas, that's a lot to put on one person. It can't just be me. You need more than me."

"You're the first person I've ever allowed myself to really need at all," Dorcas admits.

"And I thought I was fucked up." Marlene sighs and reaches over to gently pat her hip. "We'll work on it."

~•~

Lily sits on the edge of the bed in the infirmary, head in her hands, squeezing her eyes shut tight against the memory of the explosion. She *saw* it. She watched it go up in flames. She witnessed the shrapnel fly out in all directions. She was an audience to the way James' body went flying.

The worst part, she thinks, was the smell of burnt flesh. She didn't know there could be anything worse than the smell of the sewer, or worse—when they were all locked in the back of a metal truck, stifled by the heavy scent of shit and piss that they all did their best to rid themselves of, still trying to remain quiet. They'd struggled for air on their way into the Hallow, and they'd all been holding their breath on the way out. Lily didn't know anything could smell more awful than that, and then a truck exploded and James Potter was on fire.

They all carry that smell with them, and the smell of smoke, and already the burns are being healed. The burn cream is fast-acting, but even in the aftermath, Lily thinks she'll never get the smell out of her nose.

Arthur and Molly have been delegated to helping Lily, Sirius, Remus, and then Marlene when she arrives with Dorcas. Poppy handles James. Lily did her best, but she didn't have all the supplies she needed, just enough to keep him alive.

They've all been allowed to get showers, get clean, get out of their clothes and into new ones brought to them. There are shower stalls that branch off from the infirmary, a big open area that they were all able to use at the same time, curtains closed and water running, the heavy scent of shampoo and soap thankfully replacing the smell of the sewer and the smell of the

smoke. Kingsley had run off immediately after, not even letting himself get checked out, which Poppy surely wouldn't have stood for if she hadn't been so busy getting James clean and doctored. Lily was too tired to bother risking a future lecture from Poppy—or worse, Molly—so she let herself be checked out, her mind full of too many thoughts.

All the running, all the shouting, all the sound of gunshots… For a second, Lily had been back in district six, tossed in the middle of war and mayhem. It felt…

It was different this time. She was scared. Maybe she was last time, but she didn't know it then. She knew it this time, though. Couldn't avoid it. Couldn't fight how sick she felt, how her hands shook, how fucking *terrified* she was. She saw Remus disappear into the room full of the green fog, and it didn't matter that he somehow, miraculously, came back out with Sirius in tow, because the fear invaded her from that moment and didn't leave her from that point on.

It's still there. She's back, and she's still scared, and it hits her that this is the cost of loving. This is what Dumbledore meant when he said she would be an asset as someone immune to the destructive nature of love, because it is through love that Lily recognizes the full brunt of her fear, and it makes her want to lay her guns down and never step onto a battlefield again. It makes her want to take the people she loves, and the people who they love, far away from here, somewhere safe where they can't be found and don't have to be involved. Let the world outside burn down around them, but please, please, please just let them be safe. Let them never feel fear again.

Lily forces herself to breathe out slowly. She digs the balls of her hands into her eyes, trying to stop shaking. She knows she's just coming down from the rush of adrenaline, and she knows that, with time, she'll feel more clear-headed. But, for now, she wants to curl up into a ball and cry.

They all came so close to death. Too fucking close.

Swallowing, Lily drops her hands and checks herself over again. She's okay. All wounds have been cleaned, bandaged, and left to heal. In a few days, she won't even look as if anything happened at all, save for a few minor scars here and there. It doesn't feel fair, somehow. It's going to exist in her memories, in her nightmares, and in all the people who were present. This exists between them now, a tie that threads them all together, something they'll all share.

It's one of those binding things, Lily thinks. Something you go through with other people that will never leave any of you. A common traumatic event between them only they'll ever understand. Lily will love each of these people with everything in her, and she will let herself, because they were all there trying to help each other survive.

Lily loves them all. Lily fears for them all.

But she—she can't, right now. She just *can't.* She feels like she's going to be crushed under the weight of it, and she's tired, and she needs to get the hell away from here.

She needs a smoke.

Naturally, the news of their return has spread across the Phoenix already. People are being nosy, as per usual, and Lily ignores their stares and whispers as she makes her way to her room. She wonders, idly, where Effie and Monty are, where Regulus is. None of them turned up at the infirmary, and surely they would be rushing to see James and Sirius again. Maybe they haven't found out yet. Maybe—

"Lily!"

At the delighted shriek of Bingley, Lily comes to a screeching halt, her head snapping up immediately. He's barreling down the hall at full tilt right for her, and Lily feels like all her fear drains right out of her, replaced by a flood of relief.

"Bingley," Lily blurts out in knee-jerk delight that mirrors his, and then she's opening her arms just as he comes flying into them, slamming into her hard enough that she grunts.

"I knew you weren't dead!" Bingley declares, squeezing her, head lying against her chest. "I told Mary, I told her you were too cool to die, I said it."

"She thought I was dead?"

"Riddle said it on the broadcast. He gave the order for all of you to be killed. But I knew he couldn't kill you."

Lily blows out a deep breath, blinking rapidly, and then she grips Bingley's shoulders and slowly eases him back. He beams up at her, and it breaks her heart. "Bingley, I'm—I'm very sorry you had to hear him say that. I'm sorry if you were scared, even for a moment."

"I was," Bingley mumbles, wrinkling his nose. "But just for a second. Only a second, I swear."

"No, it's—it's okay to be scared," Lily says slowly, just as she realizes it. "Let yourself be scared when you're scared. It just means you care, and that's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Oh." Bingley pauses. "Okay, in that case, I was terrified the entire time and maybe cried a little and was basically shitting my pants through all of it, to tell you the truth, but don't tell anyone any of that, yeah?"

"Our secret," Lily assures him with a weak laugh. She swipes her hand over his forehead, not touching his hair, because he doesn't like people to do that. He keeps his hair cropped short to his head in lovely waves he's been training, often brushing it and wearing a wave-cap whenever he's sprawling about on his bed. "Listen, I—I think maybe… Bingley, I don't want to frighten you more, because I care about you, but I don't want you to think that I'm indestructible. I don't want you to have to think of anything happening to me, but something could. You said… You said Riddle couldn't kill me, but he—he can, is the thing. And it's scary. And it's—it hurts to even imagine that, but I need you to know that, no matter what happens to me, or anyone, it's okay to care anyway."

Bingley stares up at her, swallowing, and he's so painfully young that it feels like her heart is cracking in her chest. He doesn't deserve to have these fears thrust upon him. He didn't deserve to lose his parents and his home. Yet, this is the world, and Lily worries he's latching onto her because he sees her as strong and capable, which isn't necessarily bad, but it could be damaging in the long run if something *does* happen to her. It will hurt, and she never wants to hurt him, even indirectly.

In the end, Bingley just whispers, "Okay," and wraps his arms around her again, hugging her even tighter than before.

"Bingley! Where did you—"

"Uh oh."

Lily's mouth runs dry as she looks up to find Mary at the end of the hall, staring at them. "Uh oh? Why uh oh?"

"I—sort of ran off," Bingley mutters. "We were in our room, and she was upset, but she was pretending not to be. For me, I think. We—well, *I* got angry and yelled at her."

"Right, I see. Very uh oh," Lily murmurs.

Bingley eases away from her slowly, glancing back at Mary, biting his lip. "You know, maybe she'll just forget all about it now that you're here."

"Mm, doubtful, but either way, you should probably apologize," Lily says.

"I know." Bingley sighs as his shoulders slump. "I—"

"Bingley," Mary calls out, her voice sharp and terse, heels clicking as she moves towards them, "go to the room. Now."

"But—"

"Now, Bingley."

Lily nudges him gently. "Go on. It's going to be wild around here for a bit, so it's best to avoid the mess. I'll come and see you later, I promise."

"Fine," Bingley declares with a huff, pursing his lips in a clear sign of displeasure, but he's smart enough to know now isn't the time to argue. He stops on the way, catching Mary's arm to murmur to her, and she thumps him in the middle of his forehead. He rubs it with a scowl, then goes when Mary forcefully points in the direction of their room.

And then Mary is heading right for her, and Lily fidgets a little ridiculously with her fingers, itching to touch her, already a mess as she tries to get her scrambled thoughts from the mere sight of her in some semblance of order, just to string a sentence together befitting of how relieving it is to see her, and how scared she was, and still is, and how she's afraid because she cares, she cares so fucking much.

Lily decides to start with, "Mary, I—"

She gets no further, her mouth still ever so slightly parted when Mary marches right up to her, catches her face in between her hands, and draws her into a kiss.

Lily has no thoughts after that.

She forgot, really, how good a kiss could be when it's not about sex, or the lead up into sex. That's not to say kissing before, during, and after sex *isn't* good—because it is—but this has nothing to do with sex, entirely separate from it, and Lily's pretty sure it's the best kiss she's ever had.

It's also a post *I-thought-you-were-dead* kiss, which—as it turns out—is a fucking phenomenal type of kiss. It's like a lightning strike travels right down her spine, lighting her up and making her jolt as she inhales sharply, falling into it and drowning in it and lost in it and every other cliche in the world.

It's a hell of a first kiss, Lily has to admit, and she can quite literally feel herself be entirely ruined for anything or anyone else from just that, just this, but the thing is, she thinks she has been for some time now. It's the sort of kiss that leaves her shaky and sensitive, Mary's hands sliding into Lily's still-damp hair as her tongue slides over the seam of her lips, and Lily arches into it in an eager way that would be embarrassing if Mary's breath didn't stutter against her mouth, audibly hitching, a small sound escaping the back of her throat that can almost be labeled as a very quiet groan of defeat.

Yeah, Lily's still got it.

Mary keeps right on kissing her, too, and she's the one who chases the kiss when it's broken. She's panting a little, following after Lily's mouth with her own, and Lily can't stop herself from breaking out into a grin as she turns her head away from it, feeling warm all the way down to the bone.

Mary blinks at her, then mutters, "Fuck."

"I can see you thinking naughty thoughts," Lily teases.

"Shut up," Mary replies, then clicks her tongue and leans forward to let their foreheads settle together. Her hands ease over the curve of Lily's cheeks, gently caressing down the sides of her throat. "Okay. Yeah, okay, you got me."

Lily laughs, utterly exhilarated. "Did I?"

"Turns out I'm not immune to your, ah, allure," Mary admits dryly. "It's a shame, isn't it? I suppose I'll have to resign myself to it, being just like everyone else."

"You're like no one else," Lily whispers, bumping Mary's nose with her own. Her lips feel like they're tingling.

"No?" Mary asks. "Because if you wanted to take me to your bed now, I'd be more than happy to go."

"Oh, I would love to," Lily tells her, sliding her hands up her sides and humming in a pleased fashion when Mary leans into her even more, "but I think we'll take it slow."

"Slow," Mary repeats.

"Slow can be fun," Lily murmurs. "Haven't done slow in a while. Let's take it slow. Let's—date. Or whatever the fuck dating is in an underground bunker in the middle of war."

Mary leans back and studies her. "I thought you said you weren't ready for…anything."

"I also said I was probably going to do it anyway, and would you look at that?" Lily says softly, lips twitching. Mary arches an eyebrow. "I just—I wanted to be here. I hate it here, most of the time, but I still wanted to be here, because you and Bingley are here, and I… Well, honestly, I could have died. I nearly died. And that hasn't really scared me in a long time, but it scared me this time, because I have things I want to do, and people I want to love, so I'd like to get started on that. Maybe that's okay with you. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes," Mary breathes out, then kisses her again, and this time, there's absolutely no maybe about it.

~•~

For the record, Sirius doesn't like it here. He knows it's supposed to be safe, but it's crowded and full of people he doesn't know. He had wanted to stay in the infirmary, where James is, but people showed up to escort him and Remus away.

Sirius had no intentions of leaving until that woman by the name of Poppy came out to inform him that James was stable. He's resting now, put to sleep to better heal that way, as our bodies heal best at rest, or so Poppy had said. She did allow Sirius to check on him, and it

helped soothe him, but he doesn't think he's going to feel fully alright until James is awake. He's clean now, smelling better, but definitely not looking better. Sirius had wanted to crawl into bed with him, but he was too scared to touch him. It was then that people showed up, coaxing Sirius and Remus into coming along.

Remus clearly isn't pleased about it. He'd argued a bit, fussing about Sirius needing to stay and rest as well, but Sirius doesn't want to leave him either. So, Sirius compromised by agreeing to go along, secretly hoping they'll let him see Regulus whenever he's done. Because Regulus is here.

Somewhere in this bunker, he's breathing and alive, and Sirius needs to see him. Whatever it takes to get to that faster, he'll do it. He knows how these things work. Chances are, he has to go talk to someone important who doesn't actually care that all he wants is to be reunited with those he loves.

So, here Sirius is, being led down hall after hall, garnering all sorts of attention he'd rather not have. People are staring at him as he goes by, clearly recognizing him, and Sirius stays close to Remus, their arms brushing as they walk. That's new, too, being able to be close to Remus around so many eyes. It's sort of jarring, in a way, and Sirius almost doesn't know what to do with that freedom. He wants to reach out and take Remus' hand, thread their fingers together, but he doesn't.

"Sirius!"

"Cissa?" Sirius blurts out, nearly tripping as he wheels around to follow the sound of his cousin's voice. He's not sure what he's expecting, but it's not for Narcissa to come barreling down the hall right for him, throwing herself at him.

It says a lot that Sirius is expecting an attack. He prepares himself to take the incoming hit, bracing for it and already planning how he will fight back, and then Narcissa throws her arms around him with a gasp, hugging him. Sirius is as stiff as a board, blinking rapidly, a mixture of alarmed and startled because he doesn't know if Narcissa has ever hugged him before. If she has, he can't remember it. Even so, they're not exactly from the sort of family that does much hugging.

"Fucking hell," Narcissa breathes out, snatching away from him as abruptly as she jumped on him. Her hands fly up to grasp his arms, eyes wide. "We thought—"

"Regulus," Sirius cuts in desperately, gripping her wrists and searching her eyes. "Where's Regulus?"

"No one knows. We all split off to look for him," Narcissa tells him. "After the broadcast, he just—disappeared. Aberforth said he had an idea of where he went and stomped off, so—"

"Broadcast? What broadcast? Wait, Aberforth?"

"You don't know, do you? Oh, Sirius, Regulus thinks you're dead. You and James, along with all those who went on the mission to get both of you out."

Sirius feels like his whole body goes cold. "What?"

"Shit," Remus hisses.

"I have to—"

"Pardon me," comes the gentle interruption, and Sirius whips his head around to see an older man moving down the hall towards them. He bears a startling resemblance to Aberforth, the same eyes, except he looks much kinder. "I apologize for breaking up the reunion, but I must ask Sirius and Mr. Lupin to follow me. It's a matter of utmost urgency."

"Who are you?" Sirius snaps, narrowing his eyes.

"I have the answers you seek, Sirius, or most of them, including where your brother is," the man says. He sweeps his arm out. "Come along, I will explain as much as I can."

"Go," Narcissa whispers, squeezing his arms. "I need to go find Andy and Dora to tell them you're okay."

"Andy and Dora are here?" Sirius breathes out.

Narcissa nods. "They're here. Later, Sirius. We'll all have a proper family reunion later, I promise. I just—I need to let them know you're here."

Sirius lets her go, because he'd like Andromeda, Ted, and Nymphadora to know that he's alive, even if he can't see all of them right this second. He draws back and splits off with Remus to follow the man.

They're not led very far. Just to a door with mismatched wood, clearly having been broken and fixed, a gargoyle door-knocker lying against it. Sirius glances at Remus, eyebrows furrowing to see him glaring at the man's back, jaw clenched.

Okay, Remus doesn't like this man. Noted. Has he done something to hurt Remus? Sirius will kill him. It's not even a question; he'd do it in a heartbeat if Remus wanted him to.

Although, Remus would never want him to, and Remus can definitely kill on his own. Sirius has seen that now, on the way out of Azkaban. It had startled him to *actively* see Remus snap a man's neck, or beat the shit out of someone until they were choking on their own teeth, drowning in their own blood. Remus is…violent. Very violent.

It's raw, not refined. There's no finesse, and he's messy about it, forgoing technique for brute strength and overwhelming whatever unfortunate soul happens to get in his way. It's more brutal that way, less precise and certainly not as swift as Sirius himself is. If Sirius is a sword forged and sharpened, then Remus is the harsh edge of raw steel. It's not something most would label as beautiful, and yet Sirius had been as enraptured by the sight of Remus like that as he was stunned.

For a long time, Remus had been covered in blood, and that hadn't made Sirius want to touch him any less. It shouldn't have made him want to touch him more, and yet.

And yet.

"Please," the man murmurs, moving behind his desk to gesture to the chairs on the other side. "Have a seat."

Sirius and Remus sit.

"Where's my brother?" Sirius demands immediately.

"Aberforth has gone to get him," the man says. "You'll see him soon enough. Trust me, Sirius, I have no intentions of keeping you from your brother, but there is unfortunately something I need to discuss with both of you."

"Who are you? How do you know Mayor Aberforth?"

"Ah, forgive my rudeness, in my haste I've rushed past introductions. My name is Albus Dumbledore."

Sirius blinks. "Wait, like…"

"Yes," Albus confirms. "Aberforth is my younger brother."

"You're the leader," Sirius states. "Of this whole…resistance, I mean. You're the one in charge, right?"

Albus hums. "Yes, I'm the founder of the Order of the Phoenix. I want to tell you, Sirius, that you're entirely safe here. Many of your friends and family are already here, as is what's left of your home. I'm afraid Riddle released biological warfare within district six, so only a fraction

of people made it to safety. I apologize for being the bearer of such burdensome news, but it leads into the matter we need to discuss."

"My home," Sirius croaks. "It's gone?"

Remus reaches over and covers his hand. He knew. He must have, at least some details, but it's not like they've really had time to discuss anything in between all the escaping and whatnot. Still, Sirius feels the shock of it run through him. It's his home. Can he not go back? Ever?

It explains why Effie, Monty, and Aberforth are here, along with Andy, Ted, and Dora. What about Mary and Bingley? What about Crouch, Regulus' friend? What about all the people who sold at the market, and all the children who ran on the school grounds, and those he's known his whole life?

"The district is empty," Albus murmurs. "Unfortunately, as I said, Riddle released biological warfare there, leaving it currently inhabitable, but I don't think it will always be. I think, in time, it's possible that those who wish to return there after the war will be able to, safely, and I have reason to believe that Mr. Lupin may help make that possible."

"What?" Remus asks flatly.

Albus threads his hands together on his desk and leans forward. "I got a full recount of the mission from Kingsley while all of you were in the infirmary. You two faced a terrible trial today to reach your freedom and safety, and for that, I'm truly sorry. However, hope can be found, even in the darkest of times, if only one remembers to turn on the light. Today, I have found the greatest light in the form of you."

"What does this have to do with biological warfare?"

"From my understanding, you two have immunity to it."

Sirius glances over at Remus, who presses his lips in a thin line, eyebrows wrinkled together. Sirius wants to reach up and smooth them out, ease the strain away, cradle Remus' face in the curve of his neck and keep him safe there forever.

"The green fog," Sirius says slowly, looking back at Albus, his own lips tipping down. "It was used in the arena. That was biological warfare?"

"Yes."

"And some people are just…naturally immune? You mean to tell me that I was doing all that running for *nothing?"*

Albus looks faintly amused by how affronted Sirius is. He shakes his head. "No, not at all. The biological warfare was created from Horcrux Hornet venom, and immunity to it had to be formulated. I have reason to believe, Mr. Lupin, that you were a key piece in creating the formula. I don't wish to dredge up painful memories, but I must ask if you ever recall coming into contact with the fog before today."

Sirius glances at Remus again, his heart sinking at the look on his face, even before he cautiously admits, "Uh, yeah, actually. It was before the Quarterly Memorial. They injected me with something, then made me breathe in the fog. I—" He darts a quick look at Sirius, then looks away. "I…nearly died."

"If I may," Albus says mildly, "did you have a similar experience in Azkaban, Sirius?"

"No," Sirius replies.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

Remus opens his mouth, winces, then immediately closes it. Sirius turns and narrows his eyes at him, and Remus bites his lip. "It's just… *Are* you certain?"

"I just said so, didn't I?" Sirius grits out.

"I—I'm not saying—" Remus pauses, then grimaces and heaves a sigh. He sets his shoulders and meets Sirius' eyes, clearly working himself up to saying what he has to. "Is there any chance you may have…forgotten it?"

Sirius stares at him. His nostrils flare. "Remus, don't insult my intelligence. I was tortured only twice in my stay at Azkaban, thanks to James. That was how Riddle was manipulating him, by giving him the power to make sure I wasn't hurt and allowing him to visit me. Also, consider this, why the fuck would Riddle grant me immunity to *his weapon?"*

Remus opens and closes his mouth. "Okay, that's…a fair point. He'd never do that. So, how are you immune?"

"Are we sure that I am?" Sirius asks. "I mean, I—I don't—it's all a bit of a blur. Did I…come in contact with the fog?"

"You did," Remus murmurs, eyebrows furrowing again, clearly deep in thought. "Wait, that's —this doesn't make any sense. They intended to kill you with it, which means they didn't *know* you were immune. I didn't even know *I* was immune."

"Wait, what—just tell me what happened. I was—" Sirius glances at Albus, who listens to them calmly. Sirius doesn't really like talking about his difficulties with memory, not openly, and especially not to people he doesn't trust. "I was out of it from the torture. By the time I really, ah, got my bearings, we were out of the room."

"You were trapped inside. A man came out and used a remote to deploy the fog in the room," Remus explains. "I killed him and ran into the room to—"

"You *what?!"* Sirius bursts out, eyes bulging.

Remus blinks. "What?"

"Remus! You just said you didn't know you were immune! So, what, you—you just ran in there anyway?"

"You were in there."

"Fucking hell, Remus," Sirius whispers, staring at him, stricken. "You—you could have died. You—"

"Well, I mean…I didn't go in *breathing*. I held my breath. I saw how it worked in the games. It's only when you inhale the fog, right?" Remus looks at Albus, who inclines his head. "Right, so I—I obviously didn't plan to breathe it. I was just—I had to get in and get you out. But then I—I *did* breathe it in—"

"What? Why?" Sirius demands, horrified.

"I…" Remus swallows and looks at him, tentative almost. He takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "You were strapped to the chair, and you—you didn't know it was me—"

"No," Sirius croaks, freezing.

"Sirius—"

"The bruise. You had a bruise from where someone hit you. It's still there."

"Sirius," Remus says carefully, "I'd been fighting since we got there. I was going to be a little hurt. It's fine. I—"

"But you fought me," Sirius murmurs, holding his gaze. "Or, no, I…fought you. I put that bruise there. Didn't I?"

Remus clearly wants to lie, just because it would be so much easier, but—he can't. He wouldn't betray the trust Sirius has in him to not lie to him about what occurs between them when he *can't* remember. Swallowing harshly, Remus whispers, "It wasn't your fault. You didn't know—"

Too late. Remus has said enough. Sirius flinches back from him, dropping his gaze and dragging his hand away, his stomach churning. He told Remus he would never hurt him. He promised, and then he did it anyway. Because that's what he does. He carries ruin in the lines of his hands and smears it on anything he comes into contact with. Sirius feels fucking sick. He should have never touched him. He was so selfish to ever, ever, ever touch him.

What if Remus hadn't been immune? He would have been dead. Sirius likely knocked the breath right out of his lungs, making him breathe, and if he wasn't immune, it would have killed him. Sirius could have killed him.

"I understand that this is a difficult situation," Albus says into the heavy silence, "and I'm sorry for the emotional toll this is taking on both of you. If it wasn't necessary to save lives, I wouldn't ask either of you to revisit it. I do have to ask, Sirius. Do you, by chance, recall the symptoms from the immunity? Mr. Lupin, I'm sure you experienced it at least. A feeling of illness. A rash. Headaches. Nausea."

"How do you know that?" Remus asks, frowning. "I thought you didn't know how to create the immunity."

Albus sighs. "We do not. We know nothing of the formula, but I have a secret informant who was given the immunization, and I was told of the symptoms it causes. Is that right?"

"Yes," Remus mumbles.

Sirius' heart is beating very fast. "Um. Yeah, I—I did go through that, but I *swear* I wasn't given an immunization."

"Can you tell me what happened before you went through those symptoms?" Albus asks.

"I mean, I was mostly just kept in my cell, tased a lot, and I did get a visit from Riddle. That's the day the symptoms started, and I—I *was* tortured that day, but I'm telling you, Riddle never would have had me immunized."

"I believe you, Sirius. What happened with Riddle?"

"Um." Sirius grimaces. "Well, he brought a Horcrux Hornet to intimidate me, I'm sure, but it never left the jar. There were some threats, a little humiliation, and I bit him, then he hit me, and that was about it. Nothing really happened."

Albus surveys him over his glasses. "You bit him."

"He pissed me off," Sirius mutters.

"Did you begin experiencing the symptoms after the visit with Riddle, or after the torture that day?" Albus asks.

Sirius scrunches up his face, thinking hard. "I mean, I started getting itchy after his visit, but I assumed that was because I was around that bastard. Wait, are you telling me you think he somehow slipped me an immunization? That's—that doesn't make any sense. He *wouldn't* do that."

"He's right," Remus agrees. "Riddle was going to have Sirius killed that way. Why would he give him immunity?"

"I don't believe he did, not intentionally," Albus muses, leaning back with a hum. "Sirius, may I ask, when you bit Riddle, did you perhaps ingest his blood?"

"Oh, yeah, I tore open his wrist with my teeth," Sirius says smugly. "Pissed him off with that. But what does that—" He stops, then blinks. "Wait. Riddle is immune. Of course he is, why wouldn't he be? He was immunized. It's—it's in his—"

"Blood," Remus breathes out. "It's in our blood."

Albus' eyes twinkle. "So it would seem. That's my working theory, yes. It appears to be a bloodborne immunity, though it's clear Riddle isn't aware of this." His gaze settles on Remus, head tilting a little. "It would also seem that I did, in fact, have my deus ex machina this entire time."

"You need my help," Remus says softly.

"I do," Albus confirms. "We don't know how to create the immunity yet, but with samples of your blood, we could begin working out how to form one. In the meantime, you could give willing blood donations to—"

Sirius stiffens. "No. No, absolutely not. Fuck that. He's—you can't just fucking turn him into an experiment and use him like a pincushion. You're not doing that."

"Sirius," Remus starts.

"No," Sirius spits out, standing up so sharply that his chair clatters against the floor. He holds Albus' gaze. "You think I don't know how this works? You think I don't know the signs of manipulation? Already, you've stated it'll save lives, which you know will weigh on him, and that will make him feel a sense of obligation. And, if that's not enough for him to agree, how far will you take it, hm? He's safe here, but if he won't comply, will you threaten to toss him out, or torture him? And what if it takes more than just blood? What if it takes hurting him to get what you need? What then?"

"Sirius, I assure you, I wish Mr. Lupin no harm."

"Good, because you're not going to touch him. He's not a fucking servant, and he's certainly not yours. Use me. I'll do it, whatever you need, but leave him out of it."

Albus shakes his head slowly. "I'm afraid that may not be possible. We've been studying this for some time, and I don't believe the immunity would be able to be transferred from a source that didn't have the immunization. I can only be sure that a direct source will work, and I can't risk otherwise."

"Well, I suppose you're fucked then," Sirius says coldly.

"I believe that's Mr. Lupin's choice," Albus murmurs, holding his gaze, utterly calm. "Not yours."

"He's not yours to use," Sirius snarls. "You can't have him."

"Sirius. *Sirius,"* Remus says, his voice sharp, and Sirius whips his head around to stare at him. "He's right, Sirius. It's my choice. Not yours, and not his, but mine."

Sirius practically wilts. He sinks back down into his chair, staring at Remus with wide eyes. "Remus…"

"I'll give blood samples, and I'll donate however much blood *Lily* will allow, and no more," Remus announces, turning to look at Albus. "I'll do that on one condition."

"Which is?" Albus asks.

Remus tilts his chin up. "It's my blood. I'll decide who gets immunizations first, and then—after that—you can do what you want with what's left, or how much I give after."

"Very well," Albus agrees immediately. "I want you to know that, with your help, we will be able to take the districts, save countless people from certain death, and take this war to Riddle. You will single-handedly be the catalyst to helping us win this war, Mr. Lupin. This world will owe you everything."

"I don't need everything." Remus' gaze shifts to land on Sirius, face softening. "Something will do."

Sirius clenches his jaw and stands up again, hands balled into fists. "Where's my brother? I want to see my brother."

"Aberforth will surely be escorting him to the infirmary," Albus informs him. "You're free to return there. Mr. Lupin, I'd ask that you remain so we can discuss the plans."

Sirius walks out before he ever hears Remus' response, and he slams the door as he goes.

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Aberforth hasn't had to lug a ladder along in years, and he feels quite foolish doing it now, but he does appreciate the wind that stirs his hair and beard. The boy could have chosen a better time to make his grand escape, like perhaps during the day. At least then Aberforth would get to feel the sun.

Being outside makes him ache for home. He always aches for home, though, much like he imagines the boy does. It comes as no surprise to Aberforth that the boy would go outside in the aftermath of what happened. Regulus always seems to seek out trees when he's troubled.

Sure enough, Aberforth eventually spots Regulus where he expected to find him, or close to it. He's never seen Regulus climb Ariana's tree, though he tried, but he did witness Regulus climb the hedge within the arena. It seemed like an important event in his life, and so it would seem the tradition accompanies him now. When believing his brother and the man he loves have died, he has chosen to climb.

Sighing, Aberforth adjusts the ladder and lets it lean against the limb the boy is on with a dull clatter. Regulus doesn't acknowledge the sound. He's sitting on the branch with his knees drawn up to his chest, arms wrapped around them, faced pressed down into them. Aberforth grunts and grabs the ladder, then begins to slowly climb.

He's getting too old for this shit.

Surprisingly, it's Regulus who speaks when Aberforth reaches the top. His voice is devoid of emotion, his face—when he lifts his head—even more so. "I don't care that I broke a rule. I don't care if Riddle has Hallow heli-carriers still out searching for the bunker. If you're trying to get me to come down from this tree, you're going to have to kill me."

"That won't be necessary," Aberforth says dryly. He suspects the boy might fall out of the tree in his haste to get back inside once he knows who's waiting for him in there.

"Alright, well, I got nowhere. Just like you said. Are you here to rub it in that you were right and I was wrong?" Regulus grits out. "Because, if so, I'll kill *you."*

"Boy, I'm not here for that," Aberforth grumbles. "Even if I was right, I wouldn't do that. But I was wrong. You need to come down now. The others made it back."

Regulus stares at him. Aberforth can see his hands tremble against his legs. The boy's been out here for hours and it's February now, cold outside. He's shivering, but he hardly seems to notice, too busy staring at Aberforth like he's too scared to hope. "The others… Do you—who do you mean?"

"All of them," Aberforth says gruffly. "Everyone who went on the mission from here made it back, and they brought James with them, along with your brother. They're here, Regulus."

Regulus damn near *does* fall out of the tree, his body jerking as he sucks in a sharp breath, and then his body starts to tip. Aberforth snaps his hand out and fists the front of his shirt, heaving a sigh when Regulus yelps and clamps down on his wrist desperately, his eyes wide

with fear. He looks small like that. It reminds Aberforth so painfully of Ariana that he scowls as he drags Regulus back to let him get his balance.

"Oh, fuck," Regulus wheezes, gripping the branch and suddenly seeming to realize how high he is all at once, staring around in dismay. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. What am I *doing* up here? I need to get down. I need to get down right now."

"Alright, keep your hair on," Aberforth mutters.

"I need to get down!" Regulus bursts out.

Aberforth starts climbing down. "No need to yell at me about it. I didn't tell you to be dumb enough to climb up in a tree when you're scared of heights. Now, stop all that panicking nonsense, boy, and use the damn ladder."

As soon as Aberforth reaches the ground, Regulus scales down the ladder faster than Aberforth has ever seen anyone move, probably a mixture of desperation to get down and desperation to get inside. Aberforth steps up to grab the ladder.

"Uh uh, where do you think you're going?" Aberforth barks when Regulus starts to turn, clearly about to run off. "Only way they're letting you back in with no trouble is if you're with me. Come here, help me with this."

Regulus stares at him incredulously. "But—"

"I'm an old man. Hurry up, or we can stand out here all night, if you prefer," Aberforth tells him.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Regulus snaps, glaring at him as he marches over to snatch the ladder from him, exhaling sharply and gesturing towards the Phoenix. "Can we go *now?"*

"By all means," Aberforth says, amused despite himself.

Regulus seems to have no concept of patience whatsoever, and he proves so by keeping ahead of Aberforth all the way back into the bunker. As soon as they're back inside, Regulus carelessly tosses the ladder aside and starts rushing, only to be stopped by those who he incapacitated on his way out, so Aberforth has to step in to keep him from being immediately thrown in solitary (again) for breaking rules and also knocking out about nine different people just to get to the surface.

Really, Aberforth thinks it's a miracle the boy didn't kill any of them. He's pretty sure he was just focused on getting outside, and killing would take a little more time and effort, which is likely the only thing that saved those people's lives.

In any case, Aberforth has to escort Regulus to the infirmary. As Albus' brother, he gets clearance to do pretty much anything he wants. Albus isn't above playing favorites, and even if he was, no one wants to disrespect him by crossing his brother. Aberforth has a high position here, technically. Albus trusts him with everything, all information, and he even consults with him. Aberforth didn't want to be a part of this, but Albus didn't really give him a choice. He never does.

Once inside the infirmary, Regulus immediately starts looking around. That girl—Molly, Aberforth thinks her name is—steps out from behind a drawn curtain and blinks.

"Oh dear," Molly says quietly. She gazes at Regulus with something akin to pity. "Here to see James, I take it. He's not awake, I'm afraid, but he's right through here."

Regulus moves forward to whip the curtain back, and then he instantly freezes, a choked noise escaping him. It comes from somewhere deep, something that tugs at even Aberforth's chest. Well, that's just awful, is what it is.

James is very badly injured, wrapped in bandages and covered in salve for his burns. It's an ugly process, healing burns that severe, though it's thankfully a fairly quick one. He should be fine by tomorrow, Aberforth suspects, but he looks really bad laid up in the bed as he is. The injuries are all over him to the point that it doesn't look like there's really any place you can touch him without it hurting him.

The boy takes a staggering step forward, bracing his hands against the rail at the foot of the bed. He sounds like he's gasping when he says, "What—what happened to him?"

"There was an explosion," Molly explains gently, full of sympathy. Her eyes only grow sadder when Regulus outright whimpers. "He took the brunt of the blast, they said, but he's going to heal up just fine. By tomorrow, he'll look much better; give it a few days, and he'll be good as new."

Regulus heaves out a harsh breath and continues on his staggering journey around James' bed. His head is ducked, but Aberforth can see the pain there, twisting it. His entire expression collapses the moment he reaches the head of the bed and lifts trembling fingers to push them through James' hair in a touch so tender that Aberforth feels like he's intruding by simply being here. He looks away, but that can't save him from hearing Regulus.

He's crying. Sobbing, really. It's muffled, like he's doing his absolute best to hide or stop it, but again, it tugs at Aberforth's chest. Maybe it makes him a soft old man, but he can't help but see Regulus as just a boy. So young, really. He remembers the first year Regulus' name got called, and how Sirius volunteered for him, and the way his breath had caught, because he knew. He knew that he'd just watched a tragedy in the making. He knew that he'd just watched two boys have their innocence snatched from them, and he knew—through that—they'd always have this stunted sort of growth where they're never quite children again, yet they're never going to shed themselves of the pain that chains them to the children they were. He knew, because he'd experienced it himself.

"Where's his glasses?" Regulus chokes out, and Aberforth looks at him again to find him shaking all over like he's on the cusp of falling apart. "Why doesn't he have his glasses?"

Molly gives a wary flutter of her hands, looking pained. "I don't know. He—he didn't have any, or any contacts, and they said he didn't need them anymore. I'm sorry."

"He—he does need them. He needs them. He needs his glasses." Regulus releases yet another horrible, heartbreaking noise and seems incapable of holding himself up any longer. His legs buckle, and he goes down right there next to James' bed, kneeling next to it as he cups James' hand gingerly in both of his, pressing his face to the limp fingers. "They're his. Please. He needs them. He needs his glasses."

Molly doesn't respond this time, likely because it doesn't seem like the boy can process a response. He's just weeping, and there's nothing to be done about it.

"Move," Aberforth orders gruffly, waving Molly back with a scowl, and she looks startled, but she does as he says.

Aberforth reaches out and whips the curtain shut, because if nothing else, the boy deserves to have his breakdown in peace. The least they could do is give him his damn privacy.

Even still, closing the curtain does nothing to drown out the gut-wrenching sound of his sobs.

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It's Andromeda who hunts Euphemia down to call off the search for Regulus, because apparently Aberforth is going to get him, and also Sirius and James are here.

Euphemia is pretty sure she and Fleamont have never run this fast in their life. It's so very reminiscent of the last time in the aftermath of the arena break-in, the way they clutched at one another's hand and tore through the halls in the hopes that, very soon, they would be reunited with their children again.

A part of Euphemia died while watching Regulus' broadcast, when Riddle gave that kill order, and she thinks the only thing that stopped her from lying down and never getting up again was the news that Regulus had disappeared. It filled her with such visceral fear, along with the selfish, possibly horrible thought that he was all she had left of her boys, and she couldn't bear to lose him, too.

And now, everything has shifted. Euphemia is breathless as she whirls around a corner, then choking on air the moment her gaze lands on Sirius. She comes to a screeching halt, listening to Fleamont groan like a man on the verge of tears. She wouldn't be surprised if he's crying already. She is. Her eyes immediately start streaming.

"Sirius," Euphemia gasps out, and his head snaps in her direction, eyes widening when he sees her.

They both start running at the same time. They also slam into each other at the same time, and Sirius *laughs*. It's a breathless laugh of pure elation, one that lifts Euphemia right off her feet. No, actually, that's Sirius. He wraps his arms around her tight and legitimately picks her up from the force in which he embraces her, then goes with the motion and twirls her around until she's laughing with him, even through her tears.

Fleamont nearly tackles them both to the floor with how hard he collides into them, arms thrown around them both, and he is both laughing and crying as well. He squeezes them so hard they wheeze, all of their hands slipping over each other, desperate to touch and hold on, feeling life and love spill out between them. Family. This is family.

"Oh, honey. Darling boy." Euphemia's hands come up to cradle his face, and he stares at her as he always has, like she's his hero. She presses in, tugging him by his head, kissing his forehead fiercely. Fleamont has an arm around Sirius' shoulders, head ducked down against one as he breathes and cries, a big man with big emotions, weeping all over Sirius with no shame in his lumbering frame whatsoever.

"It's okay," Sirius says. "I'm okay."

"We were so worried," Euphemia confesses, because these are things you tell your children, especially the child that doesn't automatically realize parents are meant to care enough to worry. "We've been so worried, Sirius."

"I was worried about you, too. Both of you. All of you, everyone," Sirius tells her. "You have no idea how relieved I was to know you've both been safe."

"We love you so much," Fleamont croaks, lifting his head to peer at Sirius with a watery smile.

"I love you, too," Sirius replies simply, with the sort of ease it took years for him to find. He doesn't let them go, and they're not keen to let him go either. "I—I heard about what happened back home. I'm glad you got out. Andy, Ted, and Dora, too."

Euphemia pauses, her heart giving a harsh clench. She swallows and reaches up to gently sweep her hand over his hair. It's tangled and damp. "Ted didn't—he didn't…"

Sirius' smile falls. "No. No, he—"

"I'm sorry," Euphemia whispers. "Sirius, I'm so sorry."

"Oh no, Dora. *Andy."* Sirius' eyes sink shut, his eyebrows wrinkling as he ducks his head. Fleamont and Euphemia soothe him as much as they can, and he eventually looks up again. "Are they—how have they been?"

Fleamont gives a wan smile. "It's been hard. We've all been grieving. There were a lot of people lost, but as for Andromeda and Dora, having Narcissa has seemed to help a lot. For Dora specifically, Regulus has also been a big help. It's—difficult, but we're all leaning on each other. Taking care of each other."

"What about Mary?" Sirius asks desperately. "Bingley?"

"They're here," Euphemia assures him. "They lost the rest of their family, but they're safe. Regulus' boy, that Barty, he made it, too. His parents didn't, but Regulus has seemed to help him with that. They've been helping each other, really."

Sirius nods. "And—and Regulus? Has he—"

"It's been rough," Euphemia admits, taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out. "Fleamont and I have been looking out for him, along with Remus. He's a good boy, Remus is. Hasn't been doing well himself, honestly, but he's such a pure soul. I got that letter to him like you asked."

"You did?"

"Of course I did, honey. Of course."

"Okay." Sirius exhales, some of the tension seeming to leave his body, and then it comes right back. "Wait, have you seen James yet? He's—he's in the infirmary. Regulus is supposed to be there now. I sort of…got lost on the way."

"Yes, this place is massive, isn't it?" Fleamont turns to guide him along, and Euphemia joins them. "Been here for weeks and we still get lost frequently. You said James is in the infirmary. Is he hurt very badly?"

Sirius glances between them in a way that makes a pit open up in Euphemia's stomach. "It's —yeah, it's pretty bad. I mean, he's fine. He's going to be fine. They said he'd be healed up for the most part by tomorrow, but…he just looks really hurt at the moment. I just—I want you to be prepared. It's hard to see."

Euphemia swallows harshly. "What happened?"

"There was an explosion," Sirius whispers. "Um, a truck exploded. He was close by, and he…" Likely due to the looks on their faces, he doesn't finish. Instead, he clears his throat and mumbles, "He's alive, though, and he *will* get better. He's okay, Effie, Monty, I swear it. I promise he'll be okay."

It's not every day that the child comforts the parent, and not on every occasion is it appropriate, but in this instance, Euphemia is so very grateful for him, for the kindness in his heart to want to reassure them, even after everything he's been through. Euphemia leans her head over on him as they walk, basking in having him close again, safe and within reach.

It's quiet between them the rest of the way to the infirmary, something settling familiar and comfortable between them, wrapped up in something else somber. It feels so very good to be together again. Just the same, they ache with what's happened, and they ache for James.

When they do reach the infirmary, Sirius halts outside the doors and closes his eyes, taking a deep breath. He draws away from them, squaring his shoulders, visibly standing taller.

"Sirius?" Euphemia asks.

"Regulus is in there," Sirius says, and his voice cracks. It makes him grimace. He works his jaw, flexing his fingers.

Oh, Euphemia knows what this is. She's seen it before, a ritual Sirius has gone through many times in his hardest moments, before he's going to see his little brother again. He does this. He tries to pull himself together and be strong, stepping into his role as protector, the one who takes care of Regulus no matter what, regardless of his own struggle and pain. It's a self-imposed role, which saddens Euphemia, because she thinks Regulus might appreciate a role reversal sometimes.

But this is what they know. This is how they've always been. Sirius is the big brother, and he's so much more, too. The weight of that is something he shoulders instinctively, and always has, and Regulus doesn't mean to put that weight on him, but it's impossible for him to lift it on his own. Because he loves Sirius like a brother, a mother, a father, a friend, an enemy, a reflection, and like no other. He can't stop that any more than Sirius can stop loving him as a brother, a son, a daughter, a friend, an enemy, a reflection, and like no one else. That's a weight they carry together, between them, and it'll take both of them to lift it.

"Take a moment," Euphemia murmurs, reaching out to gently touch his cheek. "It's alright, Sirius. We'll go in, see him and James, and you can take some time. Just breathe, darling."

"Thank you," Sirius whispers.

Euphemia hugs him again, and so does Fleamont, and then they go inside. It's fairly sparse, especially now that it's getting later in the evening. Marlene is lying in a bed, sleeping, and Dorcas sits in a chair next to her, holding her hand and also sleeping. Euphemia only knows this because Arthur steps out of the curtain to reveal them, and then he gently shuts it back. Kingsley is off to the side, being fussed over by Poppy in low tones, because apparently she's

not pleased that he didn't stay in the infirmary from the start. Euphemia sees no one else, and she's looking around eagerly for—

"Here to see James?" Arthur asks kindly. He waves them along. "Follow me. I'd like to warn you, he looks more than a little worse for wear, but I assure you he's healing as we speak, and he'll be much better by tomorrow."

"Thank you, Arthur," Euphemia says.

"Is Regulus here already?" Fleamont asks, still worried about him, too. He's so terribly fond of Regulus.

Arthur nods. "Aberforth dropped him off just a bit ago, then left. Regulus has been by James' side ever since." He offers them a gentle smile as he gestures to the curtain they all stop at. "Go on, then. You're welcome to stay all night."

As if Euphemia was going to do anything else. She smiles and nods anyway, then shares a look with Fleamont as Arthur sweeps off to go help Molly. Swallowing, Euphemia eases the curtain open so they can slip inside.

The first thing she sees is Regulus sitting in a chair next to the bed, holding James' hand between both of his own, James' fingers pressed against his mouth. His gaze is locked on James with unwavering focus, and she follows it.

Oh.

Oh, her poor baby. Tears spring to her eyes almost instantly, and the only thing that keeps her from crying out is the fact that she was bracing for the worst. Somehow, it *could* be worse, but that doesn't take away from the fact that her son is lying in a bed, covered in bandages and burns. He just *looks* like he's in pain, even if he's sleeping right through. His face is slack, practically peaceful, despite everything.

Fleamont inhales sharply, and his hand finds hers, gripping tight. At the sound, Regulus' head snaps up. He looks at them, and his eyes are so very sad. It's heartbreaking. He's not crying now, but it's very apparent that he has been at some point.

"He's okay," Regulus says, his voice small and shaking just the slightest bit. "He's—he's going to be okay. They said he'd be much better tomorrow."

It's things such as this that will make sure Euphemia never forgets just how gentle of a man Regulus is. Look at him there, all torn up inside, and he softens himself as much as he can in the hopes that he can offer them a bit of solace. Those fears of his in the arena, that he and James are opposites and not well-suited; they're unfounded. Regulus and James are more alike than people realize, even in all their many differences. It's a beautiful thing to have, and Euphemia knows because she was fortunate enough to find that in Fleamont.

"We know," Fleamont says softly. "They told us."

Euphemia and Fleamont move closer to the bed, standing on the other side of it. James' other hand is wrapped in white bandages, likely burned there, but his wrist right above it is open and unharmed. She gently brushes her fingers over that warm space of skin, something in her easing and unclenching all at once as she feels the flutter of his pulse beneath.

Fleamont edges closer to the top of the bed. He moves so carefully, gingerly cupping the side of James' head to lean down and kiss his temple, then stays there. He closes his eyes and rests his forehead against James', just breathing.

"Have you seen Sirius?" Regulus asks hopefully.

"He's here," Euphemia assures him quietly. She starts to open her mouth, only to close it and cock her head at the sound of the doors opening in the distance. Her lips curl up. "Ah, I suspect that's him now. Go on, go see him. We'll be here with James until you both get back."

Regulus nods, because he knows as well as she does that they're all going to camp out at James' side until he wakes up. He moves towards the curtain, then pauses and looks back at

them. As gentle as he is, he says, "Thank you."

"You have nothing to thank us for," Fleamont tells him, not pulling away from James. "We love you, Regulus."

"I know," Regulus replies, and that's all he says, but that alone says so much. He's never accepted their love before. He watches them and James for just a moment longer, and then he turns and slips out the curtain without another word.

Euphemia lets her eyes drift shut, breathing along to the feeling of James' steady pulse beneath her fingers.

~•~

Only Sirius could get Regulus to leave James' side. There's a harsh yearning bearing down on his chest, because he wants to see his brother again. Just know that he's here. Alive.

And then he is.

As soon as Regulus turns away from the curtain, Sirius is right there across the room, staring at him. Regulus feels like he's a small child again, for just a second, overcome by the simple elation of seeing Sirius, thinking of him as if he was the grandest thing this world had to offer, as if he was wiser and seconds away from adulthood when he was merely a child not even two full years older than him.

Before Regulus ever found the sun in James, Sirius was the brightest light he knew; his guiding star. Regulus would have followed him anywhere, to the ends of the earth and beyond, and he still will even now.

Maybe especially now.

It's easy, then, to move towards him now. Regulus wants to run, but he isn't the child he once was. Always a bit guarded even then, but now he's cautious with everything, especially the things he's scared most to lose. And this—Sirius, before him, within reach—he's terrified it'll dissolve like a mirage if he moves too fast and shatters the illusion.

Sirius is not smiling. His face is very still, and as Regulus inches slowly closer, he can see a blotchy spot of red crawling along Sirius' jaw. Closer, closer, and Regulus can see the film of tears forming in his eyes. Regulus' heart feels too big in his chest, taking up too much space, constricting with each careful step he takes. Closing the distance.

"Sirius?" Regulus rasps.

"Reggie," Sirius says. It comes out hoarse and choked, his face twitching before it crumbles altogether. A gasp escapes him, and then he's moving to meet Regulus halfway.

Regulus isn't at all prepared for Sirius to stumble right into his arms, collapsing into him like he's so tired of holding himself up and needs somewhere safe to fall into. He clings to Regulus and cries *hard,* fingers twisting in the back of his shirt, face pressed against his shoulder.

The thing is, Regulus recognizes this. It resonates with him, because he's usually on the other side of it. It's Regulus who always curls into the security Sirius offers, breaking down because he can trust Sirius to take care of all his broken pieces, if not put him all back together again. It's about the comfort one seeks, and Sirius is the strong one, the big brother, the one who never breaks and always offers the shoulder to cry on.

Sirius has never truly done this before, and Regulus is at first very alarmed, even frightened by it. He thinks something must be terribly wrong, and he doesn't know how to fix it, and he needs to fix it—but then Sirius slumps into him like he's giving in to letting himself be cradled and comforted for once, and Regulus realizes with a blooming warmth and simultaneous pain in his chest that Sirius has come to him for safety and security for the first time…maybe ever.

It's the most vulnerable Regulus has ever seen him, and he takes the care to wrap his arms around Sirius and hold his weight for him, and just hold him. Because he knows how it feels

to need that, and because he knows how it feels to have that. Sirius is the one who taught him both, and it's through that lesson that Regulus knows how to return the favor.

He'd thought it would be him to fall into Sirius and break in the safest place he could, but he can be the strong one for once. He can be the protector. He can be safe. Little brother or not, he can. Sirius showed him exactly how.

"It's okay," Regulus whispers, feeling like something fractures in his chest and mends together all at once as he realises Sirius is holding onto him like Regulus is all he needs. "It's okay now, Sirius. It's okay. You're okay. I've got you. You're here, and I'm here. Me and you, remember?"

"I was—I was so—" Sirius hiccups a sob into Regulus' shoulder, clinging to him. "I'm sorry. I tried to be—I didn't want to be scared, but I was. The whole time, I was so fucking scared."

Regulus swallows harshly and wishes—oh, he really wishes—he had the words to reassure Sirius. He's not good at this, not good with any of it, because the truth is, he's been terrified this whole time, too.

So, that's what Regulus says. "Yeah, me too."

"M'sorry," Sirius mumbles, yet again.

"You don't—I don't know why you're apologizing," Regulus admits quietly. "I'm the one who made it out. I'm—Sirius, I'm sorry you didn't. I wanted—I tried to make them go back. All I wanted was—"

Sirius makes a disapproving sort of noise, peeling back a little to frown at him. "Hey, don't do that. You can't think I'd ever be upset you made it out over myself. Reggie, I always put you before me. Its you before me every time, okay?"

Regulus feels his throat close up, and he knows what Sirius said is not healthy. He knows he's supposed to tell Sirius not to do that, tell him he doesn't have to do that, tell him he shouldn't do that—but he can't force the words out, because he has missed Sirius so much, even this part that he's always resented. This part where Regulus is the source of everything that's ever gone wrong for him; the name called that he volunteered for, the one picked up before him which left him behind, the reason he tries not to be afraid and the reason he finds himself in situations where he has to be. Regulus has missed even this, and feels unwaveringly loved, and feels unwavering love in return. A complex, complicated thing, something broken and codependent at the same time, and Regulus wants to cradle it in careful hands and never let it go again.

"I wanted you here," Regulus chokes out. "We agreed we both deserved to get out. We—"

"Technically, I did get out," Sirius says weakly, then clicks his tongue when Regulus makes a fussy sort of noise in disagreement. "Okay, hey, I know what you mean. Trust me, I wanted to be here, too. Come here, let me look at you." He reaches up to grab Regulus' face, squishing his cheeks and rolling his head around to examine him critically. Regulus lets him do whatever the fuck he wants. "Doing okay?"

"Mm."

"You look like shit."

"Just modeling myself after you," Regulus murmurs.

Sirius stops rolling Regulus' head around and stares at him, and then he says, "Was that a joke?"

"Was it funny?" Regulus asks.

"No," Sirius replies, then laughs a little hysterically, and keeps laughing, and keeps laughing, and then he's not laughing at all, because he's crying again.

Regulus makes a strained noise, his stress spiking once more, every instinct in him screaming at him to fix it, to fix whatever is wrong. His arms come up a bit, almost instinctively, and Sirius falls into him just like before.

"I—I didn't—I'm sorry," is what tumbles out of Regulus' mouth, heart thumping hard in his chest. "I didn't mean it. You look—great."

Sirius laughs through his tears, words muffled into Regulus' shoulder as he wheezes, "You little shit, I've missed you. Oh, fuck, I really missed you."

"What can I do?" Regulus whispers, because he's trying, but he isn't sure he's getting this comforting thing right, and who better to ask than the person who does it best? "Sirius, tell me what to do."

"Just be here," Sirius rasps in something devastatingly close to a whimper. "Just be here with me, okay, Reggie? That's all I need you to do."

"Okay," Regulus says quietly, because he can do that, and really, he doesn't want to do anything else anyway. "It's okay. I'm here."

Sirius holds onto him for a long time, weeping like it's the most cathartic, comforting moment of his life, and Regulus stays there with him, doing all that he can, just as Sirius has always done for him.

They're okay, because they have each other. Here they are, holding onto this moment; two comforted, two comforting, two brothers.

Always brothers.

Chapter End Notes

okay so let's get into it!

from the top, we've got dorleneeeee <3 the way dorcas was waiting on marlene, she loves her so much. i adore them, yall have no idea!!! also that moment of marlene being like: We're Gonna Work On Your Issues. HELP MARLENE SAID BABE I DONT WANT TO FIX YOU BUT BY GOD SOMEONE'S GOTTA 😭

also we learned james got injured! yeah, i doubt anyone was expecting that lmaoooo. blindsided you all with that one, sorry not sorry. he's not doing too hot. or, well, he was, in fact, too hot...

sorry.

ahem, anyway, cut to lily!!! that was definitely a rough mission for her, that's for sure! the changes from how she was in the beginning, and from her first mission, to now is so fascinating to me. like, she has come so very far. also, her and bingley are so sweet. i love them so much. oh, and marylily!!!

okay, full disclosure, i didn't actually know that they were gonna kiss there. like i had it vaguely in my head that they'd agree to date/take things slow and eventually work up to a kiss and then more, but like. mary MEANT she was kissing lily. she wouldn't stand for anything else, and you know what? who am i to stand in her way? good for them 😌

sirius my beloved <3 the way he has no idea what's going on and he's just. he's very out of the loop and dealing with so much at once. we find out how he became immune—which, again, im not a doctor/scientist, so apologies for any inaccuracies, but it's a fake world and i make the rules, so ha. that whole moment of him not wanting remus to be used and kind of like...speaking FOR remus? it comes from a place of love/worry, and it's really good that remus spoke up and like, made that decision for himself.

also, that moment where sirius found out that he fought remus... yeah, not great 😬 he struggles with that A LOT, and like, he and remus have minor issues about it—rest assured, they'll talk about it and stuff, and it will be addressed more.

i doubt anyone expected the glasses quote to be from aberforth's pov. regulus clearly isn't doing well. all that trouble he had getting out of the bunker, and then he just. beat the shit out of everyone standing in his way to go climb a tree. it's like...well, why didn't he do that to start with? and the thing is, it's partially bc the whole phoenix was in a state of chaos after riddle gave the kill order, so there were less people to fight, and also partially because regulus wasn't even aware that he COULD. when he fought his way out, it was done in the mental state that he didn't care if he was killed or thrown in solitary on his way out, and he didn't care what the fallout of trying to leave would be.

but hey, aberforth to the rescue (again)! also the fact that regulus climbed a tree is doubly tragic when you remember the dreams he had where sirius and james were at the top, the view he was always trying to climb to and couldn't. needless to say, he was not doing well.

it unfortunately only got worse when he did see james again. like, yay, james is here! oh no, james is severely hurt. no one can catch a break 😭

effie and monty reuniting with sirius is so special to me <3 also them seeing james again!!! sad, yes, but he's there. they're all there :(

the sirius and regulus reunion. look, you all know by now how much of a mess they make me. i love them dearly. just the way sirius tried so hard to be strong, but he's been through so much, and the whole time, he was afraid. like the whole comfort thing of family, and just how he and regulus are still kinda unhealthy but they love each other so much, and they're TRYING. and regulus taking care of sirius, trying to be strong, just. god, they make me so emotional 😭

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-marlene grinning because dorcas kissed her
-mary "yeah, okay, you got me" macdonald and lily "you turned me into a cliche" evans
-narcissa and sirius hugging <3
-aberforth thinking he's too old for this shit lmaooo
-sirius twirling effie in a hug 😭
-regulus accepting effie and monty's love <3
-remus not knowing he was immune and still risking his life and when sirius asks why he says "you were in there"
-regulus calling sirius ugly less than five minutes after he gets back and sirius crying 😭 (not really, sirius is just emotional, but it's still funny)
-regulus being comforting bc sirius taught him how :(

Together

Chapter Notes

hello everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-mentions of drugs/being drugged (its prescribed medication, but still)
-references to past wounds/injuries
-references to past death
-references to past murder
-references to past violence
-references to past torture
-references to past dissociative amnesia
-possible medical/scientific inaccuracies (sorry)

that's it!!! enjoy 🥰

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James is perched on a cloud, a very fluffy cloud, and there are so many people here with him. There is the mother, the father, the best friend, and the angel. Pretty, pretty angel. James tries to reach for the angel, because the angel is beautiful.

"James?" the angel murmurs.

"So beautiful," James tells the angel.

"That'll be the meds," says someone else, who has invaded his cloud. He does not know them, but they sound friendly. They also sound amused. James decides they can stay.

"James, honey, how are you feeling?" asks the mother.

"Look at him," the best friend announces, "he's clearly feeling fucking amazing at the moment."

"Oh," James gasps in utter delight when he finds out that he can, in fact, touch the angel. He stares in wonder as he glides his fingers gently along the angel's jaw. To him, it feels like ultraviolet sparks fizzling against his fingertips, and somehow someone is skipping rocks in the rippling lake that sits in his stomach. This is the best day of his life.

"Yeah, he's fine," the father says with a snort.

"Am I dead?" James asks in disbelief.

This displeases the angel, James thinks, because the angel frowns. "No, James, you're not dead."

"Oh," James says. "Are you visiting, then?"

"Visiting…?" The angel looks confused.

James blinks. "Um. Earth, I guess?"

It is a little confusing, James supposes. Where do angels come from? From heaven, or so they say, but where is that? A separate realm? In the sky? James' gut instinct says they come from outer space, celestial like the stars. Somehow, James knows this angel is a star.

"I don't know what that means," the angel mumbles. "I'm not visiting earth, James. I…live here."

"Oh, that's good. That's really good. You should stay here forever," James tells the angel earnestly.

"He's high," says the best friend. "Completely off his head. Of course he's not going to make sense."

"I am the smartest person on this cloud," James declares, then gently boops the angel's nose. He grins at the angel. "Except for maybe you, because you must have all the information ever invented. Pretty and smart. So pretty, so smart."

The angel turns a marvelous shade of red.

"I would like to commit blasphemy," James says, because in for a penny, in for a pound. What is the angel going to do? Smite him? No, somehow James knows the angel won't. Somehow, he knows the angel will hesitate to do so.

"James, we're going to start removing bandages now, okay?" asks the someone else he doesn't know, but is permitted entry to his cloud because they're nice.

"Are clouds on earth?" James muses, and then he yelps as the someone he doesn't know, but is permitted entry to his cloud because they're nice starts to peel away his strange skin, and maybe they're not so nice after all. "No! My skin!"

"James, these are bandages. It's not your skin."

"You're peeling off my skin."

"I promise you, I'm not. Do you feel any pain?"

"No, but it's my skin. Give it back and leave my cloud. I don't think you're very nice anymore."

"James," says the mother, soothing, "it's okay. Your, ah, skin needs to go away. You have better skin underneath."

James sends the mother an incredulous look. "It's my *skin."*

The best friend laughs. James would like to laugh with the best friend, because they always laugh together, but he doesn't see what's very funny about this. He feels that everyone on his cloud is not suitably horrified about what's happening right now. Do they have no regard for his skin? He looks at the angel desperately, in hopes the angel will take his side.

"It won't hurt," the angel informs him. "They need to get rid of it, and you're going to let them. Just relax."

James is displeased that the angel has not taken his side, so he frowns at the angel. Nonetheless, because the angel is an *angel,* James knows better to question any further. He sighs and lets his skin be peeled off. The angel was right, it doesn't hurt, and he even forgets it's happening when he lifts his hand to touch the angel again. The angel allows it.

"You're divine," James breathes out in awe, because the angel is literally divinity, and James gets to touch. Wow.

The angel's lips curl up, and the angel looks soft, as well as pleased. James is pretty sure he's going to woo the angel. That *is* blasphemy, isn't it? Well, it's worth the trip to hell.

"Alright, James," says the someone he doesn't know, but may or may not be permitted on his cloud because they may or may not be nice. "You're all done. See? That wasn't so bad. Now you're free to lay about all day and rest up good and proper."

"When will the medication wear off?" asks the father.

"Couple of hours. He'll likely sleep on and off until then."

"Ah, okay."

"Shame," the best friend says. "This is brilliant."

"Brilliant," James agrees, because the best friend is always right. He sweeps his fingers very carefully over the bridge of the angel's nose. "Wow. Just *brilliant."*

People on the cloud are laughing, and James likes the sound. It's like windchimes in his brain. Sweet and mystical to his ears. The angel is not laughing. The angel looks fond, but there is no laughter. James wants the angel to laugh. James bets the angel's laugh sounds like celestial harmonies.

"I have to tell you a joke," James says, and the angel blinks at him, then arches an eyebrow. "I need you to laugh."

"James—"

"What did the big flower say to the little flower?"

The angel glances over at the best friend, and the best friend is stifling laughter, and then the angel focuses on James again. The angel indulges him. "I don't know. What *did* the big flower say to the little flower?"

"Hey there, bud," James tells him, and the mother laughs, and the father laughs, and the best friend laughs, but the angel does not laugh. No, the angel only reaches up to grab his hand, gently pressing a smile to his knuckles. It's a small smile. Lips of an angel. Sweet. James wants to put his mouth on it, and stick his fingers in it, but he's also sad because the angel didn't laugh. "You were supposed to laugh. I told a flower joke. It was funny, and you like flowers."

"Mm." The angel's eyes drift shut. The angel is still smiling and cradling his hand. "Better luck next time."

"I'll keep trying."

"I know."

James sighs wistfully, letting his head drop back against the pillow, gazing up at the angel, enamored. The angel's eyes open, regarding him over his fingers, peering through pretty, pretty eyelashes. James smiles at the angel and risks being smited…smote? Risks certain death at the hands of an angel, in any case, by twitching his finger up, unfurling it slowly to trace the angel's bottom lip. The angel does not beam him with celestial grace and turn him to ash. The angel just looks at him, watching, and allows it.

James keeps looking at the angel, because the angel is very beautiful, and he doesn't want to look away. But his eyes are getting heavy, and with each blink, the cloud seems to wrap around him more and drag him under. His finger slows against the angel's lip, and he frowns. He doesn't want to go away; he wants to be with the angel. Maybe the angel will remain even when he goes away and comes back. Oh, James hopes so.

"You'll stay, right?" James mumbles.

"I'll stay," promises the angel, and James believes the promise, because James looks into the angel's eyes and knows the angel means the promise and isn't being a sneaky little liar.

James smiles, pleased. "I'm going to keep you."

The angel finally, finally, *finally* laughs, and it has special angel powers to make James' chest go warm. It sounds like a gentle jingle, a tinkling bell, and it's the last thing James hears before he happily falls off into dreams of a knitted hat with the angel's laughter trapped inside.

~•~

Remus sneaks into the infirmary to see James.

Well, *sneaks* is a bit of a strong word. What he really does is march right in, and he's ultimately surprised to find James wide awake and entirely alone, other than Regulus, who is conked out and draped over the side of the bed. He's obviously sleeping deeply, and James is just—gazing at him. The look on his face is so fucking tender. Adoring. Loving. Soft.

When James looks up and notices him, his entire face lights up, splitting into a smile. It takes about ten seconds of Remus not returning the smile for James' to fade.

"Oh," James says quietly. "Right, you're—angry at me."

"Where's Sirius?" Remus asks, flicking his gaze around, eyebrows drawing together. "Where are your parents?"

James clears his throat. "Ah, well, I made them leave. Kicked them all out. They needed to eat, and they've been cooped up in here since yesterday."

"They actually went?"

"It was a fight. I almost cried, so I ended up winning."

"Ah, the ultimate weapon." Remus snorts and shakes his head, then moves over and sits down in the chair next to Regulus, sighing as he looks over at him. He's sleeping so hard that his mouth is slack. Even asleep, his eyebrows are scrunched together, almost like he's still scowling at everything.

"I've had some visitors," James murmurs. When Remus looks up, he drops his gaze. "I knew you'd be along eventually."

Remus stares at him, waiting for him to finally look up, and then he asks, bluntly, "Why didn't you get in the van?"

James grimaces.

Yeah, that's about what Remus expected. Some part of him already knows, and maybe that's why he never asked Dorcas, because he didn't have to. Effie said James *chose* to stay in the Hallow—and he did. Remus was there; he saw James make the deliberate decision to do that, and he doesn't need three guesses to figure out why, but he wants James to say it.

"Honestly?" James croaks. Remus nods. "I wasn't in the right state of mind to go making decisions like I did. Once Frank died, it—it was like this pressure was on my chest, and I couldn't breathe. I couldn't carry it, Remus. I messed up, and something bad happened, so I—I wanted to do something good. I thought—" He tips his head back, eyes slipping shut as he exhales heavily. "This was foolish of me, but I thought I could do it. Not just for you and Regulus, but for me, too. I really thought I'd get him out, and then it'd all be okay."

"So, you knew, then," Remus replies, his tone level, despite the spike of pure fury that rushes through him. James opens his eyes and looks at him, swallowing. "You knew Sirius hadn't made it out. You knew when you shut me in that van."

"Yes," James whispers.

"You know, James, I—" Remus stops, and a brittle laugh escapes him. "The thing that pisses me off the most is that I would have done the same thing. Verbatim. I wouldn't have told you, I would have made sure you got out, and I would have tried to save Sirius. Do you know what's so infuriating about that? It's that I *understand* why you did it, but it still makes me angry because I didn't even get the choice; you made sure I didn't get the freedom to choose."

"Remus," James chokes out, "I'm *sorry.* I—"

"And the *worst* part is," Remus cuts in, "it *had* to be you. It couldn't be anyone else, it couldn't be me, because Riddle would have just killed me and found some way to make Sirius do what he made you do. You were the best outcome in all of that, and now we're all here, and we're all safe—and I'm still so fucking *angry* at you, James."

"I know, I know, you have every right to be," James says, his voice tight like he's trying not to cry. "It was wrong. I know I made a mistake. I've made so many now, Remus. You don't have to forgive me, but I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Remus sighs, glancing down at Regulus. It's a good thing he's not awake, is all Remus can think. He'd lose his fucking mind if he knew Remus currently has James on the verge of tears.

It's a pretty shit thing to do, isn't it?

And, like this, Remus isn't really all that angry, as it turns out. Maybe he just needed to hear James say it, all of it, and say sorry. Maybe he just needed to say what he did, out loud, just to feel more real. A person with feelings. A person who deserves the freedom to express those emotions, and then work through them when it's necessary.

Slowly, methodically, he works through them. Feels them. Breathes every time Regulus does, matching the sleep-soft melody of it, letting it lull him, and calm him. Thinks about how James did what Remus would have, what any of them would have, what Lily would have for Remus six years ago, what Remus did himself for her six years ago.

James nearly *died.* Almost, almost, almost. Too close. He was in a horrible state of mind, grieving and terrified, and trying. He's always trying, isn't he? Remus cares about him so *fiercely,* one of the few people he formed a deep connection to in the Hallow, and look at all they've been through. James helped him get out. James insisted on it. All these things bounce around in Remus' mind, and he lets them until they settle.

Remus sighs again and meets James' teary gaze. "Friends do this sometimes, I've learned. It comes from a place of love, because we care about each other. You wouldn't leave me behind, and you couldn't leave him behind. I would have done the same thing; I pretty much did, for Lily. The very thing that got me imprisoned in the Hallow busted me out. I understand, James. There's nothing to forgive, but I forgive you anyway."

"I do love you, you know," James tells him earnestly, his eyebrows pinched together. "I really do."

"I know." Remus huffs a weak laugh. "Because Sirius does."

James frowns at him. "I mean, sure, but Sirius also doesn't really have that much to do with it. I love you because you're you. And you—you're my friend, Remus. One of my best friends, honestly, at this point."

"Yeah, James, I know. Me too," Remus murmurs, his lips curling up, admittedly warmed by the ease in which James extends affection and friendship. He's been like this from the very beginning. Some things really never do change.

"Remus?" James says softly.

"Yeah?" Remus asks.

"Why did you come back for me?" James looks at him, studies his face, something gentle in his gaze. "You could have died coming back for me."

Remus could say it was guilt. He could say it was to prove a point. He could say he just wanted to do the right thing. But, in the end, he looks James in the eye and says the truth.

"I couldn't bear the thought of leaving you behind."

~•~

The first thing Regulus registers is a gentle caress down the line of his nose, so soft he wouldn't even feel it if he wasn't slowly becoming aware, finding his way to being awake.

Perhaps it's wildly inexplicable, but Regulus knows James by even just the very tip of his finger. He *knows* it's James ever so gently stroking his nose, the touch simultaneously too curious and reverent to be anyone else, and the pads of James' fingers are entirely unique in their own special shape and texture, which Regulus may or may not have memorized, literally.

Regulus imagines that James is still heavily medicated. While on the prescribed drugs, he has been delighted by basically everything and seems to have little to no grasp on what's going on around him at any given moment, but what he *does* know, apparently, is that he's obsessed with Regulus, especially touching Regulus as much as he can get away with.

Honestly, Regulus is stupidly pleased by that.

The infirmary is oddly quiet. He didn't mean to fall asleep, really, but he has hardly slept lately—and if he does, it's never good sleep—and he couldn't sleep last night until he actually *saw* James get visibly better. Not fully healed, even now, but his injuries have definitely made exceptional progress through the night and the morning, so maybe Regulus finally, finally, finally let himself rest—or, maybe James was sleeping, and Regulus' blinks as he gazed at his face got too spaced apart, and he literally couldn't hold his eyes open anymore. Who's to know? The details are fuzzy and unclear even to him. All he knows is that he didn't dream, not even to have a nightmare.

He did stay up to talk to Sirius about the mission, and about Remus. Sirius told him what he did, all of it, how he went in to get Sirius and how he went back to get James, refusing to leave either of them behind. *Sirius* is distinctly displeased with Remus at the moment, which Regulus finds rather stupid, but he's just so grateful that Sirius is *here* that he didn't even bother risking getting into an argument with him, not so soon.

All Regulus wants to do, really, is bask in having them all here, safe and sound, with him. It's ridiculous, considering how he was a mere year ago, but he wants to touch everyone, just to know that they're alive. For the longest time, he'd planted his chair right next to Sirius' so he could make sure their elbows were knocking and their arms were touching. It's his brother. A little bedraggled and jumpy, more vulnerable than he's ever been, but his brother all the same.

In any case, Regulus is sure Remus and Sirius will work out whatever their issues are at the moment. It's been weeks of pure hell for all of them, so he doesn't doubt that they're all going to succumb to the temptation of comfort and unity sooner rather than later. They've all been through a lot, and they should get to rest now. Regulus wants to rest now.

At some point, Sirius, Effie, and Monty must have left. That makes no sense, because Regulus can't fathom why any of them would have left James' side so soon.

It causes Regulus' eyebrow to furrow, his rising concern and weary paranoia dragging him awake, face scrunching as James' finger slides up to caress the wrinkle between his eyebrows. Regulus' eyes flutter open, and he blinks slowly, fighting a yawn as the world swims into focus.

Regulus doesn't remember leaning over to rest his head on the bed James is in, but apparently he did, because that's where he wakes up. He's down by James' hip, one of his hands resting on his leg, the other tangled loosely with James' free hand. His face is tilted towards James, so the first thing he sees is James looking down at him with a small smile, entirely lucid.

"And he finally wakes," James murmurs, his finger gently smoothing over his right eyebrow.

Regulus pops up, jolting in place and slamming his elbow into the rail on the side of the bed. "Shit. Ow."

"Oh, did that hurt?" James asks, leaning forward slightly, reaching away from Regulus' face to cup his elbow, rubbing gently. "Funny bone, they call it. Not so funny when you slam it into something, though, is it?"

"You're awake," Regulus says stupidly. "Like, properly."

"Mhm," James confirms.

Regulus blinks at him, then looks around. "Where's—"

"I ran them all off. Made them go away," James tells him, lips twitching. "I'm not actually released yet, but I'm fine, so I made everyone else go. I wouldn't let anyone wake you, though. You were sleeping so deeply; it seemed like you needed it, and I guess I just wanted to be alone with you for a bit."

"What?" Regulus says stupidly, yet again, just staring at James.

James smiles, gaze warm, glasses gone. "We're alone, love."

Regulus isn't really sure why that gets to him, but it does. James is here. James is right here, looking at him, talking to him, smiling at him, calling him *love,* alive and safe and maybe not at his physical best while still healing, but okay. He's okay, and he's here; so close, and finally, close enough.

Regulus doesn't think he's scrambled up on a bed so fast in his life, genuinely just climbing right onto it with no warning. James doesn't seem startled, at least. If he wasn't expecting it, he was clearly hoping for it, because his arms open up, and he's dragging Regulus close as Regulus frantically crawls up to him with no finesse whatsoever.

It's in the back of Regulus' mind to be gentle with James, to not hurt him, but all inhibitions fly out the window the second James starts tugging on him, blatantly and shamelessly trying to get him as close as he can get. Maybe it's supposed to be this seamless sort of reunion where they click into place, but it's not. It's a messy collision, much like them, all elbows and fumbling fingers, and James makes a horrible gasping noise like a man coming up for air and choking on it, and he's crying before Regulus can properly hold him; it's awful, it's all so awful, and it's the best thing Regulus has ever felt.

"Shh, shh, it's okay," Regulus croaks. He finally, thankfully manages to get his arms around James' shoulders, tugging on him, encouraging him to fall into Regulus' chest and stay there, hide there if he needs to, remain safe there for as long as he seeks the refuge. "James, it's okay. Shh, it's okay."

James digs his face into Regulus' chest, his shoulders hitching under Regulus' hands, a shudder rippling through him. His tears seem dry; the scratchy, raw sort of sobs that Regulus

knows feels like sandpaper in your lungs. Pain that burns where it is; pain that burns on its way out.

"I was trying—I wanted this to be—" James chokes off, shaking his head against Regulus' chest. Regulus cups the curve of his skull, fingers delving into hair, and he could cry from the relief of getting to feel it again. James clings to him, hands fisting the back of his shirt. "I didn't—Reg, I didn't want it to be like this. I'm so—"

"James, it's *okay,"* Regulus insists, because it is, because James doesn't have to pretend to be alright for his sake. Goodness knows Regulus never managed that himself, and he's too tired to make those foolish attempts anymore. He won't stand for James thinking he has to make that attempt at all.

"I don't know why I'm—" James groans, sagging against him, just deflating at once. He sniffles. "I'm—I swear I'm so *happy* to see you, so happy you're here, I'm just—"

"I know, I know, it's okay," Regulus murmurs, squeezing his eyes shut and rocking him a little, letting them sway back and forth like that, letting it soothe them. "I promise it's okay."

"I missed you," James whispers, his words muffled.

Regulus is pretty sure his chest caves in. He can practically feel the three fractures that splinter out from the center, one for each word. *I missed you;* one fragment, two fragments, then three. He aches with it, because it's—well, it's the longest that he and James have gone without seeing each other. Even back when they never spoke, and Regulus was waltzing around like a fool, wasting time believing he hated him; even then, they still saw each other every day, even just in passing, even just a stolen glance they rarely took at the same time, but always there, so close, only just missing each other.

"I'm here now," Regulus whispers back.

James exhales heavily, hot breath pressing against Regulus' shirt, pooling through the fabric to warm his skin. Slowly, James tilts his head back and peers up at him, hunched in over on himself. His eyes are open, watery and bloodshot, rimmed with red. No contacts. No glasses.

"Did you miss me?" James mumbles.

"Not for a second," Regulus lies, and James sobs out a laugh, eyes welling up again until he's crying and smiling through the tears, shaky hands lifting to frame Regulus' face, gazing up at him with no shame for how his chin wrinkles and his lip wobbles and his tears fall.

"Liar," James rasps.

Regulus nods and leans in to press his forehead to James', eyes drifting shut. He breathes, and breathes, then breathes out a soft, "Yeah. Yeah, I am. It was every second. I missed you every single second. At all times, baby, at all times."

James makes a helpless, muffled noise and tilts forward to press his face into Regulus' throat. Like this, hunched over as he is, James almost seems small. He feels small in Regulus' arms, like he's trying to fold into himself so all of him will fit. Regulus grips him as securely as possible, wishing he had more arms just so he could gather more of James to hold.

"I thought you'd be angry with me," James mumbles, and Regulus' eyes snap open just so he can blink in sheer disbelief. He pulls back to stare down at him incredulously, and James swallows. "Because I—I chose to stay. I—do you know? Regulus, I...knew you were here, and I still—I—"

"James," Regulus cuts in, holding his gaze, "did I not do the same thing when I went into the arena in the hopes that Sirius would kill me and win? That was my original plan, and believe me, it wasn't about leaving you; it was about what I thought you needed, and what I needed, and just—Sirius. Loving Sirius."

"I love him so much," James chokes out.

Regulus nods. "I know. I'm not angry with you for that anymore."

"I love you, too," James whispers fiercely. "I'm so in love with you. Part of the reason I stayed was for you, because he's—he's your brother, and I just—I saw you in the arena, you know, when—" James stops, his face falling slack, and Regulus goes tense instantly when he realizes just how many things actually sit between them now; the changes, the experiences they've been through, what they saw of each other and what they didn't. James exhales shakily. "Your boggart. Your—it was—"

"James—"

"It was me."

"James," Regulus protests weakly.

James is breathing all out of order, thin and shaky, and he's a little wild-eyed. "It's not true. Not a fucking word that was said there with my mouth was true, Reg. I couldn't bear to lose you, and no one—I promise you, no one would be better off with you. If I lost you, I'd look for you forever. You're not rot, love, and you're the most beautiful thing this world has to offer. I would never—I wouldn't—"

"James, it's—stop, it's okay, I know," Regulus cuts in as James' chest stutters on his inhale. "I know it wasn't real. I know it wasn't you. It couldn't be, because you're good, and it wasn't."

"I'm—" James almost seems to release a whine. "I don't know that I'm good, though. I—I try to be, but I just—I made things worse, and—and no matter what I did, it was like—"

"Like you couldn't do anything right?" Regulus asks softly, and James' shoulders jerk as he nods. Regulus sighs. "Welcome to my life. That's pretty much how I feel...all the time. Like a constant failure, and it's—it makes it more difficult to entertain the thought of trying at all. But it's not something only I experience, I'm learning. All humans make mistakes. You're human, James. The most *human* human I know. And such a good one. The best, in my opinion."

"It's my fault Frank is dead," James whimpers. His eyes shine. "I didn't mean to. I swear I didn't mean to. I only wanted to do the right thing. I was just trying—"

"Don't do that," Regulus replies softly. "I've talked to Rodolphus, and listen, I know where you're going with this, okay? But no, it's not that simple. Bad things happen no matter what we do; that doesn't make you a bad person. You're not a bad person, James."

James collapses forward with a horrible, harrowing noise crawling from what sounds like the very depths of him, raw and scratchy and desperate. He folds into Regulus and stays there, trying to shrink himself down and fit with him, and Regulus holds him, eyes closed, faced pressed into James' hair. He feels him stop crying, slowly. He feels him breathe. Regulus is so glad that James breathes.

They stay there together like that for a long time, and though the setting is different, it feels so much like their first meeting after their arena that it's almost as if they're back there, or as if perhaps that moment has always existed, then and now and later, there and here and anywhere. Regulus basks in it, in this, and it doesn't matter how hard things have been; nothing matters other than this, not anymore, not ever again.

The ruffle of a curtain and a soft gasp makes Regulus tense up as his head whips around. If looks could kill, Molly would be dead ten times over, and it would be a very gruesome death. She stares at them with wide eyes, pink-cheeked, bashful.

"Get out," Regulus snaps.

James swats his hip gently. "Be nice." He clears his throat and lifts his head. "Hi, Molly. Please ignore him. He's just—like that. What can we… Um, what can I do for you?"

"Actually, it's what I could do for you." Molly clears her throat and carefully edges her way inside, side-eyeing Regulus like he might pounce at a moment's notice. Don't tempt him. "I'm glad I caught you while you were still here. I, um. Well, I hope you don't mind, but I thought you might appreciate this, so…"

"Oh," James says softly, when his gaze lands on the glasses Molly holds out to him. Regulus holds his breath while staring at them, because they look just like James' old pair. "I—um, thank you, Molly, I just… I don't—" He swallows harshly and looks almost…ashamed? He can't seem to meet Regulus' gaze with his own. "I mean, I—I *do* appreciate it, or the thought,

but they—they, um, fixed my eyesight in the Hallow. I didn't… I never asked them to. They just…did it."

"The lenses are plain, James. Nothing to help your eyes, or strain them," Molly murmurs. "Regulus said you really need them, like they're important to you, so I may have…put a rush order on replacing them for you. Go with or without them, the choice is yours, but you should *have* the choice."

James' gaze snaps up to hers, and Regulus' heart clenches at the immediate flood of relief that steals over his face. He looks due for crying again, and Regulus remembers. He can never forget the way James said they couldn't change who he was, not really, but they've done their absolute best to. They've altered him, his very body, without his permission. It's invasive and cruel, and it makes Regulus want to gouge out Riddle's eyeballs for suitable retribution, see how *he* likes it, the fucking piece of shit. Oh, Regulus could dig his thumbs into Riddle's eyes and just—he could just—

"Thank you," James says, interrupting Regulus' internal tirade of violence. "Really, Molly, thank you."

Molly passes the glasses over with a small smile, then sighs and gives them both a tiny shrug. "I've found that Riddle does his best to take what's important from us all, but what he fails to realize is that what's important will always be important. You two were—" She halts, then takes a deep breath. "You two were very important to Fabian and Gideon. My brothers. And now, through them, you're very important to me. That's what Riddle doesn't understand. What's important will always remain so if we make the choice to let it."

"They were important to us, too," James tells her, as earnest as he's always been. "And, through them, so are you. I'm—I'm very sorry for what happened to them, Molly."

"You were there," Molly whispers, fingers nervously tangling together in front of her stomach. She pulls at a loose thread and flicks her gaze between them. "When they… You were there in their last moments."

"Yes," Regulus confirms, so James doesn't have to.

Molly swallows. "Did they suffer?"

"No," Regulus lies. Again, he does it so James doesn't have to. James isn't the best liar, never has been, but sometimes lying can be a kindness. "No, Molly, they didn't suffer."

Maybe that's not what someone would say if they wanted to incite vengeance within someone. If Regulus were aiming to give Molly further reason to seek revenge, to throw herself into war in the name of her brothers, he would tell her that they were brutally beaten and died in pain. But Regulus has seen Molly with Arthur, seen the shared warmth and simple love between them, so easily bulldozed by the draw of violence waiting on the other side of the truth, and so he lies. Regulus lies so that she may have peace; what a concept, peace in the midst of war. Someone should get to have that, at least.

If it were him, if it were his brother, he would want the truth; he would want to give into the bloodthirsty need to make someone, anyone, everyone pay for it. But, the sad truth is, doing that wouldn't bring him peace. He's learning. He's finally getting it. Revenge achieves nothing; at the end, what hurts will still hurt, and you're no closer to peace than you were at the start. But Molly? She's close. Even grieving as she is, still, she's so much closer, and Regulus will make the selfish and perhaps kind decision not to pull her away from that.

He sees it there in the glimmer of tears in her eyes, the way her shoulders shift, like a weight has lifted and dropped down simultaneously. Grief never goes away; that's a burden to bear for as long as you live when someone you love doesn't. She'll never be free of that, but she can find peace anyway. It's there. It's within her grasp, and Regulus hopes wherever Gideon and Fabian are, they know she's okay. That she will be.

"Thank you," Molly says thickly, blinking hard and clearing her throat. She gives them a watery smile and nods. "Right, well, I'll be on my way. If you two ever need anything…"

"You too, Molly," James murmurs. "Anything at all."

Molly leaves after that, sniffling as she goes, and Regulus turns to find James looking at him. It's a searching look, studying him. Regulus resists the urge to fidget under his gaze.

"What?" Regulus mumbles.

James' mouth curves up at one side. "Nothing, just…that was kind of you."

"Yeah, maybe, but it was also unfair of me to do."

"I don't think so."

Regulus huffs a weak laugh. "Yes, well, you wouldn't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You see the best in people. In me."

"Not that hard to notice." James smiles at him, a crooked thing, warm. "Impossible to miss, really."

"Debatable," Regulus says, and James opens his mouth like he's about to argue, because of course he is, because of course he would, but Regulus shakes his head. He reaches out and taps the corner of the frame of the glasses, held folded in James' loose grip. "So, what will you choose?"

James glances down at them, eyebrows furrowed. After a beat, he looks back up. "You like my glasses."

"I do," Regulus admits. "Believe it or not, I just so happen to like you even more, with or without them. Don't wear them for me, James. Wear them for you, if you want to."

"I know it might seem stupid, but they—they helped me with the timeline before," James confesses, and Regulus nods, because he remembers James telling him that. "My glasses and my cane help me get my bearings, but now so much has happened, and it's all—it gets a bit confusing, honestly."

"So they don't help anymore?"

"Maybe with some more time to adjust, they will. But that's not all my glasses do. I mean, I've worn them my whole life. I've needed them, and it feels—it makes me uncomfortable that I don't anymore. But they—they help me feel separate from the Hallow, does that make sense?"

"They always took your glasses from you," Regulus murmurs.

"Yeah," James replies. "I want them back. I want—I want to need them again. And I never will."

Regulus reaches down gently and takes the glasses, carefully unfolding them and slowly sliding them onto James' face. They sit as they have always sat, looking the exact same. Regulus gets a heart flutter just looking at him. James swallows harshly, lips parting around a deep exhale.

"Do you feel better wearing them?" Regulus asks.

"Yes," James whispers.

Regulus smiles. "Then you need them."

James gazes up at him with such wonder, such reverence, that maybe Regulus should see it coming, what happens next. Yet, for some reason, it takes him wholly by surprise. Just the quick slip of James' hand around the back of his neck, tugging him down, and then Regulus is being kissed.

Regulus hasn't left the infirmary, so he hasn't brushed his teeth. James probably hasn't had the chance to use a toothbrush either. Both of their mouths are stale, and it doesn't matter. They're not kissing with tongue. It's just lips against lips, pressed together, a warm weight. It's likely the tamest they've ever kissed, and they've certainly kissed in filthier conditions, tongue-and-all, but this one. This is the one. Oh, yes, this one fills Regulus with so much warmth and love that he can feel it tingling in his very fingertips.

James pulls away just to peck him again, then kisses each corner of his mouth, then along his jaw, his cheek, wherever he can reach. Smothering him in soft, quick kisses that makes Regulus want to squirm and laugh, so he does, warm from his hair to his toes. His face is warmest of all.

"James, *James,"* Regulus gasps out through laughter, desperate now to speak, to say something so devastatingly important he feared he would never get to say again. "Stop, hold on, just—James, would you—"

"Listen at you," James mumbles, chuckling. "I've never heard you laugh so much. It's lovely. You're lovely."

"I love you," is what spills out of Regulus' mouth next, coasting out on what sounds like a breathless giggle, but no less sincere for it. James stops. He just stops, then pulls back to look at him, lips parted. Regulus reaches up to cradle his face, staring into his eyes. Those pretty eyes of his. "I love you, James. I loved you from the start, I love you now, and I'll love you for as long as love is something that exists—and, if it ever stops existing, I'll reinvent it just for you."

James bites down on his lip, then licks them, eyes bright. He exhales shakily, nodding. "Okay. Yeah, okay. I—well, you see, I'm trying not to—" His voice cracks, so he clears his throat with effort. "I'm trying not to cry, and I have to say, love, you're making that very difficult at the moment."

"I'd apologize, except I'm not actually sorry. I mean it, James. I love you so much," Regulus murmurs.

"Fucking hell," James breathes out, "are you—so you'll just be saying that all the time, then? Is that—it's a thing now?"

"Well, I'm trying not to lie to you anymore," Regulus admits, lips curling up. "Telling the truth is a good place to start."

James groans and tips his head forward, leaning into him, holding on. Regulus cards his fingers through James' hair and whispers the truth in his ear over and over, saying it and saying it and saying it. Feeling it. Letting himself feel it.

I love you, I love you, I love you. He does, and he does, and he does. Love as a verb, because it's something you do. Regulus is doing it. He's been doing it for a long time. Maybe not in the best way throughout, not always, but doing it all the same.

He's going to keep doing it, too, and get better at it all the while. He'll try and try and try, and that's enough.

For both of them, from both of them, that's enough.

~•~

Remus is not having a very good day, despite the rather healing conversation he had with James earlier.

Lily is mad at him. Well, she's *been* mad at him pretty much ever since he ran into the room full of biological warfare, and she's doubly mad at him for running into gunfire and smoke because he refused to leave James behind, and he gets her anger. He really does. They've only just gotten each other back, and to come so close to the realization that they could easily lose each other again is infuriating, likely even more so for her, because he was the one who was taking insane risks.

He really does get it, because he was sort of mad at James for the same thing, in a way. And, sure, Lily sat all of that aside while on the mission, but they're back now, and she's *pissed.*

"What were you *thinking?"* Lily had hissed at him.

"I wasn't," Remus had confessed.

Lily's voice had been so cold when she said, "Yeah, you never fucking do, do you?"

In any case, her anger only got worse when she found out that he was planning to let Dumbledore use his blood, in the same line of thinking about Sirius on the whole matter. He knows it comes from a place of love, worrying about him, but there is a bigger picture here. If he can help make sure more people won't be slaughtered at Riddle's hands, he has to do that. It doesn't matter if he's afraid, if the mere idea of being yet another experiment makes him feel sick, because he could help people. Children, innocents, the very people he loves.

It seemed to soothe Lily a bit that she was allowed to put the limit on how much blood he can donate. She put her foot down and said that he can only give one pint every eight weeks, but he can give a small sample of his blood as needed, though no more than three times in a week. Remus thinks this is a little extreme, but she went on about red blood cells and how long it takes them to regenerate, along with other medical science stuff that he didn't argue with her about.

However, by estimate, one pint of his blood is five hundred milliliters, and it can be used in two milliliter injections to give immunity to around two hundred and fifty people.

Despite everything, Remus can't help but feel that there's something really special about that. He also put his foot down and told Dumbledore that all the children in the Phoenix have to be immunized first, along with all the freed servants, the rescued tributes and those that went in to break them out, everyone from district six, and those that escaped the Hallow. After that—and only after that—can Dumbledore use it however he sees fit, on whoever he sees fit, including himself.

That probably only leaves approximately one hundred people, at most, but Remus is the one giving his blood, so he demands to have some say in how it's used, just this much at least. The children will be safe. Those he loves will be safe. Those who have already suffered because of Riddle will be safe. Maybe it makes Remus selfish to demand that, maybe it doesn't, but he honestly doesn't give a shit either way. In the end, Dumbledore agreed to his terms, so that's that.

Remus is set to give his donation later in the week, and he's admittedly nervous about it. Lily has already stated that she'll be there, but she's ignoring him otherwise because she's pissed at him. The thing is, she's not the only one.

Sirius is mad at him, too.

On one hand, Remus gets it, because he knows it's not just that. Remus knows it's really just anger Sirius feels for himself. It's that Sirius hurt him. It wasn't his fault, and they all ended up okay in the end, but of course Sirius isn't going to see it that way. He's blaming himself, because of course he is.

Remus wants to fucking scream, because it's not fair, because he doesn't want it to be like this. He wants to wrap his arms around Sirius, run his hands through Sirius' hair, breathe him in and keep him close and never let him go. It's been too long; Remus has spent too long worrying about him, missing him, wanting so badly to have him close again.

He's here, is the thing. Remus doesn't think Sirius wants to see him, and Remus also doesn't care. He's just going to have to get over it. Remus didn't spend fucking *weeks* missing him, lost without him, just for him to get back and be stubborn enough, after everything, to run away from their something.

No. Fuck that. They're not going to do that.

Remus can be wrong, as it turns out. Tragically inevitable and woefully pointless, he called them, and maybe he was right at the time he said it, maybe that's how they started out, but he'll be damned if that's all they'll ever be.

The proper thing to do here, what Remus should do, is let Sirius have more than one night to adjust, maybe give him a little space, let him cool down and get his bearings. The only thing is, Remus has never been very good at being proper or doing what he should, has he? Hm, let's reframe that, here and now. Make it positive. What it is, really, is that Remus is *very* good at doing what he shouldn't in an improper manner, and you know what? Good for him. It's a skill, at this point.

So, naturally, Remus hunts Sirius down.

Sirius is somewhere in this bunker, and Remus knows he won't be far away from Effie and Monty. Of course not, and he isn't. He's practically right up under them in the Great Hall, sitting beside them with Narcissa on the other side of the table.

For a beat, Remus hesitates to come closer. For one thing, Remus hasn't really interacted with Narcissa, specifically, because—well, ah, he killed her husband. He knows that Sirius once said she had no love for Lucius, but still. Honestly, it's less cowardice that keeps him from telling her it was him, because—if Sirius is to be believed—she likely won't care or might even thank him; no, it's more that he might have to revisit it, what he did, and have to acknowledge that he feels exactly zero remorse about it whatsoever.

All around him, people are murderers—through war, through self-defense, through survival. It weighs on them, despite their reasons. Remus? Even without reason, it doesn't weigh on him at all. He doesn't have nightmares about that, killing Lucius or Greyback, and he doubts he'll have nightmares about any of the others he killed on the most recent mission; he didn't last night, in any case. When it comes to what he feels about being a killer, he feels—nothing. Absolutely nothing.

His nightmares are riddled with his own torture, the loss of his mother, of Lily, Sirius, James, his dad. Getting whipped, his scars splitting back open and swallowing him whole. The empty eyes of Hallow servants. The cold of Azkaban. The chair on the lower levels and the mask strapped to his face.

Sometimes, Remus thinks that being a servant really fucked him up. All the experiments. All the torture. Because while he knows that killing is the worst thing he's ever done, he never quite feels bad about doing it. He probably should. A lot of people do, here. Sirius does.

But, the thing is, Remus has suffered at the hands of people who wanted him to suffer, and he knows the difference between someone who does what they have to, and someone who does what they want to. He knows it intimately. It's a different perspective, and in war, murder is commonplace. Remus thinks that he's been in war his whole life, ever since Greyback came into it.

It infuriates Remus to think about the mark that man left on him, on his life, how he shaped it, and how he shaped him. Somewhere out there, long ago, there might have been a softer Remus, one who didn't dive head-first into chaos and violence, one who never had to to survive, one who would feel remorse for the blood staining his hands. But they whipped that out of him. But it died with his mother. But it was muzzled like a dog and left to snarl and foam at the mouth, defiance building until he never misses a chance to bite. But they silenced it, and he has found his voice, and now, now they hear him scream.

So, no, Remus doesn't want to revisit it, or talk about it, or think about it. He doesn't want to be a killer, but he doesn't care that he is, and maybe he should. But he has seen worse things, experienced worse things, and those weigh on him more than murder ever could. Maybe someday, when this is all over and he's just an old man, he'll look back and feel the remorse he should now. He welcomes the thought, because he knows that will mean the war is over.

But, for now, the war is still waging, and he's remorseless. Maybe he's selfish, too. Desperate. Because all he wants is Sirius, right now. So, despite Narcissa's proximity, and despite how sure he is that Sirius is avoiding him, Remus marches right up to him anyway.

"Sirius," Remus says firmly, and all heads swing towards him immediately. Sirius' relaxed expression goes tense, and Remus resists the urge to grind his teeth. "Can we talk?"

"I'm busy," Sirius replies shortly.

"Okay, allow me to rephrase," Remus corrects. "We *need* to talk."

Sirius huffs. "Oh, is that right?"

"I mean, we can do this here in front of an audience if you like," Remus says, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, fuck you," Sirius mutters.

"No, *that* we can't do in front of an audience," Remus drawls, and something in his chest goes warm when Sirius' face starts to turn red. Oh, that blush. There it is.

Effie proceeds to burst out laughing, then claps a hand over her mouth like she's done something unforgivable. Sirius looks betrayed instantly, only more so when Monty goes into a coughing fit, trying to cover his own laughter. Narcissa's lips curl up at the corners, amused.

Sirius glares at him. "I don't find you funny."

"Shall I tell another sex joke, or…?"

"Have you no shame?"

Remus arches an eyebrow, which is all it takes for Sirius' blush to come back in full force and spread. Monty is practically wheezing at this point, and Effie has buried her face in her arms. Narcissa is grinning now, looking very entertained. It's not every day that people get to see Sirius turn as red as a tomato, Remus thinks, which is a shame. It's truly a sight to behold. Remus has missed it so much.

With a disgruntled sound, Sirius bolts to his feet, grumbling that he'll be back soon enough, complaining under his breath as he follows Remus along. He stays one step behind him the whole way, refusing to come too close, arms crossed over his chest defensively, expression set into something closely resembling a pout. It's adorable.

Remus leads Sirius to his room, waiting for him to step in before closing the door. He neatly steps around Sirius, careful not to brush against him, respecting his boundaries.

"What?" Sirius bites out. "Talk."

"Sit," Remus orders as he takes his own spot on the edge of the bed. He gestures beside him, and Sirius stares at it, squinting suspiciously like getting too close would be a trap. They're both stubborn enough to wait each other out, a challenge, but Remus isn't budging. He's more stubborn when the situation calls for it, believe it or not.

Finally, Sirius caves and moves over with a warning glare, plopping down next to Remus with space between them, holding his arms out rather childishly and announcing, in a mocking tone, "I'm sat."

"Good job," Remus praises, as equally mocking as Sirius.

"Fuck—" Sirius stops, thinks about it, then turns red. He drops his arms, looking away. "Look, I'm not…pleased with you at the moment, so maybe it's best if we don't do this now."

"I'm not waiting." Remus takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. He softens his voice. "I'm done waiting, Sirius."

Sirius' face screws up, and he squeezes his eyes shut, then proceeds to blurt out, "We have to break up."

"Mm, no," Remus says.

"No." Sirius blinks open his eyes. He swivels his head, slowly. Stares at Remus. Blinks and blinks. *"No?"*

Remus nods. "Yeah. *No.* We don't have to."

"Well…" Sirius sits on that for a moment, looking a little lost. He opens and closes his mouth, eyebrows pinching together. It takes him a truly adorable length of time to clear his throat and set his shoulders. "Well, we *are.* So."

"Are we?"

"Yes."

"Look me in the eye, then," Remus says. "Look at me when you break up with me."

Sirius peeks at him, then quickly looks away. He's chewing on his lip. "What does eye-contact have to do with a breakup? Is that, like, required? I've never dumped anyone before."

"Yes, I can tell," Remus replies dryly. "You're rather shit at it."

"I am doing my *best,"* Sirius hisses.

Remus sighs, helplessly fond. "Sirius, stop. You're not breaking up with me."

"I am," Sirius counters weakly. "I am, literally as we speak. This is a breakup. You should be crying. Why aren't you crying?"

"You don't *want* to break up with me; you just feel you have to, because you hit me," Remus announces bluntly.

Sirius' whole body locks up immediately. He looks like he wants to bolt, his throat convulsing on a harsh swallow. There is shame in his eyes when he looks at Remus, finally, utterly pitiful. "Remus, I'm—I—"

"You were strapped to the chair," Remus begins to explain, holding his gaze. "The fog filled the whole room, so we couldn't see each other. When I removed your restraints, you slammed your palm into my chest. I inhaled reflexively, and you pushed me into the tray by the chair, then tried to hit me. I dodged, you elbowed me in the chest, tried to hit me again, then shoved me against a wall."

"Oh, fuck," Sirius wheezes, looking horrified. "Remus—"

"I thought maybe you just didn't know it was me and couldn't hear me, but I knew it was you. I knew it was you when I tackled you and slammed you against the window," Remus continues, and Sirius blinks.

"That doesn't count. That's self-defense. I was *attacking* you."

"That's when you hit me."

Sirius practically whimpers. "I'm so sor—"

"And then I shoved you, pinned you there, and heard you breathing," Remus carries on, his voice light. "Very confusing for me, you understand, but I didn't really have much time to think about it, because you whirled me around into the door, then kicked me right through it. I have a bruise in the shape of your boot on my chest."

"Oh, oh shit, Remus," Sirius gasps out, his hands shaking as he reaches for him, only to curl his trembling fingers into fists and pull away. He has tears in his eyes.

"You followed me out," Remus murmurs. "I saw you, and I knew immediately that you weren't really there at the time. You'd slipped away. You looked at me with no recognition, and then you crawled into my lap. Put one hand on the top of my head. One hand under my chin. Got ready to snap my neck."

"No. No, no, no," Sirius chokes out, and he comes up off the bed, a burst of motion. He paces, hyperventilating, hands in his hair, wild-eyed. A mess. A beautiful mess, as always.

Remus exhales. "Listen to me, Sirius. You could have killed me, but you didn't. I could have died, but I didn't. Things could have happened, but *they didn't."*

"I hurt you," Sirius rasps. "That did happen. That—"

"I didn't blame you, I still don't, because it wasn't your *choice.* You didn't choose to hurt me," Remus says softly, standing up and ducking his head to chase Sirius' ashamed gaze, catching it and holding it. "But this? What you're doing now hurts me, and it is a choice. You're actively making that choice, because you can't forgive yourself, and that punishes me, too. Do you hear me? You're *choosing* to hurt me now."

With something bordering on a whine, Sirius shakes his head, chest stuttering on his shaky breathing. "I can't. I can't do it, Remus. I—I can't. You could have died. It doesn't matter if it's out of my control or not. *You could have died.* If you had, if I was at fault for it, do you have any idea what I would have done? I would have gone insane. I would have—I would—I wouldn't survive that. Not losing you. I love you. Oh fuck, I love you so much, and I—I can't hurt you again—I gave you bruises, but not the fun kind, not—"

Remus huffs in frustration. "Sweetheart, I love you, I do, but you're putting a lot more weight on this than me. I'm—I don't want to be insensitive, I really don't, but I genuinely do not give a shit that you hit me. Like, at all. Because, rationally, it wasn't done by your choice; it wasn't done because you want to hurt me; it wasn't done out of violence *you* had any control over. I'm not scared of you. My trust in you hasn't fractured. It doesn't hurt, and the bruise will fade, but I'm not going to stop missing you. Or loving you. So, please let it go. *Please."*

"I need you to care about yourself more," Sirius demands.

"I *do* care about myself. For fuck's sake, I've been *tortured* multiple times," Remus snaps. "Sorry if a little bitch hit from my boyfriend doesn't *quite* compare."

Sirius' mouth drops open.

"It's *my* body," Remus continues, worked up now. *"I* decide what I'll accept and what I won't. A couple of fucking bruises is *nothing,* Sirius. It's a laugh, actually. Take a whip to my back and then we'll talk."

"I—fucking hell," Sirius breathes out. "Remus—"

"Do you want me to hit you in the face?" Remus asks, and Sirius shuts up, giving a violent blink. "Is that what you want? Do we need to, what, settle some sort of score here? Get even? You hit me, I hit you, guilt absolved?"

"What?" Sirius chokes out, eyes bulging.

"If you want," Remus says slowly, holding Sirius' gaze, mouth wrapping around each word like he's tasting every letter, "I will actually slap the shit out of you."

"Remus," Sirius gasps, all dramatic-like, mouth hanging open. His cheeks are flushed. Rosy. All the way down his throat.

"Do you get what I'm saying?" Remus asks, feeling like he's about to rip his own hair out, because they're going in circles and getting nowhere, and it's making him feel like he's about to cry. "It's not a big deal to me, okay? I—it doesn't mean I don't care about myself or my well-being, because I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't grant myself the freedom to beg you now, and I'm begging. I'm *begging,* because what's worse than you hitting me is these last few weeks without you, and I'm *tired* of it. *I* can't do it anymore. I care about myself so much that I'm asking for you, because I need you, alright? I—I need you to be here. I need you to hold me. I need—I—Sirius—"

"Remus," Sirius says, strained, and Remus' vision is blurry, so worked up now that the feeling that he's about to cry has become his reality, the tears building and his body shaking like he's about to rattle apart.

"Look at the fucking world we live in," Remus chokes out, his shoulders heaving. "It's death and blood and pain *everywhere,* so this? What even *is* this, in all of that? Not your fault, or mine, that's for sure. We're in *war,* Sirius. It's war out there, now, and maybe it always has been. So, please, *please,* let me have the freedom of peace here, with you." He steps closer and wants so badly to reach for Sirius, but won't move an inch. He would never force it. "We—we never thought we'd have this, and now we have it. We *have* it, sweetheart. We're not in the Hallow. We're as free as we can get right now, more free than we've ever been, and you said—you told me you'd live for me."

"I did live for you," Sirius gasps out. "I really did. I *do."*

"So let's just—let's *live,* together," Remus says, plaintively, his voice so tight it threatens to snap between his teeth. "I'm not—I don't want to pressure you or push your boundaries or force you into anything you're not ready for. If you don't *want* to touch me, that's one thing, but if you hold yourself back out of guilt and fear, to punish yourself, then I can't accept that. Sirius, you deserve better than that. *We* deserve better than that. Whatever you need, you have it. Forgiveness? It's yours. I forgive you even if you're not at fault."

Sirius swallows harshly and opens his eyes, eyebrows wrinkled in the middle. His hands are flexing at his sides, fingers trembling. "You—you have to let me train you."

"Train—I—what?" Remus blinks, nearly startled right out of his tears. "Train me. You want to train me?"

"Yes," Sirius says firmly, taking a deep breath and setting his shoulders. "Train you to fight me."

"Sirius—"

"No. *No,* Remus, listen to me. I can't—the loss of control is too much, and this is all that I can think of that will help. Because I can't control when I'm myself and when I'm not, but I *can* make sure you're ready for anything that I could ever throw at you. I—I want you to be able to beat me. Not kill me, I know you'd never, but incapacitate me, and *quickly.* I want you to be able to do it half-asleep and blindfolded, when I have a weapon or don't, when I'm not holding back. That way I know you'll be able to stop me from hurting you if—if—"

"Okay," Remus cuts in.

"Okay?" Sirius repeats, his voice small.

Remus takes a deep breath and nods. "Yes, okay. You can train me, if that will make you feel better. If that's what you need, then that's what we'll do. But I won't hurt you, Sirius. If you're going to do this, then you're going to show me how to do it without causing damage."

"I—yes, alright," Sirius mumbles. "We'll—we can ask Effie for help. She's really good."

"This is just a precaution, you know," Remus whispers. "It only happened once. Every other time you were triggered, you weren't violent. It was in the aftermath of *torture,* Sirius. I really don't think it's going to happen again."

Sirius shrugs, stubborn as ever. "I don't care. I need you to be prepared. That's what I need, because I need you to be okay, and I need to never fucking hurt you again."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Maybe not, but it was my hands."

Remus sighs and tips his head back, blinking hard to fight the tears still stinging in his eyes. "Is this—so, what? We can't move past this? We can't even work on it? Or try? This is it?"

There's a long beat of silence, and then Sirius sounds close to tears when he whimpers, "Well, don't—don't say that. Now it sounds like *you're* breaking up with *me."*

"Doesn't feel good, does it?" Remus croaks, dropping his head forward, his heart clenching violently when he sees how splotchy Sirius has gotten, eyes wide and wet. He looks so upset.

"I need to know, Sirius. I need to know if—if—"

"Okay, no, I'm—I'm sorry. I take it back," Sirius decides, and he shuffles forward carefully, tentatively. He doesn't reach out and touch Remus, but he seems to just—fall into him. Lean on him. He hooks his chin over Remus' shoulder and releases a shuddering breath when Remus' arms slip around him all the way, holding him, and yes. Yes, this is it. This is all Remus wants. This right here. Something. "We don't have to break up. I was being stupid. We'll just—we can figure it out."

"Thank you," Remus exhales all at once, sagging against him.

"Oh, oh, you—" Sirius makes a sound like a whine, lips brushing Remus' jaw, and then he's peppering kisses all down the side of Remus' neck. Careful and sweet, but greedy. He chokes a little, groaning, and then—finally—like a flood, Sirius touches him. His hands press against Remus' shoulders, so tender, so adoring. "Remus. *Remus."*

Remus doesn't even really get to respond before Sirius cups his jaw and tilts his face with urgency, his mouth finding its way to the bruise his fist left behind. Remus' eyes flutter shut, lips parting around a sigh, and Sirius kisses him there so gently like he can wipe the violence away. A world of violence they live in, of course there's some spillage over into them, in who they are themselves and who they are together, but this means so much more. It means something. It means everything.

Sirius is frantic, then, but meticulous. He eases Remus back to the bed and makes him take off his shirt so he can kiss the bruise from his boot, too. Every inch, even where it's ugly, he kisses and kisses and kisses. It doesn't hurt, but it makes Remus ache, because he knows Sirius needs to do it. Needs to face what he did when he didn't even really do it at all, and apologize when he's not to blame, because he's Sirius, and that's what he does. And so Remus lets him. Remus lays there and lets Sirius do this for him, and for himself.

Another thing about Sirius is that he's thorough. He doesn't do anything halfway. So, naturally, he makes Remus turn over to kiss all the scars on his back, too, despite not being responsible for them. It doesn't matter. He's sorry about them as well, and Remus knows it. Because he cares so, so much; he cares more than anyone Remus has ever known.

And maybe Remus is selfish and perhaps enjoying this far too much, because when Sirius asks if he has any new scars, he kicks out of his trousers and shows Sirius where they cut the tracker out of his thigh. Sirius kisses the jagged line with reverence, like he can capture all the pain Remus has ever felt with the surface of his lips and swallow it down himself, keep it all himself so Remus doesn't have to.

Last—oh, yes, Sirius saves the scar on his face for last. He crawls up and cradles Remus' head, holding him still. Kisses every part of that scar, from where it cuts through his eyebrow to where it meets his lip. Sirius doesn't kiss his mouth, but once he's done, he sags like all of his strings have been cut and rests his forehead against Remus'. They breathe.

"You have to let me do that whenever I want, whenever we're alone together, I mean," Sirius whispers. "Can you do that?"

"I don't know. It's such a hardship," Remus jokes. His voice comes out croaky. He doesn't know why, but he just cried. Somewhere in all of that, he cried, and felt—he felt so—he can't even describe what he felt. Love, maybe. Wholly and completely loved. Cherished. Adored.

Sirius rocks their foreheads together. Lets their noses bump. Exhales sharply. "Always fucking with me, aren't you?"

"I'll do it until we're old and grey," Remus murmurs.

"If we get there," Sirius whispers.

Remus strokes his hair. "We'll get there."

Chapter End Notes

drugged james my beloved <3 he's so funny lmao. i want to put him in my pocket!!! him just being so enamored by regulus is so... oh, he's lovely.

also, remus and james!!! there was a reason i didn't mention remus going back for james in the last chapter, because it was going to be addressed again in this chapter! their friendship means so much to me, yall have no idea. and like, remus' anger had been festering, and it was less anger at james and more anger about his lack of freedom in the whole endeavor, which is honestly fair.

then jegulus... AHHHH. so much happens with them. they're so grossly in love, it makes me wanna die. i think, like, this is where it really shines through how much growth regulus has had. like, thinking of where he started out and how he is now, he has come soooo far. im ridiculously proud of him.

also, james getting his glasses back!!! because the thing is, eyesight aside, he DOES need them. like, it's implemented in the story that his glasses help him with his issues with time and such, and they're as necessary as they've always been—like molly said, what's important will always remain so if chosen to let it. i think there's something really special about that, like james reclaiming his bodily autonomy, and still holding onto the fact that there are things about him that CAN'T be changed. it's this really empowering thing of like, james has always needed his glasses, and he still does. no one can take that from him, even though they tried.

also just how tender regulus is with james—this continues to be a theme. and like, if you recall, after what happened with frank, james had the thought that regulus would tell him that he was still good and because bad things happen doesn't mean he's bad, and he KNEW regulus would tell him that, and then regulus did. just like regulus knew the boggart wasn't really james, because james would never say those things, and then james reiterates that now. like, they KNOW each other. they understand each other. that's so special :(

regulus has turned into a whole sap. james is back, and he's now in Coddling Mode. he's gonna coddle this man so much, just wait. he's so in love, i almost pity him, but james is in the same boat lmaooo.

and then we've got remus again!!! i think his viewpoint on murder and the things he's done are so interesting, because like, it's so wildly different to everyone else. he's very pragmatic about it. and like, he's always been aware that it's the worst thing he's done, but he's never been shy about not having any remorse about it. and there is a point in the story where that kind of gets unlocked for him, and you see why its almost out of reach. it's explained more later.

also, remus is just a man on a mission this chapter lmaooo. he MEANT he and sirius were figuring their shit out, and honestly, can't blame him. we love a man who knows what he wants 😌

it was very important for remus to tell sirius everything that happened, because trust is such a big thing between them, for BOTH of them, and they've always been very mindful of each other's boundaries and such. like, they're still insane, but they're so incredibly healthy about it that it makes me kinda scratch my head and squint at them, like how are you DOING THAT? i love them so much.

also, that whole thing of like, remus really getting worked up and diving into the nuance of sirius harming him and how he views it—you have to keep in mind the world they live in, ya know? like, remus KNOWS violence, he knows it intimately, and he is very big on like, his freedom and his choices etc etc, so his frustration with the whole situation genuinely wasn't a lack of care for himself at all.

and sirius struggling with the lack of control and needing to regain control through training remus was a big thing, too. like, they will figure things out, and it'll take time, and they'll be exploring like, forgiveness and intimacy issues etc, so there's more to come on that. it takes time, but they are madly in love with each other, so that isn't gonna change <3

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-high james telling a flower joke
-agbt reference to regulus' laughter sounding like the bell in his knitted hat 😭
-molly my beloved <3
-james telling remus he loves him :(
-jegulus being sickeningly in love
-remus and lily fighting (they'll be alright)
-remus making sirius blush and everyone laughing at him lmaooo
-sirius trying to break up with remus and remus just being like No
-remus offering to slap sirius (this is talked about later), but remus is so insane
-sirius kissing all of remus' scars 😭

Day-by-day

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past murder
-references to past death
-references to past child death (its a little bit heavier in this chapter than others, like we actually revisit it briefly, and it's not as vague as the other times)
-references to past torture
-references to past violence
-references to past gun violence
-references to past dissociative amnesia
-references to past injuries/wounds
-references to biological warfare
-depictions of depression
-depictions of ptsd (this is very heavy and involves violent nightmares as well as vague, brief mentions of hallucinations)
-brief, vague implied panic attack (not too heavy, but you can tell that it's happening)
-heavy depictions of grief
-mentions of blood
-heavy descriptions of violent/murderous nightmares involving killing loved ones (sirius and regulus)
-brief mentions/depictions of past burns/burning

this chapter is heavier than the one previous, and a lot heavier than the one that follows, and it's the one i like to refer to in my head as "The Struggle Chapter" because everyone is struggling. we get some light, happy moments, sure, but it's definitely a rough one. please read the warnings and take care of yourselves!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aberforth watches James, Sirius, and Regulus shuffle into the room, each of them looking very, very worn out. Visibly tired. The picture of exhaustion. Albus can't even let them rest?

It makes Aberforth itchy. These are his people. These three here are his; district six, born and raised, and he saw it all. He has seen them when they were no bigger than knee-high, running around and giggling with each other, so innocent then, having no idea that they'd end up here.

Aberforth wants to snap at Albus to leave them alone, at least for a damn week or two. How can Albus look at them and not see himself? How can he look at them and only see what they can give? Haven't they given enough?

"Take your seats," Albus murmurs, watching them do just that over the top of his glasses. That boy—Regulus—has his jaw clenched; he looks tense, ready to spring, gaze locked on Albus like he's more than willing to come across the table and kill him if he says or does something wrong to the other boys next to him. "I know you're all very tired, so I'll keep this short. I don't intend to hold any of you from well-deserved rest."

Aberforth grunts and squints at him suspiciously, but Albus seems entirely sincere. That's the thing about him, though.

He always does.

"James, I must speak with you first," Albus starts, and James blinks, seeming to rejoin earth. He looks mildly startled to be here, reaching up to touch his glasses fleetingly. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Albus Dumbledore, and I'm the one who created the Order of the Phoenix."

James blinks at him, then says, "Er, I know. Dorcas told me."

"I see." Albus gazes at him for a moment, then leans forward to thread his hands together on the table. Something about the action makes Sirius narrow his eyes. "I have to ask, when you were with Riddle, what information did you give him?"

"Ah," James chokes out, freezing in place, tension blooming in his frame immediately. "I—I didn't—"

"Fuck you," Sirius spits out. "You're *accusing* him of—"

"Leave him alone. You *know* he was coerced," Regulus hisses.

Albus sighs and lifts a calm hand. "That was not an accusation. James, I assure you that you're in no trouble, and it's not your fault. I'm merely asking so I can be prepared."

"I—" James looks nauseous. "I—I swear I didn't really give him anything. I, um. I gave him as little as possible, just to scrape by. That's why he started making me do broadcasts, but he probably would have no matter what I gave him."

"Yes, I imagine so. He fully intended to never release you from his manipulations; it was a cycle you were trapped in, and not one you could break free from. You did your best," Albus says, and James swallows, some of the tension bleeding out of him. Sirius settles down as well, minutely. Regulus doesn't at all. "I don't blame you for whatever you gave him in the endeavor to save Sirius. I just need to know what it was."

"Um," James mumbles, wincing.

"It's alright, James," Albus assures him. "I'm assuming that Ms. Meadowes explained everything about the Order?"

"Yes, sir," James admits cautiously.

"Including that there are stations we use in each district?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you tell Riddle that?" Albus asks.

James coughs. "No, sir."

"Did Ms. Meadowes tell you an estimate of our numbers?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did you inform Riddle of that?"

"No, sir."

"Did Ms. Meadowes tell you that we're aware of Riddle's use of biological warfare and intend to create immunity here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you tell Riddle that?"

"No, sir."

"He's not a fucking idiot," Regulus snaps. "Maybe he's not the best liar, but he knows how to talk around things, and talk himself out of things. Has it crossed your mind to think that maybe he gave Riddle the *bare minimum?"*

"Yeah," Sirius agrees firmly, "James wouldn't just dump all the secrets, especially if it put Reggie in danger. No one is better at keeping secrets than him, honestly."

James gives a small, sheepish smile. "That's a bit true. Can't lie to save my life, but I can lie to save theirs, and I can always keep a secret. I mean, I went ten years without telling my own best friend I was in love with his brother. Frankly, I'm a pro."

Albus stares at James and slowly tips his head forward to peer at him over his glasses. "So… what *did* you give Riddle?"

"Ah," James says awkwardly. He reaches up and scratches at the side of his neck. "Well, er—you, sir."

"Pardon?" Albus asks, blinking.

"I gave him you," James informs him, face scrunching in a clear apology. "I told him you were still alive, and that you run the Order of the Phoenix, and that you've been planning to wage war against him for over fifty years now."

Aberforth waits for the laughter that should be crawling up his throat. He waits to find this funny, because isn't that so funny? Albus, after years of hiding, is in danger. Isn't that hilarious? Where's the laughter? Why isn't Aberforth laughing?

And it's not as if Albus is truly in danger, untouchable in the Phoenix as he is. Someday he may leave it, yes, but likely not until the war is won. Riddle may wish to target him, but he'll be safe. And yet, despite knowing this, Aberforth feels...

Aberforth feels slightly ill. It's supposed to be funny; it's ironic and *deserved,* perfect karma for Riddle to be aware of Albus' place in all of this, and likely want to hurt him. He'll likely take the very first chance he can get to hurt Albus, in some way or another, and Aberforth isn't laughing. He's not even breathing.

"Well," Albus says lightly, eyes sparkling, "I have to thank you for judging the situation so well and giving the least damaging information you could. You handled that very well, and I can only commend you for it. I'll let all of you go now; I believe you all know how steeped into this war you are, and how your efforts can contribute to ending it faster and more safely, so I will need your help in the future—all of you. For now, though, you all deserve plenty of rest. Thank you."

They all stand, visibly happy to be dismissed, pushing in their chairs and heading swiftly for the door, only for James to gasp and whirl around as he announces, "Oh, I forgot!"

"Something else?" Albus asks.

"Right, yeah, I also gave Riddle one other thing." James winces again and looks right at Aberforth. "Dorcas mentioned you were still alive, so when Riddle—when he asked if my parents made it out of district six, instead of them, I told him you managed to make it out and back to your brother. Er, sorry, Mayor Aberforth. I…gave him you, too."

All the light in Albus' eyes is immediately extinguished, and when he watches it go out, Aberforth finally laughs.

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James is very tired. It's a strange sort of tired. A world-weary tired that he's never experienced before, in which people all around are draining him, sapping him of energy.

Not that long ago—in the grand scheme of things—James felt rejuvenated by people. Like they were batteries that could keep him running forever, their laughter when he told a joke pushing him to tell another, their happiness when he did something to please them making him want to please them more. Talking—the voice of life, chatter and communication, a form of caring about people, engaging with them and listening to them. Just being around people was enough to keep him going; oh, he could go for ages and ages, because his smiles came easier and his mind was a lot lighter.

Now… Well, now it takes effort. A lot of effort. Because it's not laughter and chatter and being pleased. It's grief and fear. It's concern for him, the state of the world, and what's coming. Now is not the time for laughter, nor the time for meaningless talks, and no one is fully pleased anymore, not really.

His mind is certainly a lot darker than it's ever been. He won't tell anyone—can't tell anyone—but he remembers how it felt. He remembers the explosion. He remembers the smell of his own burning flesh, and how—oh, how it felt—it *felt* like the worst pain to exist. James has always hated pain and never truly knew it before the arena, before that bear trap, but it was a trap of pain he would never be free from. Because, from that moment on, the pain he would

be forced to experience would only increase until it reached this point, the peak, blazing like the caricature of the sun he is. Oh, the irony.

It still hurts, in his memory. It was searing, scorching, scalding; any word you can think of, it was that. Unfathomable and mind-consuming—it was that, too, because he couldn't think around it, or past it. That's how he knows it was the worst thing he's ever felt, because in the midst of all that agony, he couldn't even drag himself from the ashes of his own thoughts to think about anyone he loved in what he believed was his last moments. He thought he was dying, and all he could think about was how much it hurt.

James doesn't remember blacking out, but he's thankful he did. It was a kindness, he thinks, because he only felt the pain for a few minutes. Just—at the time—it was so agonizing that you could have fit years in those minutes.

And no, James doesn't want to talk about it. He's tired of talking about pain. It's there now in his everyday life. He never knew pain before the arena, and he has carried it with him every moment since. A cane to use for a leg that hurts, a grief that clings to him for everyone lost, so many people lost, now. Vanity, Hodge, Peter, Irene, Mathias, Evan, Frank, Augusta, that servant who got shot he'll never know the name of, all because he dared to touch them, dared to try to talk to them. People from his home district, and people from other districts, and people, and people, and people—and James is drained, now, by people. Drained, now, by pain.

He's so very tired.

Also, he's still healing. His body is sore and raw, and he aches all over, but the burns are gone. It just hurts to move if he does it too fast, and so he's a bit slow at the moment. They got his old cane back to him, the one he used to trap Remus and the others in the back of the van, and it's comforting to have it again. Sirius made him this cane. A lot like his glasses, he's relieved to have it back. It helps settle him, somehow.

There were a lot of people who wanted to see him. He has many friends from home, to start with. Mary and Bingley, for example, but even just various kids from the classes he would sit in on as Mary's assistant, as well as various people from the market. All these people, he's brightened their lives, and they want to talk to him, make sure he's okay, promise him that he has their support and loyalty. So, he smiles and nods and talks, and he can't recall one moment of any interaction he has by the time it's over. He feels like he's on autopilot.

For now, James really just wants to be left alone.

This becomes blatantly obvious when Effie tenderly strokes over his hair and asks if he's doing okay, only for him to nearly burst into tears, because no, not really. So, he kisses his mum on the cheek, winces through a stubborn hug to his dad, then grabs Regulus' hand and asks him to take him to bed.

Regulus does, in fact, take James to bed. Takes him to his room in this metal tin can beneath the dirt. A room with only the bare necessities—a bed, a dresser, a nightstand, a lamp, and that is all. There's no notebooks for sad boy poetry, no vase for flowers, no signs of Regulus anywhere here. But Regulus is here, in the room, and that's enough. More than, honestly.

Regulus not only takes James to bed, he *fusses* over James in bed. Fluffs his pillow with a frown. Leaves and comes back with another pillow he claims he didn't steal, but James looks in his eyes and knows he's lying. Fluffs both of James' pillows and frowns harder. Smooths out his blanket like the wrinkles are the height of discomfort. Fluffs the pillows *again,* frowning so very beautifully.

James watches him do all of this, and lets him, and loves him. It amuses him. Warms him. He lets it go on for probably a bit too long, just basking in it, how comforting it is. And then, finally, he grabs Regulus' wrist and coaxes him into bed.

Regulus doesn't drain him.

Regulus makes him feel safe.

Regulus curls into him so very gingerly and looks at him. Cards his fingers through James' hair. Gazes at him like he's all the wonders of the world. Touches the frames of James' glasses gently, like it even matters if they're broken, as if James actually depends on them. Stares with stars in his eyes, fixated on James like he's the centerpoint of the universe.

It's almost too much, seeing him like this, and James doesn't dare look away. Regulus is so visibly in love with him that it steals his breath. James used to dream of this. All that it's taken to get here, all that pain, and to have this—it's worth it.

"Tired?" Regulus murmurs.

"Yeah," James admits.

"Are you ready to sleep?"

"Not that kind of tired."

Regulus hums, instantly getting it. "Well, that's alright. We can hole up in here for a few days, and just rest. You're meant to be recuperating anyway. No one will bother you."

"No?" James asks, lips twitching. "Why's that?"

"I won't let them," Regulus says simply, like it's a fact, like it's law because he has made it so.

"What are you going to do? Beat them all off with a stick?"

"If I have to. You'll let me borrow your cane, won't you?"

James snorts. "I'm not encouraging you to beat the shit out of people on my behalf, Reg. You're taking your role as protective fiancé very seriously, which is cute, but—"

"James?" Regulus asks, when James has come to a screeching halt, just staring at him, wide-eyed.

"We're engaged," James states, feeling his whole mood do an instant pivot. "You're my fiancé."

"Yes," Regulus confirms, lips curling up.

James holds his breath, dangerously close to screaming, but he doesn't. He just grins and feels *so* immeasurably good about this that he's almost baffled by it, because he hasn't felt this good since—since—oh, he can't remember the last time he felt this good. Maybe…the night of the Quarterly Memorial, before the announcement. It's been months.

"Sex really isn't on the table right now, but we are going to have so much sex about this later," James announces.

"Oh, are we?" Regulus asks, huffing out a laugh, a smile winding its way on his face. His gaze is warm, playful, soft with love. Oh, he's so sickeningly in love, just look at him. James wants to swallow him whole. "Good to know."

"You're my *fiancé.* We're going to get married," James says, and it's here that it finally, fully sinks in until he's giddy with it, feeling it hit him all at once, and all he can do is spend a ridiculous amount of time repeating this declaration over and over in different tones of victory and excitement, because holy *shit,* Regulus Black is his fiancé and they're going to get married and his fifteen year old self is losing his fucking mind right now.

It is, quite literally, his longest dream come true. *Years.* Over a fucking *decade.* He's spent so long loving Regulus, wanting these things and being so sure he'd never get them, and it's wild and inexplicable how they've ended up here. There's a war on, and James wants to plan his wedding.

Regulus indulges him, laughing at how happy he is, teasing him a little as if James can't see how fucking happy *he* is clear as day. He's all lit up with it, glowing, absolutely ethereal in his joy. And it doesn't make sense, because James was burning alive yesterday, and Regulus thought he was dead yesterday, and they both know so much pain—but look, just look at what love can do, look at what hope paying off feels like. And yes, yes, things will be rough, and they're not okay, but for this one moment, that doesn't matter. It's just this. Just them.

James puts his hands all over Regulus, touching him and losing himself to the curiosity of getting to do such a thing when they're both happy like this. It's so rare, so special, and this moment is satin sunshine he can run his fingers over. And he does. He brushes Regulus' hair out of his face, cups his jaw, buries his nose into the crook of Regulus' neck and inhales sharp enough to make Regulus squirm and laugh. He wrestles with him, gently, playfully. They grapple at each other, fingers spider-crawling all over the body they know as well as their own, laughing breathlessly and letting sweet-nothings tumble from their mouth until someone —and who knows who?—gets the brilliant idea to muffle everything with a kiss.

And there. Yes, right there. The world swirls away as James' eyes flutter shut, hands sliding around Regulus, up his back as Regulus winds his arms around him and kisses him until they're both breathless for a new reason. Then kisses him some more. Kisses and kisses him. Insatiable, but not like he's trying to quench an unquenchable hunger, but simply as if he's savoring every single second of the taste.

They do that until they don't have to keep doing that, and then do that some more, just because. They kiss lazily, just because. They breathe the same air, just because. They lay there pressed together, just because. They're in love, just because.

Later, later, much later, James is so relaxed that he's sincerely sleepy now. Not quite as tired the way he was before, but genuinely worn out enough to cover up, block out the world, cuddle up to his fiancé, and fall into oblivion. He can't think of anything he would like to do more.

Regulus makes him get up, because he's mean.

"Why?" James—well, he whines. This is whining, and he knows it. He pouts, too, and doesn't even give a shit.

"Oh, don't start. It's for *your* benefit," Regulus tells him, rolling his eyes as he starts stripping the bed, gathering up the pillows and blankets. "Here, help me with the mattress."

"What are we doing? Why are we moving the bed?" James asks miserably. He would like to crawl back into the bed, not lift it up and carry it away, as Regulus clearly intends to do.

"We're going to Sirius and Remus' room," Regulus announces casually. "You'll sleep better with Sirius close by."

James stares at him. *"I'll* sleep better with Sirius close by."

"You want to be near him."

"Do I?"

"Yes," Regulus states with utmost certainty.

"Love," James says gently, "I think you're projecting."

Regulus frowns. "Am not. So, what, you *don't* want to be close to Sirius?" James doesn't even get to reply before Regulus waves him off. "Yes, you do. Shut up."

Helplessly, James watches Regulus putter around, feeling a tender flare beneath his ribs, because yes, James would like to be near Sirius, of course he would. But…it wasn't James who even considered it. No, that's all Regulus, who has severe abandonment issues, and it's almost heartbreaking how desperately he wants to be around Sirius as much as possible, but won't confess it. Would sooner project onto James than accept it himself.

"You know," James starts, keeping his voice light, "there's nothing wrong with wanting to have a sleepover with your brother, Regulus."

"Shut up," Regulus hisses, appalled. "Don't *point it out."*

James' face softens. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. I think we'll all be better off together right now."

"I—I'm just—" Regulus stops, swallowing harshly as he looks down. His fingers tremble on the edge of the mattress.

"Reg," James says gently.

Slowly, Regulus looks up to meet his eyes, his voice so terribly small when he whispers, "I only just got him back."

"I know," James murmurs.

"And you. And even Remus. And I just—" Regulus exhales sharply and looks away. "I just want to be sure, okay? If—if I need to check that you're all here, it's easier to do if we're all together, and I have to check right now. I have to make sure, because it's—it's the only thing that makes me feel—"

"Safe?" James asks quietly.

"Yeah," Regulus croaks. "Safe."

James moves over with his cane to take the pillows and folded blanket, somehow managing to hold it under his free arm and *still* lean in to kiss Regulus' forehead. James lingers there for a bit, and Regulus closes his eyes, pressing into it. When James pulls back, he nods. "Okay, love, we'll go."

And so, they do. And Remus answers the door. And Remus lets them in. And Sirius releases a reflexive exhale of relief when they show up. And Regulus says James wanted a sleepover. And James nods along to this. And no one laughs for fear of breaking the miracle of this moment, all being together again, not just people—but brothers and friends and lovers and love and safety. And, regardless of age, they have their sleepover with James and Regulus on the mattress on the floor and Sirius and Remus in their bed, Regulus and Sirius on the edges of their respective beds closest to each other, all of them breathing in the dark, for a moment untouched by war.

And, for the first time in a while, they're safe.

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A lot happens in the aftermath of James and Sirius getting back. Even more happens in the aftermath of their little sleepover where four men piled into a room and dared to believe that they'd get at least one night of rest.

All throughout that night, tremors ran through Sirius' body; he tossed and turned and repeatedly swapped between plastering himself against Remus and putting as much space between them as the bed would allow. In the end, halfway through the night, Sirius literally just got out of bed and slept on the floor down by James and Regulus, which wasn't exactly how Remus imagined their first night sleeping together would go. Yet, all he did was hang his hand over the side of the bed in offering, and at some point, Sirius must have taken it, because when Remus woke up, it was to their fingers tangled together.

None of them had gotten much sleep that night, honestly. James was achy and sore, so he had to get up and down to walk around with his cane quite a lot. Regulus would randomly sit up and peer through the dark because he was checking that everyone was there. Remus had too much on his mind to sleep easy. And Sirius—well, Sirius ended up on the floor. They all jerked awake from paranoia or nightmares or both at least once, though of course it wasn't just once.

It feels unfair that things are this hard. It was foolish to entertain the belief that they'd all get back together and everything would be okay, just like that, just that simply. But, the truth is, they all have shit to work through. Regulus never let himself deal with what happened in his second arena, and neither did Sirius. James was trapped in Riddle's castle for weeks, used like his puppet, recovering from a car accident; he underwent an operation on his eyes he never approved of; he had to deal with grief for Frank alone and didn't get to fully deal with it very much at all. Sirius was in Azkaban, and not only that, but he was tortured. Remus and Regulus have been here, stuck, grieving and scared and handling absolutely none of it healthily. Between the four of them alone, they have enough trauma to weigh so heavily that it could snap gravity in half, so how they all manage to stay standing is a mystery.

But they all do. They stay standing.

In any case, in the days following, between everyone, all the separate little puzzle pieces of information finally manage to click together. It would be nice to say that it happens simply, but there's nothing cohesive about it until things travel around by word-of-mouth *(did you hear Tom Riddle is a vampire, and Sirius Black drank his blood, so now he's a vampire who can't be killed?)* and reaches Pandora, who essentially busts in with busy hands and demands for everyone to set the record straight.

There's a lot to cover for a lot of people. Stories to tell and theories to give. Time to rewind, sifting back through all that has happened when all that has happened is so fucking shitty that no one wants to revisit it at all. But they have to, they must, because being in the dark in dark times just puts you in more danger. So, the exchange of information begins.

It starts where all paths diverge. That very first mission to get those within the arena out, traced back to Dorcas, with her main motivation being Marlene. Sirius has a field day with this one, so stuck on the surrealism of his stylist actually being involved in the rebellion, the one who single-handedly set the course for everyone ending up right here. He asks so many questions that no one has the answers to, so then he just goes to *get* Marlene and Dorcas, who have even *more* information to exchange, as well as all the answers to Sirius' questions.

It comes down to Regulus to explain what happened on the heli-carrier when rescued from the arena, except he awkwardly admits that he was really…ah, out of it, and so Dorcas goes to get Lily, who brings along Mary, and they also have answers and information that offers many a sense of enlightenment.

Each of them have their own stories to recount, and so they do. Of course there are things they *don't* talk about also.

Dorcas doesn't breathe a word about the fact that Albus Dumbledore is responsible for the Quarterly Memorial rule this year, and that Minerva followed the order to give Riddle the idea. Sirius definitely doesn't say very much about his torture (and he wouldn't, even if he could remember it), but he's more than happy to make a show of complaining about Azkaban with all the dramatics he can muster. James does not say very much about how Frank died, nor does he say a word about the explosion he went through. Lily doesn't go into detail about Marlene dying (briefly), only speaking in stiff, clinical terms when mentioning it.

But, for every one thing they don't talk about, there's three that they do. Swapping information, asking questions and answering them, going back and forth until all of it stitches together and aligns so they're all caught up. Pandora sits back and takes notes, because of course she does.

And so, they reach the present with all the facts and all the tiny separate pieces put together, and with that, the current state of the world comes into sharp focus.

Each of them are separate components that had to come together for all the puzzle pieces to fall in place, and now it all starts to make sense. How they ended up here, and what's going to happen next, each of them so deeply involved in this that they know there's no way out.

Some of them want out.

Some of them don't.

But, at the end of the day, what they want doesn't matter. War doesn't care about wants, and here they all are, in the midst of it. And so, all they can do is prepare.

They do that, too.

They sit down and have a long, long discussion about Albus Dumbledore. His history. His hand in all of this. His plans, or what they know of them, and how they're a part of them.

They sit down and have a long, long discussion about Tom Riddle that uncomfortably resembles the discussion about Albus Dumbledore. His fascination with fear. His willingness to wipe out districts. His determination to win this war, no matter the cost, and how he wants them all dead.

So, what's left? What's next? The war, yes, but how will that go? They stitch the threads of that picture together, too, and look at it. All of them there, just staring.

First, weakening Riddle's reach. Everything James said under Riddle's orders, he's going to have to un-say to the entire world. He's going to have to step up, regardless of how tired he is, and get on camera yet again just to tell the world the truth. Not only him, but Sirius. Oh, yes, Sirius has so much sway over the Hallows, beloved as he is, the Hallow heartthrob he is. Put him on camera, let him tell his story; what Riddle did to him, how Riddle used him; let him ask those who love him, who idolize him, to fight for him. Manipulation, or justice? To them, he is their trophy, their object. Artificial intelligence gaining sentience and declaring war.

It'll be a call to arms. Not just the Hallows, but the districts, too. Dumbledore's mouthpieces now, his pawns, these three that have been so naturally good at invoking rebellion long before they even realized that could be used as a weapon. It's them that defiance orbits around, all the way from the start, the turning point in this war when Sirius manipulated Slughorn, Regulus threw himself into a crimson river, and James tipped up a vial of Horcrux Hornet venom.

They didn't know it at the time, didn't know it when they made the choices they made, but there was no going back after that. They did what they did, and it ended with them right here, in the thick of it. And, if they had the gift of foresight, would they have done any differently? Could they have? Maybe this is the only place they had to go. Maybe, as terrifying as it is, they're exactly where they're meant to be.

The next thing on the list, immunity. The timeline here is uncharted territory. It depends on Poppy and Asher, mostly. What they can figure out from Remus' blood, because he can't give the whole world all the blood in his body. Dumbledore will have enough blood to build a fledgling army, but not one big enough to win the war. He needs all of his numbers, as well as the districts he takes, to be able to get to Riddle.

That's the third thing, taking the districts. Some will be easy, they believe, but not all of them. That doesn't matter, though, when taking the districts will be vital to win the war. If Dumbledore can take the districts, it will essentially ensure Riddle's loss. What is a leader with all those they command taken or turned against them? Defeated, that's what.

And then, finally, the breach to the Hallow. If—oh, if they can make it to the Hallow, break through the army of Aurors there, and reach the castle Riddle resides in—if they can do that, then it's done. If they can do that, the war is won.

That's a whole lot of ifs.

That's a whole lot of unknowns.

That's a whole lot of chaos, fighting, and death.

Yeah, but what else is new? James said it once, that despite alterations, some things can't be changed, or taken away. That seems to apply to the world, too. Look at where they started. Look at where they are. It's all the same, isn't it?

Just more of the fucking same.

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There's a lot going on—a lot, so much, too much—and James is doing his best to adjust. He's trying very, very hard. It's just very, very hard to try.

But he does it anyway, because he's James.

It's days later, days after arriving, that James' world extends past the small circle of people who never drain him. He has mostly blocked everyone else out, lost in the presence and comfort of his parents, Sirius, Remus, Pandora, and Regulus.

Pandora—who is palpably ecstatic about them all being together again—has been dumping information in their laps at, frankly, an alarming rate. She's the only one, from what James can tell, that has crossed all the bridges between what seems to be clear lines between various groups of people. It appears that a lot of people cluster up and stick to what they know, what they're used to, which is a very human thing. In a way, Pandora is otherworldly in her determination to push back against that and branch out.

So, in short, Pandora is friends with practically everyone, and this means she knows more than anyone else about everyone else, all while most know next to nothing about her.

Pandora, in the midst of all her chatter, while taking them all on a tour to help acclimate them to the Phoenix, points out rooms of people she knows. And she knows Dorcas, who now shares a room with Marlene. And she knows Rodolphus, who originally shared a room with his little brother, except now Rabastan shares a room with Asher. She knows Majesty, who is practically never in their room and very hard to find when not at meals. She knows Mary, who shares with Bingley, while Lily, who is right next door, spends a lot of time in their room instead of her own. She knows Huey, who has his own room; and Minerva, who shares with Poppy; and Kingsley, who shares with Sybill; and Amos, who is alone; and Barty, who is alone; and Michelle, and Kirk, and Xanmir, and Julie, and all these freed servants who have their own rooms; and Emmeline in her own room, even if she spends a lot of time in Alice's.

Alice's room, because Alice has a room, because Alice is here.

Alice is here .

Alice.

James' heart practically goes splat right at his feet when Pandora gestures down the hall to Alice's room, and he comes to a halt, staring at the closed door. He looks at that door and thinks about the one Frank opened. Peeked around. Stepped out of, only to get shot. So sudden. So quick.

He thinks about Alice's boggart. He thinks about Alice holding Augusta in their arms. *You can let go now. I've got him.*

"James?" Regulus murmurs, tugging on his hand, looking back at him with a small frown, concern in his eyes.

"I—I have to—" James' mouth is so dry. He swallows thickly and exhales. "I need to speak with Alice. Um. Just—just give me a few minutes. I'll—I can catch up."

They all get it, instantly. They all know. It's not a secret that James was there when Frank died. Dorcas was the one tasked with telling Alice—and Emmeline—that Frank was dead, but she didn't give any details. Alice doesn't know the whole story, because they don't know Rodolphus was there, or that James was there, or that James was at fault.

He has to tell Alice. They deserve to know, or maybe it will just weigh on him until he confesses. So, he pulls away and starts towards the door alone, thankful that he has his cane to lean against on the way. And then Sirius is there, beside him. James looks at him. Sirius doesn't waver under his gaze.

"He was my friend, James," Sirius says softly.

"I know," James croaks, and they walk to the door together.

Alice isn't the one who answers the door; Emmeline is. She looks mildly surprised to see them there, as they have been mostly staying to themselves, in their own circle, doing their best to recuperate and heal from all that's happened.

Nonetheless, Emmeline is relieved to see them, Sirius especially, and she pulls him into a hug before ushering them inside. Alice is sitting on their bed, and they look…

If grief was a person, it would be Alice. James' heart clenches just looking at them. How much have they lost? Their parents in a riot that started on the victory tour; James was there that day, heard the gunshots and saw the bodies drop; any of them could have been Alice's parents. Augusta in the games, not even their mother, but their best friend's mother, who they stayed beside the entire time, who they worked so hard to keep alive, who took a dagger to the chest for them while their best friend, Augusta's child, had to watch. And then—oh, and then Frank, their best friend, who died trying to make it back to them, who died without them knowing it, who died without ever getting to see them again, who died before he could ever tell them they weren't at fault for Augusta, who loved them with every breath in his body, all the way up until his last.

And still, they manage a tiny smile as they stand up, as visibly tired as they are. "Sirius, it's good to see you here, and James, I'm glad you're doing well. We heard—well, we all heard

about what happened. Fucking awful, all of it."

James can barely look Alice in the eye.

"We're relieved you're safe here, too," Sirius murmurs, reaching out to tug them into a hug. They embrace for a long time, like they can find Frank there in between them, and then Alice releases a shuddering breath when they pull away, like it hurts that they can't find Frank anywhere. Sirius gives them a sad smile. "How have you been?"

"I'm—ah, well, it hasn't been great," Alice admits with a hoarse laugh bordering on brittle and bitter.

"Alice," Sirius mumbles, "I'm—I'm so sorry about Frank, and I heard about Augusta. Fucking awful sums it up, yeah."

"Riddle used him, you know. His death," Alice says, their jaw clenching. "He—he—"

"Alice," Emmeline cuts in cautiously.

Alice balls their fists up, exhaling harshly. "He made a mockery out of it, used it to his advantage like it wasn't his fault. The war—Sirius, this war—he has to pay. He has to die."

"I know," Sirius agrees, eyes flashing. Danger, danger. Oh, Riddle isn't making it out of this alive. There are far too many people who want him dead now, and all these people are those willing and skilled to kill. "He will, Alice. Trust me, someone is going to make sure he feels every ounce of pain he inflicted on others. Don't fucking doubt it."

"He better hope I never get my hands on him." Alice looks more alive in their anger. Emmeline looks away, rubbing a hand over her jaw, eyes fluttering shut. "Frank is—he's dead because of him. He's—"

"No," James whispers, and his voice cracks.

"What?" Alice asks.

James swallows. They're all looking at him now. He forces himself to look at Alice, holding their gaze. "It's—yes, Riddle is responsible for—for everything. It was his Aurors that killed Frank, on his orders, so that is his fault."

"You were there," Alice rasps, pulling away from Sirius to come closer to James. Their eyes are wide and glimmering already. "You were—you know what happened."

"Yes," James chokes out.

"Tell me." Alice reaches out and grabs James' arms, their grip tight. They nearly shake him. "Tell me what happened. I need to know. Did he—did he say anything? Did he—"

"Alice," Emmeline says softly, "ease up."

Alice doesn't. They grip James harder. "Tell me. *Please."*

"Riddle is responsible, but—" James hangs there for a moment as he feels it rip at him, practically gagging on his confession. Alice's nails dig into his skin. "But it was my fault."

"No," Sirius says instantly, moving over swiftly to grab Alice's wrist, shaking his head at them. "No, it's not. You heard him. It was Riddle's orders that got Frank killed, not—"

"Frank would still be alive if it weren't for me," James cuts in, holding Alice's gaze, which is filled with a storm of emotion. James peels Sirius' hand away. "The servants—we only went back for Remus. Frank, Rodolphus, and I had to go to the office and turn three keys to override the cell mechanisms so we could open the door. Cell six, that's the one Remus was in, and that's the only one we originally intended to open. That was the plan, but I—I made

the executive decision to play hero and open all the cells. All twelve. I wanted to save them all."

Alice's hands slip off of him. Their face has gone blank.

James' eyes sting. "It would have been okay, if I hadn't done it. Frank would have lived, if I hadn't made that choice. Because, in the time it took to open all the cells, the Aurors reached us. In that time, if I had let us only open the one, we would have made it out before the Aurors got there."

"James," Sirius snaps, "that's not your—"

"Frank would have made it out," James continues, never looking away from Alice. His chest burns. He feels like he's caving in on himself, and good. He did it. He did this. He should hurt for it. "Frank could have made it out, but he didn't, and that's on me."

"No, it's *not,"* Sirius hisses. "You were just—"

"Saving people. Or trying to." James exhales shakily, fighting with the lump in his throat. "I insisted on saving eleven extra people, and it cost me a friend, and it cost you your best friend. And I can't—I need you to know that I—I will never stop feeling the pain of that, and I know it's nothing in comparison to the pain you feel, and I'm *sorry.* Alice, I'm so sorry."

Alice continues to stare at him blankly. Their voice is as devoid of emotion as their face and eyes when they say, "I want to know how he died."

"I don't—" James' breath hitches. He feels like he's going to throw up. His vision is blurring. "I—he was—you should know he wasn't—he didn't blame you for Augusta. He wanted—he was so eager to help save you, Alice, so *relieved* when he saw you saved from the arena. He —"

"Tell me!" Alice bursts out, and James flinches. Emmeline and Sirius inhale sharply at the same time, going still and tense, waiting. The room seems to have dropped in temperature, so cold that breathing stings. Alice breathes out and looks at James, looks right into his eyes, their own eyes dead. "Tell me how he died, James. Now."

"The Aurors—we—we didn't know they were there. That they were waiting. We—I swear we didn't know. If I'd known, I'd never have let him go first," James gasps, his words falling out of him on a whine. "He—he opened the door and leaned out just to check. Didn't see anything. He thought—we all thought it was fine, but when he stepped out, they—they—" James squeezes his eyes shut. He can still see it. He can still feel Frank's blood splatter across his face. "They shot him."

"Where?" Alice whispers. "Did he—did he bleed out? Did he have time to—to say—to—"

"No," James whispers back, opening his eyes. As soon as he does, the tears tip right over and scald his cheeks on the way down. "Alice, I'm sorry."

Alice rolls their jaw, shoulders jerking on a stuttered breath. They blink fast and hard. "The head, then."

James hesitates, then slowly nods. And maybe, to some, an instant death would be something of a comfort. Frank didn't suffer, but he also didn't even see it coming. How can there be comfort in such tragedy? Sometimes people die, swift and sudden, and they don't get to say goodbye; they don't get to pass along a message; they don't get anything, because they are here, and then they're gone, and that's all there is. That's it, and that's all those left behind are left with.

No closure. No peace. Nothing.

"For your sake," Alice croaks, "you need to get out and stay the hell away from me, James."

"Alice," Sirius protests.

"No, shut up," Alice snaps. Their hands are shaking. "Think about this, James. Put yourself in my shoes, and imagine that your parents died in a riot you helped start. They asked you not to, and you did anyway, and they were both shot in the head for it. You never got to apologize. You can never undo that mistake. And then you're going into the hunger games the second time, only two years after the first, only six months after your parents die. You go in with this plan to make sure your best friend gets their mother back, only to fail. She dies, because she took a hit meant for you, and before you can even come to terms with it, you're being saved from the arena. Only hours later. Only *hours* too late to save the woman who died for you, and you just—you have to live with that. You have to figure out how to live with that."

James' eyes burn, the consistent building tears spilling over with each word Alice speaks. It *hurts.* Oh, it hurts to even think about, and that's Alice's reality. They have to live with all of it.

"And then you make it to safety," Alice chokes out. "You make it out, and you're alive, and the only comfort—the *only* comfort you have is that you promised the woman who died for you that you would take care of her son, your best friend. You *promised,* and that's how you live with it, with all of it. Because you intend to do it, and then—" Alice chokes again, their whole body jerking as tears fill their eyes. "And then you find out that you can't do it, because your best friend is dead. Your best friend is *dead,* James. He's dead."

James makes a small, pained noise as he feels those words slam into him, so heavy, so harsh. He can't stop himself from looking desperately towards Sirius, just to be sure, just to see him there. And he's there, his expression twisted with pain. And he's there, but Frank is nowhere to be found when Alice looks for him.

"And then, one day, I show up at your door," Alice tells him, their lips trembling. "We don't know each other well, but you know that I've been through a lot recently. You know of me from what you've learned, and all you've learned is that I'm a good person. I'm kind. I love hard and deeply. I care about my family and friends and also the whole world, and you learned that I was friends with your best friend, which means I must have cared about him, too. But then I show up at your door."

In this moment, James regrets ever showing up at their door, but he knows he's earned this. His penance.

"And I tell you—" Alice flexes their hands, their whole body tense. "I show up, and I tell you that your best friend is dead because I wanted to save more people than planned. And I did save those people, and that's great, and that's good—but, the ugly truth is, you don't care. You'd cut them all down if it meant your best friend could be here, alive, with you. And you have to live with that ugly feeling, too. So, I stand before you, after everything you've lost, and I tell you that your best friend died in the same exact way as your parents, just as you feared he would, just as you had nightmares about. And you have to live with that now, and live with eleven extra people who are alive when your best friend isn't, and live with the fact that I'm in front of you, telling you I'm *sorry."*

He is. He's so fucking sorry, and he can only wilt under the weight of it, and cry. He can only stand there and feel how much it hurts, and listen as Alice shifts everything in reverse to show him how much his pain doesn't matter. Because it's nothing, absolutely *nothing,* compared to theirs.

Alice steps forward, looking right into James' eyes. "I hope you're always sorry. I want this to hurt, and keep hurting as long as you're alive, which is the only reason I won't kill you. Because if you ever reach a point in your life where you're close to full happiness, where you're having a good day, I want you to think about Frank, and how he's not here, and how he would be if not for you. I want you to think about me, and all the things I have to live with, and all the ways in which I'll never, *ever* be fully happy either. So, we'll share this, you and I. We'll carry it, and live with it, and we don't get peace from this. You made sure of that, and so I'll return the favor. Stay away from me, but don't you *dare* forget."

"Okay," James whispers, because it's the least he could do, because he was going to do that anyway.

"Alice, you're out of line," Sirius says carefully. "You're—I know you're grieving, and I understand—"

"No, you *don't,"* Alice spits out. "Your best friend is right fucking here, Sirius, and he's part of the reason *mine* isn't. So, get the fuck out. Both of you. Get out. *Get out!"*

"Go. Sirius, *go,"* Emmeline orders firmly, sweeping in to usher them back, and Sirius actually listens, grabbing James' arm to tug him towards the door.

Maybe because Alice is trembling. Sobbing. Hyperventilating.

"Come on," Sirius mumbles urgently.

"James. *James,"* Alice whimpers as they reach the door. Sirius keeps trying to yank him out, but James resists, turning back to Alice like facing judge, jury, and executioner. Alice stares at him through tears. "You wanted to be a hero. The fucking hero of the story, right? But in mine, James, you're the villain."

"I'm sorry, Alice, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry," James chants, gagging on his remorse, choking on his tears, and it's useless to say, but he can't stop.

He's still chanting it when Sirius drags him from the room, wraps him in his arms, and holds him as he breaks down. From the other side of the door, Alice breaks down, too.

~•~

The visit with Alice is a major setback for James, and Sirius knows it, and he was already set way back to start with. They all are, frankly, but this is a direct hit to James among all the rest, and it seems to do him in entirely.

James, for a lack of a better phrase, takes the rest of the week off. Won't leave his and Regulus' room, not to go to meals, not even to see anyone. Regulus has taken it upon himself to bring his food and—well, he's basically a guard dog at the moment. He only lets a select few into the room—Effie, Monty, Sirius, Remus, and Pandora. No one else gets in, James simply doesn't leave, and Sirius makes the wise decision not to explain to Regulus all that happened to get James to that point, watering it down to the grief for Frank fully hitting him.

Regulus accepts that easily enough, and James is apparently wise as well, because he doesn't give Regulus the details either. Sirius knows this, because Alice is still—well, not fine, but they haven't had Regulus try to rip their head off for hurting James, so that tells Sirius all he needs to know.

Because Regulus is hovering and fussing over James basically at all times, Sirius hasn't really had a moment alone with him. He told him right after leaving Alice's room that Frank dying wasn't his fault, that he can't blame himself for it, that he didn't mean for it to happen and had no control over it and couldn't have predicted it—and then he felt like a fucking hypocrite, because he's doing exactly that about hurting Remus, isn't he? But it's always easier to tell someone you love all of that than accept it yourself.

Sirius misses Frank. He will always miss Frank. He agrees with Alice that Riddle needs to pay in blood and pain for all the blood he's spilt and pain he's caused. He also knows that, right now, Alice is grieving. Thirsty for revenge. Clinging to every scapegoat they can find to spread the hate within, all bred from loss and fury and their own guilt. Sirius hopes that, someday, with time, Alice will be okay in a way that they can't be right now, and maybe, just maybe, they'll forgive James and set them both free from this weight they've decided bears down on them and James. Neither of them deserve it.

Frank wouldn't want it for either of them. Or anyone.

It's a hard time for everyone right now, all of them dealing with the fallout of all the things they couldn't deal with before in the midst of it happening. Sirius has fallen into that trap as well, unable to break free from it.

Sometimes, out of nowhere, Sirius will catch a glimpse of Camilla out of the corner of his eye and jerk around, heart slamming in his chest until he assures himself that she's not there. He'll peer into the darkness and convince himself Dixon is about to barrel out and attack him, or Lester, or Yaxley—and then he can't sleep, because he has to make sure they don't. He will close his eyes and hear the sound of Marlene's arm breaking ringing in his ears, or the gurgle Regulus gave when gagging on his own blood, and he'll have to open his eyes and hold them open until they burn.

One of the more complicated things is Remus. Sirius and Remus are having—well, intimacy issues, basically. There are times when Sirius can't touch Remus but really wants to, and then there are times when Sirius can't stop touching Remus, always so gentle, so tender and careful and adoring, and they're pulled too thin between both extremes.

At night is when it's the worst. It's been years since he had nightmares as frequent as these. He dreams horrible things, the most terrifying things, usually centered around Remus. One of the recurring nightmares he has is so vivid that it scares the fuck out of him; it starts the

same, him in bed with Remus, who smiles at him, and then he climbs on top of him, wraps his hands around Remus' throat as his smile falls, and strangles him to death. Every other part of him in the dream tries to stop it; he begs and pleads and cries, tries to yank his hands away, fighting it so hard while Remus lays there and takes it, and his hands don't let go until Remus is dead.

And then he wakes up. He wakes up, and Remus is fine. He wakes up, and Remus is right there. He wakes up, and he thinks about how he used to yearn for the chance to sleep in bed next to Remus, throughout the whole night, and now he can't. Every night, he starts out in the bed next to the man he loves, soothed by the ritual of kissing all his scars and the places his bruises have already faded—even though Sirius can still picture them perfectly in his mind's eye—and then, by the end of the night, he's on the floor.

This isn't something that just goes away overnight, and Remus is quite possibly the most understanding man on the planet, because he's patient and kind and never, ever pushes Sirius.

It takes days for Sirius to fully grasp it, but Remus isn't asking him to be the person he met—which, while quite fucked up even then, was someone much more put together than he is now. Remus meant it when he said he'd love every version of Sirius, because he does, even this one. This version of Sirius, the one who has nightmares of murdering him every night. When Sirius finally confesses this, Remus tells him, calmly, that he's not scared of him.

Sirius knows, distantly, that this is just how his brain is responding to his guilt, and fear, and trauma. He knows that things will get better, with time. He knows how this goes, because he's dealt with it before, and maybe through that, it's almost easier to deal with the second time around, in some ways. For example, he hasn't slipped away since coming back from Azkaban. He won't be spending nearly a year not even present, or lose all of this time; in some ways, he almost resents that, but mostly he's relieved by it.

Sirius and Remus talk a lot, maybe to make up for all the touching Sirius can't always bring himself to allow. They talk about things only they will understand. How cold Azkaban was. The fear of being led to lower levels. The terror of seeing that damn chair and knowing what comes next. Sirius admits he doesn't even remember most of his own torture and thinks, maybe, that was a kindness, because from what he *does* remember, he knows to be grateful that he wasn't really present for all of it. But Remus doesn't have that same experience; he remembers every single second.

They talk about other things, too. All the small details they never got to divulge before now. Remus killed Lucius and feels no remorse for it or anyone else he had to kill. Sirius got on his knees before Riddle and begged for James' life. Lily is angry with Remus, and Remus is upset about it. James isn't in a good spot, and Sirius is upset about it. They're both stuck in the middle of war with no way out—that's one thing they talk about more often than the rest, but it's not what they talk about the most. No, there's something else.

They're all here together, finally, and it's the only consolation they have. They talk about that the most, the relief of that in all of this shit, constantly reminding each other of it over and over because that's the most important part.

And so, they take it one day at a time, just like they started out doing when things got rough, and that's all they can do. They have plans; Sirius wants to start training Remus after he gives his first donation of blood, and Remus wants to do whatever it takes to get Lily to forgive him. Sirius wants to work with Filius to build some sort of hearing aids that will muffle the sound of screams and keep him from being triggered into slipping away, which he will need if he's fighting in a war. Remus wants to get much better with guns, hopefully with Lily's help. But, for now, they're all sort of in limbo, too wrapped up in trauma to manage much at all.

Which is okay. They're all human. They've all been through unimaginable things. They've all suffered. They're all afraid. They all need time to adjust, and so this is how it starts.

A war goes on in the background, and James won't leave his room. Sirius can't be intimate with his boyfriend. Remus is the boyfriend he can't be intimate with, who is on outs with his best friend and getting ready to give the blood this war will need for it to be won. Regulus isn't to be trusted with any information that could cause him to harm someone on their behalf, because as doting as he is at the moment—to a frantic, restless point—he's ten times as violent in the name of being protective.

Yeah, great start, everybody.

Speaking of Regulus, he pops up around Sirius like a fucking ghost, which startles the shit out of Sirius every single time. It reminds Sirius why he once literally knitted him a hat with a bell in it, because the little shit is sneaky.

Like now.

"Fucking *hell,* Reggie, don't *do* that!" Sirius bursts out when he turns and finds Regulus standing right outside his door.

"Sorry," Regulus says, grimacing, because he's so soft these days. Apologies roll off his tongue with ease now, and he goes out of his way to avoid upsetting those around him. Sirius is pretty sure he could tell Regulus to jump, and Regulus would ask how high. No protest. Nothing. It's like he's trying to be a person no one has a problem being around, as if he's fucking terrified to do anything that could make them leave him.

Sirius heaves a sigh. "It's fine. What's up?"

"James is sleeping. Again." Regulus looks away, the skin at the corners of his eyes strained with visible stress. James sleeps a lot now, has been mostly sleeping for three days straight at this point, after his altercation with Alice. Doesn't get out of bed. Eats, but hardly talks. Closes his eyes, turns over, shuts the whole world out and sleeps, or pretends to. "Yeah, so I'm going to get him lunch. Are you going to the Great Hall?"

"I was planning to," Sirius murmurs. "But—ah, actually, would you do me a favor?"

Regulus looks at him and immediately says, "Yes, anything."

"Remus was off trying to talk to Lily again, so I was going to meet him there, but I think I'll go see James. Would you let him know where I'm at and also grab me a plate, too?"

"Okay."

"Thanks," Sirius mumbles, his chest feeling tight. No snarky remark. No scoff. No rolled eyes. There have been times when Sirius foolishly (and only internally) wished that Regulus was less fussy and argumentative, and would just listen, and would just do as Sirius told him to—and be careful what you wish for, because here it is, and it breaks Sirius' fucking heart.

"I'll walk with you until we split off," Regulus says.

"Yeah, alright. Hey, come here." Sirius reaches out and slips his arm around Regulus' shoulders as they walk, his heart swelling and clenching in tandem at the way Regulus leans into him instantly, melting a little bit. "Are you okay?"

"Worried about James," Regulus confesses quietly. "I don't know how to help him feel better. When he's not sleeping, he's crying, and he wants to cuddle basically all the time, which is—that's *fine,* I'm not saying it's not, but he won't talk to me. Won't talk to his mum or dad. Won't hardly talk at all."

Sirius blows out a deep breath, then clears his throat. "Well, I imagine you do help him feel better, or else he probably wouldn't want to cuddle you all the time."

"I—yeah, maybe," Regulus allows, but his voice is strained, full of anxiety. "I just… I—I mean, I'm trying, but I don't think…"

"Regulus," Sirius says gently.

Swallowing, Regulus croaks, "I don't think I'm getting it right. I—never do, which is sort of my thing, but it's like… Fuck, Sirius, I don't know. I feel like I'm not saying the right things, and I just keep *coddling* him, because I—well, I love him, I can't help it, that's not my fault. What else am I meant to do?"

"Fuck it, coddle him all you like. Goodness knows he could use it, considering everything," Sirius mutters. "Now is *absolutely* the time to coddle him. You're doing fine, Regulus. He's just… Well, it's rough right now. Sometimes, we can't just *feel better.* Sometimes, we just have to feel what we feel, even when what we feel isn't good. You know that better than most."

"Yeah, I know. I just hate it when it's him," Regulus murmurs.

"You're taking care of him. You're doing your best," Sirius assures him, squeezing his shoulders gently. "And you? What about you? How are you doing in…all of this?"

Regulus blinks at him and says, with a straight face, "I'm fine."

"You're fine," Sirius repeats.

"Yes."

"You're *fine."*

"Yes."

"You're fine."

"Yes," Regulus says, yet again.

Sirius stares him. "No, you're not. There's no fucking way you're fine, not after everything."

"I am," Regulus insists. "I have to be."

"Oh no. Oh, *hell* no." Sirius jerks to a halt, snatching Regulus to a stop right along with him. "Regulus, don't do that. Do *not* do that, do you hear me? You—trust me, you don't want to do that. Putting off your own issues to be there for everyone else doesn't mean you're *fine.* If anything, that means you're *less* fine than everyone else, because you're not even letting yourself deal with your problems."

"All my problems went away the moment you and James made it back," Regulus informs him.

It's a nice sentiment, but things aren't that simple. Sirius shakes his head. "You can tell yourself that, but that's not how it works. Your problems are still very much here, and ignoring them by focusing on us is a recipe for disaster. It's—look, it's not good, alright? Because in taking care of everyone else the way you're going about it, you're not taking care of yourself."

"I really am fine, though," Regulus mutters.

"No, you're not. Look at yourself. Regulus, you're walking around on eggshells *all the time,"* Sirius hisses. "You don't argue with me, you don't fuss at anyone, you're not your usual grumpy and miserable self. You haven't insulted me *once* since I got back. When's the last time you called me an idiot?"

Regulus gives him a measured look, lips pursing. He rolls his shoulders under Sirius' arm. "I don't know what you want me to tell you. Sorry I'm not taking things for granted, I guess? Did you miss the part where I thought everyone died?"

"Yes, okay, I—I get that, I really do, but…" Sirius sighs and lifts his free hand to scrub at his eyebrow. "That's—sort of my point. We're not dead, Reggie. We're here, right here, so you don't have to act like we're going to go away if you're not fulfilling whatever role you've given yourself because you're scared to lose us. You're *not* fine, and you're not expected to be, just like we're not. None of us are okay, and that's okay."

"Well, maybe I want to be fine," Regulus croaks.

Sirius gives a weary laugh. "Yeah, I get that. So, what, you're just manifesting it? Fake it until you make it? Say it enough and maybe it'll be true?"

"It's working so far."

"Is it? The bags under your eyes say differently. You're having nightmares, aren't you?"

Regulus looks away. "When am I not? That's not new."

"Evan?" Sirius asks, borderline hopeful. Oddly enough, despite being nightmares, Regulus seemed comforted by having Evan in his dreams. It's a preferable nightmare, at least.

"No, I haven't had a dream about Evan since the victory tour."

"So—the arena?"

"Sometimes," Regulus mumbles. He sighs and tilts his head back, almost resting it against Sirius' arm, staring blankly up at the ceiling. "Bellatrix features quite a bit. There was—I don't know if anyone told you about the boggarts, but there's a lot of that, too. James dying. You're a frequent one as well; I saw you get lifted out by the Hallows, so naturally I have to see it over and over again. Let's see… Crimson river, check. Rain, check. Climbing and falling, check. You disappearing into the hedge and the cannon sounding, check. Hodge and Vanity, check. Oh, there's variety, too, you'll love this. Occasionally, I dream of Mother and Father burning alive, and I'm the one who struck the match. A rare one, but a good one, is when I'm a corpse in the crimson river dragging everyone I love down into it. No, but wait, there's *more.* Shall I go on?"

"There's that sarcasm I know and loathe," Sirius says dryly, lips twitching. Regulus drops his head forward, blowing out a deep breath. "These are signs that you're *not* fine, by the way."

"I'm *never* fine, Sirius," Regulus replies, exasperated. "No one in this world is *fine.* But… Fucking hell, this is going to make me sound absolutely mental, but I've had it worse. I've been *less* fine than I am right now. When I thought—when Riddle gave that kill order, and I thought—" He squeezes his eyes shut, a muscle in his cheek twitching. "Nothing was worse than that. Nothing, okay? So—so maybe I'm being a little strange right now. And maybe, with some time, I'll be more like my usual self, but right *now…"* He opens his eyes and looks at Sirius, almost like he's pleading. "Right now, this is what you all get, because right now, in spite of everything, this is the best I've ever felt. Nightmares and all. Trauma and all."

Sirius sits on that for a long second, reframing it in his mind to see it the way Regulus does. He hums and tugs on Regulus gently, ushering him into moving again. "So, it's literally just that saying of like—you never know what you've got until it's gone? That sort of thing? You appreciate it differently now?"

"Something like that," Regulus allows. "I'm just…basking. This is me basking. Can I bask in peace?"

"Mm, do what you do, Reggie." Sirius reaches up and tugs on his ear, sighing when Regulus doesn't swat his hand away, just letting him do as he likes. "You can bask, sure, but try to take care of yourself, too, yeah? I'm—not at my best right now, and James clearly isn't either, but we're here for you, you know? As much as we can be. And there's others. Just—just—I want to be sure that you're taken care of, too."

"It's alright, Sirius. I'm alright," Regulus murmurs. "Or, I'm as alright as I can be, as alright as I need to be for right now. I've got it this time, okay? You don't have to worry about me on top of everything else."

"You're my little brother. I'm always going to worry about you."

"For once, worry about me a *little* less."

"All grown up, huh?" Sirius isn't sure why that makes him ache a little bit, a harsh clench in his chest, but it leaves him a little winded. A little choked up. "You, ah—you don't really need me anymore, do you?"

Regulus glances over at him. "If you actually believe that, then you haven't been paying attention." He pauses, and then his lips twitch. "And also you're an idiot."

"There it is," Sirius says with a laugh that cracks in the middle, and it's absolutely *humiliating* how fragile he feels these days. So vulnerable. Soft and achy in his center like bruise.

"Go on, go see James," Regulus tells him when they reach the point their paths break in two different directions. "I think it'll be good for him. I don't know, maybe he'll talk to you."

Sirius glances at him, mildly surprised. "There wasn't an ounce of resentment or jealousy in your tone."

"Growth," Regulus says, giving him a crooked smile.

"I'll say," Sirius muses, eyebrows raised.

Regulus' smile is soft, soft, soft. Sincerity shines in it. "I hope he *does* talk to you, even if he won't talk to me. I just—I want him to be okay, and I don't care who or what it takes to help him, even if it's not me or something I can do."

"Wow," Sirius says in wonder, "look how far you've come."

"These days, I climb *and* grow," Regulus tells him, which doesn't make much sense to Sirius, but it seems like something Regulus is proud of.

So, Sirius nods and says, "Hell yeah you do."

Regulus looks pleased, but a little bashful about being pleased. His ears are turning red, and he looks about ten years younger. No, twelve. For a second, like this, he looks fourteen, like maybe fifteen never even came to ruin everything.

Sirius squeezes him with possibly too much force, but it comes from affection, so Regulus hardly seems to mind. He doesn't push Sirius, or jostle him, or do anything to pretend like he doesn't want this affection; so, okay, he's basking. Sirius lets him bask, for now, and ruffles his hair before pulling away. They shuffle around each other and go in opposite directions, one heading to the Great Hall, and one heading to James.

James, much to Sirius' concern, is lying in bed with his back to the door, a lump under the covers. He doesn't respond to the door easing open, doesn't check to see who comes in, doesn't turn over to greet him, doesn't do anything.

Sirius chews on his lip for a moment, then shuts the door and pads over to the bed, lifting the cover up and slipping under it. As soon as he does, James rolls over and latches onto him, fully just flops onto him and buries his face under Sirius' chin.

Right, when James gets sad, he wants to cuddle.

Just… "Ah, you know which brother you're currently snuggling with, right?" Sirius checks cautiously, because he doubts Regulus' personal *growth* would extend out to James mistaking Sirius for him. Yeah, no, the basking would be over.

"Duh," James mumbles, making a quiet huffy noise that informs Sirius he's mildly affronted that Sirius even had to ask, like he'd never make that mistake. Nevermind that he *has* made that mistake before, but—in his defense—he was on drugs at the time and completely off his head. Apparently, when in sound mind, James doesn't have such issues.

"Okay, just checking," Sirius replies, relaxing as he throws one arm over James and brings the other up behind his head. He gets situated and cups the side of James' skull, because James is basically curled up into his side, head resting against his chest, and pressed as close as he can get. Sirius idly taps his fingers to the space above James' ear, lips pursed. "You know, uh, Frank was—the year he won his games, he said—in his interview, he said he wasn't going to kill anyone. Do you remember that? He told the whole world he wouldn't."

"I remember," James whispers.

Sirius clears his throat. "I told him that was impossible. We all told him that was impossible. I think—ha, I'm pretty sure Augusta ripped him apart for that one, because it essentially just tempted the gamemakers and other tributes to push him into it. But he was so insistent. Stubborn. Defiant. Definitely from district five, that's for sure. And I don't—I suppose I'll never entirely be sure why *that's* the goal he set for himself, of all the goals to have—ah, yes, let's go into the death arena and never kill; what kind of sense does that make, Frank?" Sirius pauses, then sighs. "People were—well, Augusta spun it as him being noble, so he skirted by. He was very charming and diplomatic otherwise, so everyone loved him. But I think—I

actually think that it was more than just personal morals he had that made him set that goal. I think he wanted to defy the games themselves. They wanted so badly to turn him into a killer, and he was refusing to let them."

James doesn't speak. He turns his face into Sirius' chest like he's hiding there, because he knows what comes next. They all know what comes next. They all watched it happen.

"And then he killed anyway," Sirius murmurs, blowing out a heavy sigh, one so deep that his chest bows in a little, making James dip in against him. "He had to kill. He didn't have a choice. Because, sometimes, there's nothing we can do. James, he never wanted to kill, *never,* but then he did, because we can't predict the way things are going to go, and no matter how much we might want to, we can't stop bad things from happening. Some things are just—out of our control. Frank didn't want to kill any more than you wanted him to die, but he did kill and he did die, and that's *not* on him or you."

"If I hadn't opened those cells—"

"If you hadn't opened those cells, eleven people wouldn't be safe here right now. If you hadn't opened those cells, you wouldn't be *you.* James, Frank opened those cells *with* you. I know him, okay? Knew. I knew him for years, and I can promise you that he wouldn't blame you. Just like he wouldn't blame Alice for Augusta, he wouldn't blame you for him."

James is quiet for a long time, and then he lifts his head, staring at Sirius with grief sagging in his face. "Maybe not, but he's not here for me to be sure, and Alice does. They blame me. You heard them. I'm the villain in their story."

"Alice is going through a lot right now. A whole world of hurt. People say things in grief, James, trust me. I've seen it all. I've heard it all." Sirius pats his head and gives him a sad smile. "I know it's hard to believe, but you're not a villain, and you're not a hero. You're just human, as we all are, and we're doing our best. You did your best, just like Frank did, and that's all we can do. You have to forgive yourself for what happened, or it's going to eat you alive, and Frank wouldn't want that for either of you. Alice has their own journey to go on, and so do you, but the best way for both of you to honor Frank is by remembering him as he was and trying to find the peace he wanted those he cared about to have."

"I don't know how," James croaks. "I don't know where to even start trying, Sirius."

"One day at a time, James." Sirius eases James' head back down to his chest and curls around him, tipping his own head forward to bury his face in James' hair. "One day at a time."

And it's fitting, somehow, the way their struggles align. James needing to forgive himself, Sirius needing to forgive himself. Hurting together. Mourning together. Terrified together. Never one without the other, even in pain.

One day at a time, together, all of them.

It's proven further when the door opens again, and Regulus slips in with Remus right beside him, carrying two trays of food each so they can all eat. Sirius prods James up, and they scoot around the bed so all of them can fit themselves on it, getting situated. Remus sinks down beside him, glancing at him, and Sirius leans over into him, resting there. Much the same, James dumps his head over on Regulus' shoulder and slumps there, eating miserably, with no enthusiasm.

But they eat. They sit there, together, and eat. They sit there, together, and breathe. They sit there, together, and live. They sit there, together, and take it one day at a time.

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"Nope," Lily says, "still mad at you."

Remus groans. "For fuck's sake, Lily, you're harder to make up with than my damn boyfriend."

"He's a weak man." Lily turns her nose up. "I am not."

"How many times do I have to say sorry?"

"At least once more."

"Okay," Remus says. "I'm sorry. I'm truly, *deeply* sorry."

Lily purses her lips. "Yeah, the answer is still at least once more, and I think it will be until I decide otherwise."

"So, you're just going to string me along forever, then?" Remus snaps.

"That depends. Just how many more times will you go around sacrificing yourself with no regard for your own life?"

"That was—two—no, okay, *three times!* Only three!"

"The best and worst things come in threes," Sybill announces sagely, poking at her plate with her fork. "For three good things that happen, there are three bad things connected to it to counteract it, or vice versa. It's all about balance, you see."

"I do see," Pandora announces, nodding along.

"Yeah, see?!" Remus bursts out, jerking his hand towards Sybill, though he's not entirely sure if she's helping or not.

"Sybill's superstitions mean nothing to me," Lily says flatly.

"Hey!" Sybill protests, offended. "It's *true,* though. Think about it. The way I understand it, Remus has made stupid sacrificial decisions thrice now. The first time to save you and get you here; the second time to save Sirius and get him here; the third time to save James and get him here. One, two, three. That means it won't happen again; the universe won't allow it unless it's going to happen in another round of threes, which is very rare, so you're probably

safe. And the good things. Three times you thought he was dead, and then three times you learned he wasn't. One, two, three. Best and worst. That's how it works."

Remus doesn't believe that's how it works at all, but he nods in agreement, because it's in his favor. "Exactly. What she said."

Lily gives him an unimpressed look, because she knows him and practically lives in his brain, much like he does hers. It's years upon years of being best friends between them, and six years apart can't really erase that. Once they found that ease they always shared, there was no going back. Here they are, two bodies and one heart.

"Fucking hell," Sirius hisses, clattering into the open chair next to Remus with an aggrieved air to him, eyes bulging as he drops his plate on the table. "I just had three different people corner me in the line to fucking *flirt* with me. Nevermind that I'm less than two weeks out of fucking Azkaban or anything, and when I mentioned that, they started, like, cooing at me. One of them offered to give me fucking *sponge bath."*

"What?" Remus' head whips around. "Who?"

Sirius starts to point. "The—"

"Don't answer that," Lily cuts in.

"Shut up, Lily." Remus holds Sirius' gaze. "Who?"

"Don't answer that," Lily repeats, when Sirius opens his mouth. At her tone, he snaps it shut again. "Remus will go *politely* tell them to leave you be, and because everyone around here is stuck with the same people day-in and day-out with only sex and chores as entertainment, they will likely cause problems since you're pretty and new. And then, before you know it, Remus will get into a fight, and they'll end up in the infirmary using resources that could be used elsewhere, namely for something much less stupid."

"Oh." Sirius blinks at her. "Really?"

"Yes, because Remus always does things he knows won't end well while expecting them to end any other way," Lily says.

"No, I meant—" Sirius coughs, scratching the side of his neck and darting his gaze between Lily and Remus, wary. "Well, I meant about how you said there's only sex and chores here to entertain ourselves with. I mean, surely there's…other things to do. There has to be. This place is massive."

Sybill heaves a sigh. "No, it's massive for functionality, not for fun. Nothing ever goes on here, really. The most excitement we've had has been these last two months, to be honest."

"Right, but…no parties?" Sirius tries. "No, like, events? Music? Dancing? What about weddings? Birthdays? You don't celebrate anything? Ever? It—it can't be…just this."

"What you see is what you get," Lily informs him dryly.

"Filius is ordained, so he can marry people, but it just happens in his little office and kept on file. You can request your favorite meal of the week to happen on your birthday, which is nice, I suppose. I got to eat green jello last year." Sybill pauses, twirling a curl with her fork, getting crumbs in her hair. "We do have memorial events, sort of. Like, when someone dies who was a hero to the war efforts, or whatever, Dumbledore gathers us here in the Great Hall, gives a speech, and we all give a moment of silence."

Sirius stares at her. "That's…literally the most depressing shit I've ever heard in my life."

"What's depressing?" Mary asks, dropping down in the seat next to Lily, getting situated and craning her head to check that Bingley is behaving at his table with his friends.

"The Phoenix," Sirius says. "Mary, it's awful here."

Mary nods. "I know, but it's safe. Better here than out there, as far as I can tell."

"So, there's genuinely nothing else to do here?" Sirius asks, seeming quite uncomfortable by the thought.

Remus gets that. Sirius doesn't like to get bored, that's true, but he's especially restless after coming out of Azkaban. It's easy to notice, at least for those who pay attention, and Remus is never not paying attention to Sirius. He seems to grow more antsy and anxious by the day.

It's been rough—and Remus suspects it will continue to be for some time—so they're all doing their best. Today, Remus sat down in Poppy's office with Asher, Lily, and Sirius; he gave his first blood donation, and it went surprisingly well. He thinks he made it out to be more daunting in his head than it actually was. Lily watched the whole time, like a hawk, and Sirius even held his hand. Asher chattered excitedly the entire time, which took his mind off what was happening, and Poppy was so efficient about everything that it didn't hurt and was over before he knew it. He doesn't have to do it again for two months, and may not have to if Poppy and Asher manage to figure out the formula for the immunity.

After, they slapped a bandaid on the inner bend of his elbow, made him eat a muffin and drink juice, held him for a bit to rest, and then let him go. That was that. The first round of immunizations that Remus specifically requested begins tomorrow, so Poppy, Arthur, and Molly will be quite busy, and Lily volunteered to help as well as soon as she gets hers, both because she's a medic trained for it and to oversee it so she can make sure Remus' demands are met.

Remus took his bandaid off an hour ago, so it's almost like it didn't even happen. Though, everyone seems to be getting prepared to deal with a whole bunch of sick people—children included—because of the symptoms from the immunity that they will have for a few days, which will eventually, inevitably pass. Better to be ill for a little bit than come in contact with biological warfare and die a swift, excruciating death.

It's not universal knowledge that Remus is responsible for saving so many people from that fate, mostly because he doesn't want anyone to known to start with, but also because this is a matter that requires discretion, which is why it's a bit of a surprise what happens next.

"I think, right now, the only thing any of us are going to do is be sick," Marlene comments bluntly as she dumps her tray on the table and plops down into an open seat towards the other end of the table. They all blink at her. "Dorcas heard from Minerva that we're all about to get immunized, starting tomorrow, and also how and why. Thanks for that, Remus."

"Ah," Remus says awkwardly. "It's…not a big deal."

"It's a pretty big deal," Dorcas counters, also sinking down at the table next to Marlene. "Big steps for the war, you know."

"Oh, yay," Lily says sarcastically.

Dorcas gives her a wry look. "Once upon a time, you would have been saying that sincerely."

"Yes, well, once upon a time, my best friend was dead and I didn't have a girlfriend," Lily replies. "Things change."

"War doesn't, though," Marlene comments. "So, you know, time to fight and whatnot. Do you think we'll get matching outfits? We should color-coordinate."

Sirius snorts. "Now there's a thought. Could you imagine?"

"I'm thinking…" Marlene purses her lips. "Hm, yellow?"

"Ooh, I like yellow," Pandora says. "We'd smash it in yellow."

"No, it shows blood too well," Remus counters. "You definitely want to go with darker colors."

"Or red, to blend," Lily suggests, coughing around a laugh, doing her absolute *best* not to look at Remus with their shared sense of humor. She fails, and Remus grins at her.

"Black is a good war color," Sybill muses. "Like, matte black. Not glossy. Something hardy, kind of rough."

"Hear me out," Mary says, holding up her hands and spreading them like presenting a banner. "Orange."

"Or we could just all go in different colors and come at them like a rainbow," Dorcas says, lips curling up.

"Naked," Sirius declares. "We should go into war completely fucking nude. They wouldn't know what to do."

Remus raises his eyebrows. "You know, he has a point."

Practically everyone cracks up immediately, just at the sheer ridiculousness of all of this, because sometimes when things are this shitty, you just have to laugh. So, they laugh.

They're still laughing when the loud scrape of two chairs across the floor interrupts them, being pulled up at the end of the table. It's Regulus, who they all peer at. He drops into one with a frown, squinting at all of them.

"What's funny?" Regulus asks.

"Oh, just—war," Dorcas says dryly, and they all crack up again.

Regulus looks unimpressed. "Yeah, hilarious. Well, change the subject or shut up. I coaxed James out of bed today, so if any of you upset him, I will kick each of you in the face."

"James is here?" Sirius asks, looking around eagerly.

Remus cranes his head, too, feeling a pulse of hope in the center of his chest. James has spent nearly the entire last week in bed, so morose that *everyone* was worried. It's a good sign if he's starting to show up at meals, and yes, there he is.

Remus spots him in line with his parents. He looks tired, but they're all tired these days, so that's to be expected. He's smiling, at least. Monty is clearly putting in the work to make him laugh, and it's paying off.

"He's coming," Regulus states, giving them all a warning look, which is objectively hilarious. "No upsetting James."

"Aye aye, Captain," Pandora teases, saluting him.

"It's sort of hard to talk about things that *aren't* upsetting these days, though," Dorcas points out.

"Yeah. What the hell are we supposed to talk about?" Marlene asks. "Like, everyone's dead, and everyone who isn't has dealt with various torments, *and* there's a war on."

"Way to bring down the mood, McKinnon," Sirius says.

"Bite me, Black." Marlene pauses. "Not you, Reginald, I was talking to the original model."

"I could have killed you, you know," Regulus tells her, eyes narrowing. "I *spared* you."

"Dumbass," Marlene says, and Sirius cackles.

The second chair scrapes as James gingerly sits down, placing his tray and Regulus' on the table with equal care. He looks around at everyone, then clears his throat. "Uh, hey."

James is clearly uncomfortable by all the undivided attention, and Regulus looks fit for murder, glaring around at everyone so harshly that they all scramble to look busy and act casual.

"Hey, James," Pandora says, smiling.

"What were we talking about?" James asks.

"Regulus said he could have killed Marlene—in the arena, I presume—and she called him a dumbass for…not doing it?" Sybill recounts, though she sounds confused by the end.

Lily covers her face with her hands and groans, *"Sybill."*

"What? It's true!" Sybill bursts out.

Regulus is currently strangling his fork. Remus is pretty sure his eye actually twitches. It shouldn't be funny, it really shouldn't, but Remus catches Lily's eye when she drops her hands, and they both have to look away so they won't laugh.

"We're not talking about the arena. We're not talking about that, or anything," Regulus grits out.

"No, we're not," Remus agrees. "Actually, James, we were talking about immunity before. Ah, it's good, you know. They're going to start with the kids, so they'll be safe."

James' face softens, and maybe it's due to the reminder of what happened in the arena when Marlene and Regulus were there together, the echo of Vanity and Hodge that gets his mind to go in this direction, but he says, "That is good, yeah. It might even be like—I don't know. Maybe one of them will find a Horcrux Hornet one day and keep it, because it can't hurt them. It's nice, I think. Vanity would have liked it."

"Vanity was obsessed with bugs," Marlene mumbles, "so yeah, she'd like it. She wouldn't—I mean, if it were only Horcrux Hornets to worry about, she wouldn't even *need* immunity."

"They never scared her," James agrees, lips curling up. There's an aged pain in his voice, but after all this time, it's the fondness that shines through the brightest. "She loved Vespa, and honestly? I know they're Hallow-made and all, but I swear Vespa must have loved her, too."

"You think?" Marlene asks, putting her cheek over on her hand, her gaze softer than Remus has ever seen it.

James shrugs. "It'd be hard not to, wouldn't it? She was—I mean, she was lovely, a bit crazy, but absolutely brilliant."

"The ant juice," Regulus announces, shaking his head, and he laughs along with James and Marlene. "Vanity and her ant juice. She was so proud of her ant juice."

"Who even *thinks* of that?" James says in wonder. "Fifteen years old and she was smart enough to think of it. I mean, she completely ignored how it affected her, breaking out into a rash and such, but still. It—it literally kept her alive."

Until it didn't, no one says, but they all hear it regardless.

Remus sighs as everyone seems to end up sad anyway, because again, it's hard to get away from it. Bringing up Vanity was a bad idea. All roads lead right to here. Grief. Loss. Sadness.

He remembers that day. Remembers watching Vanity die and James cradling her body, a harrowing thing to witness. He can't imagine how it must have felt to be there. The worst part is that Vanity might have survived, if not for Hodge. After all, Vespa *didn't* attack her, despite the fact that she was scared.

Remus wonders why. Horcrux Hornets *are* Hallow-made, so they're engineered to do one thing and one thing only, what they were made for. Horcrux Hornets were made to respond to fear and attack, and Vanity *was* afraid, but Vespa still turned to Willa's fear and attacked her instead.

That doesn't make any sense. Vespa should have absolutely killed Vanity, just because that's what it was designed to do, yet Vespa purposefully shied away from attacking Vanity, but the only thing Horcrux Hornets shy away from is their only predator, the only thing that can kill them, which leaves them immortal and indestructible otherwise. That's what Vanity said, wasn't it?

Fiendfyre ants are their only predator; that's the one thing that can kill them, because they essentially burn up from the inside out if they're bitten by them.

Fiendfyre ants.

Vanity's ant juice.

Oh.

"Oh," Remus gasps, jolting up straight so hard that he bumps into the table and causes the trays to clatter, interrupting the flow of conversation that had carefully moved on. But he's still here, still right here, and he feels it *click.*

"What?" Lily asks. "Remus, what is it?"

"Ant juice," Remus blurts out, bolting to his feet. They all stare at him like he's grown a second head. He jerks his hands at them, frustrated that they're not keeping up with him. It's so obvious now, and of course—of *course* Riddle saw it, all the way back then. "Vespa didn't attack Vanity, because of *the ant juice.* Fiendfyre ants. Vanity said Fiendfyre ants are Horcrux Hornets' only predator. Vespa would have burned up from the inside out if she were to sting Vanity, and *that's* why she didn't. Don't you get it? Vanity was *immune."*

"Oh, shit," Dorcas breathes out, eyes widening.

"She was immune for as long as she wasn't afraid, like Riddle," Remus says in a rush. "But then she *was* afraid, and yet she was immune past that. The very first person immune *ever.* Riddle didn't create immunity; *Vanity* did."

"Remus, you fucking *genius,"* Sirius declares breathlessly, standing up to grab Remus by the face and smack a fierce kiss right to his mouth. He's staring at him in pure amazement when he pulls away. "Go. Remus, *go.* You have to tell them."

"Right. Right, yeah, that," Remus agrees, a bit dazed.

"Oh, *honestly,"* Lily says, exasperated, standing up to reach across the table and whack him upside the head. "Get a move on already. It was only a kiss, for fuck's sake."

Sirius grins. And he blushes. And he's beautiful.

"Remus," Dorcas insists.

Huffing out a laugh, Sirius starts pushing him to get him moving, and then everyone starts scrambling to go, because no one wants to miss this. It's a huge turning point, if they're correct. This means they'll be able to create immunity without using Remus' blood, and *that* means more people will be able to be safe from biological warfare a whole lot faster.

Poppy must be in her office, because she's nowhere to be seen, so the next best person to go to about this is Asher, who is chatting and eating at the table with Rabastan, Rodolphus, and Barty. They all look up and fall silent at the sight of a group consisting of ten people hovering next to them, nearly all of them vibrating in sheer adrenaline.

"Uh oh," Barty says. He looks to Regulus immediately, his eyebrows rising swiftly up his forehead. "What's happening?"

"Asher, you're good with poison and venom, and you've been working on this biological warfare stuff with Poppy," Dorcas starts. "We think Remus just solved all your problems."

Asher blinks, then arches an eyebrow. "Again?"

"Fiendfyre ants," Remus says on an exhale, looking at Asher with wide eyes. "In the 84th hunger games, Vanity Clyde made up a concoction of crushed, watered down Fiendfyre ants to stay warm during the cold nights. She broke out into a rash, remember? And—and then she found Vespa, a Horcrux Hornet, and it didn't attack her because she wasn't afraid. But, when she *was* afraid, it still didn't attack her, even though that's what it was designed to do."

"Okay," Asher says slowly, the cogs visibly turning in her brain, a slow light building in her eyes.

Remus takes a deep breath. "I think—I'm almost positive it was because of the Fiendfyre ants. We don't believe Riddle was the first to create immunity; we think *Vanity* was, and we think Riddle just used that and expanded on it. Because Fiendfyre ants are the sole predator of Horcrux Hornets, right? So, they're ingredients in the formula. They must be. Surely that's it; that's what you're missing."

"Oh." Asher's eyes fully light up. "Holy shit."

"Right?!" Dorcas bursts out excitedly.

Without a word, Asher grabs one wheel on her wheelchair and jerks around from the side of the table, then proceeds to wheel swiftly away, running over Remus' toes on the way in her haste to go. After a beat, everyone scrambles to follow.

When Poppy finds out, she actually looks like she could cry. She even stands up and hugs Remus, because she's been working on this for…basically a year, and this is the answer. The solution. Not just blood from one man, but a true shot at creating immunity with no time limit, distributing it to all.

It will still take time, because these things always do, but not nearly as much. This means war will reach them faster, but it also means that more lives could be saved, and that—if nothing else—makes it all worth it.

On the way back to the Great Hall, James speaks up, his voice soft with pride. "Riddle wanted to use something she created for—for evil, but Vanity just helped save the world."

"Yeah," Marlene agrees softly. "She did."

"Well, you know the saying," Pandora murmurs. "Between good and evil, good always prevails."

"Not all the time," James whispers, "but this time, it does, because of her. She was so good, you know. She'd be so happy about this. So fucking proud."

That sits between all of them, and they let it, because for once, it doesn't lead back to sadness. There's just this, a young girl so smart that Riddle used her intelligence to design a weapon, a young girl so good that she's the catalyst to dismantling it.

A young girl gone too soon, taken before she should have been, and yet her impact remains. It lingers. She lingers. She lives on in Remus' blood now, and she'll live on in everyone who will survive thanks to her.

Somehow, through Vanity, a young girl long gone, there's hope to be found, and this is where it starts.

Right here, together, it starts.

One day at a time.

Chapter End Notes

no one is having a good time :(

from the top, i guess! this was a very james heavy chapter, which i love, even if it's mostly sad. i will say, i TOLD yall to give james more credit about giving riddle info. as much as ive depicted him as so fucking smart in this story, and sooooo many people doubted him! swatting you on the nose with a newspaper!!!

no but i find it funny that james essentially sold albus and aberforth out 😭 like, this was objectively very smart, because like, what's riddle gonna be able to do with that? as long as albus and aberforth stay out of the war, everything should be fine! 😃

also, the jegulus!!!! they're sooooo lovely. i have missed them so, so, so much. and like, they haven't even gotten to properly celebrate being engaged before now, so that one moment of them being happy is so special to me. <3 also², not regulus turning into a mother-hen 😭 PLS HE'S SO DOTING I LOVE HIM

and like, this is how it manifests for him. genuinely, this is him basking, and i think it's interesting how he basically turns into a cat hissing at anyone or anything that gets too close to what he's protecting. and like, even in this, his trauma shines through, because he's struggling too, but this IS the best he's ever felt, like the relief of having sirius and james back—even struggling as they all are—has softened him a lot. and really, all he needs is time to go back to his mean, grumpy self—trust me, we see him being a bitch again in the very next chapter lmaooo. but, for right now, he's literally just...basking 😭

and then we get the dreaded james and alice interaction, because of course james would feel like he had to do that. alice—look, as you can clearly see, they have it Very Rough at the moment, and they're grieving so hard. i better not see anyone slandering them. i will say, at some point, james and alice talk more. just...later. it takes time.

another one who has it hard, sirius!!! he's...not doing well At All, as you can clearly tell. he also just needs time—they all need time, really—but all of this is hitting him really hard. it kills me that, despite his struggles, he's still trying to take care of regulus 😭

also remus and sirius. that's something i wanted to touch on, briefly, because it's very heavy stuff. to those who need the reassurance, they're going to be okay, i promise. with more time, and with effort, they will be okay. it's just something they have to work through together. they're sticking it out and making it work how they have to at the moment, but i SWEAR to you that they get better. just trust the process.

oh, and james and sirius mean so much to me this chapter. like, the line "never one without the other, even in pain" KILLS me, because it's just. it's THEM, ya know? yall have no idea how much i adore them.

the other set of besties, remus and lily!!! HELP NOT LILY CALLING SIRIUS A WEAK MAN PLS 😭 no, but as you can clearly tell, lily has already forgiven remus (they're laughing together and being playful), but she's just being snippy and fussing. literally in the next chapter, they're smoking together and talking, so that's nothing to worry about either.

and then, like, i have to mention this, because i feel like it's often overlooked, but like. this war would NOT be won without remus. and for more than just his blood. like, he's always been very, very intelligent—even regulus had a What Would Remus Do moment in the arena—so it's like, he's genuinely the entire reason that any of this is possible. yes, he saves lives with his blood, sure, but it's HIM that figures out how to save the world. put some respect on his name!!!

oh and vanity, i miss her so much. there's another person who helped save the world. writing about her this chapter made me ache tbh. she was so lovely :(

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-sybill my beloved <3
-everyone cracking jokes about war??? they're insane
-james getting giddy because he and regulus are engaged 😭
-remus getting flustered bc sirius kissed him <3
-regulus coddling james
-regulus fluffing james' pillows—and stealing one for him (we learn more about this later lmaooo)
-james wanting to cuddle when he's sad :(
-emmeline worrying about alice
-monty making james smile even tho he's sad
-vanity about bugs: your beauty never, ever scared me 😭
-barty sensing that Something Has Happened and immediately looking to regulus lmaooo
-sybills rule of threes (Keep This In Mind)
-pandora being a social butterfly <3
-aberforth being defensive of his people!!!
-sirius comforting james about frank :(
-regulus "these days, i climb AND grow" black (im so proud of him 😭)
-sirius and remus still not sleeping together, but they hold hands through the night 😭

Two Months Later

Chapter Notes

HELLO EVERYONE!!!! (this is in all caps because im excited.)

warnings for this chapter:

-possible medical/scientific inaccuracies (i mean it, im not a doctor or scientist. this is fiction, i did research but i don't know any of this shit like an expert, so just handwave it and keep it moving. im sorry, but i canNOT answer your questions 😭)
-brief depictions of violence
-brief guns/gun violence (so brief)
-brief murder (no one we know or care about)
-references to past murder/death/torture (all very light, barely even there)
-references to past biological warfare
-references to past violence/violent nightmares
-sex. there is sex in this chapter, in every single pov, though none of it is too explicit. i don't go too in-depth about What They're Doing or What Parts Go Where or Describe Anything, but you know what's happening. i can't tell anyone where to avoid, because it's...it's literally in every single pov, and sex is discussed as a broad topic as well. all very healthy!

as you can tell from the chapter title, there's a time skip! it's small, two months, so it's not that life-altering or anything. anyway, this is one of my favorite chapters because everyone in it is happy, and things get Very Hard after this. it's the most angst-free chapter we've had since, like, idk the chapters in the early twenties??? before that??? just, it's been a while, is all im saying 😭 and uh, it'll be a while after this again, so ya know, cling to the happy while it's still here!

enjoy 🥰

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Go, go, go!" Kingsley bellows. "Dammit, Dorcas, *go!"*

"I'm *trying!"* Dorcas shouts through gritted teeth, grunting as she slams back into the Auror that has their arms around her. She uses the leverage to bring her feet up, kicking against the tree in front of her to shove them both back. "Let me *go!"*

"She *said,"* Marlene snaps, "let—her—go!"

With each word, those final three, Marlene slams her elbow into the side of the Auror's head, until they let go of Dorcas, who stumbles out of the way in just enough time for Marlene to ram the Auror's face into the tree. The Auror's head bounces off the bark, and they sag to the ground.

Marlene stares at her, chest heaving, and then she smiles brilliantly, all teeth. "You okay?"

"Oh, I'm better than," Dorcas replies, equally breathless. She huffs out a laugh, then points her gun at the Auror' head and pulls the trigger, not even looking.

"Sexy," Marlene comments, eyes dancing with humor. There's blood on her cheek. It's not hers. "You're so sexy."

"Dorcas, Marlene!" Kingsley shouts.

Choking out a laugh, Dorcas reaches out with her free hand, riding the thrill of Marlene taking it, the both of them turning and tearing further into the forest. They lost most of the Aurors half a mile back, but that last one—oh, that last one was *persistent.* And mouthy. Had a lot to say about all the ways in which they were going to make Dorcas pay, and also they shot at Marlene, so it's their fault they'll never talk again.

Kingsley, Amos, Rodolphus, and Emmeline are already at the latch, heading down to the station below where they find exactly what they were hoping to see. Alice, Lily, and Barty are already waiting, all of them ushering onto the train, Lily fussing over Amos, who has a graze on his leg.

"That could have gone worse," Emmeline announces as she dumps herself into her seat next to Alice, who looks her over with a frown, reaching out to turn her head to eye the swelling and bruising around her temple that's already showing up.

"Really?" Amos grits out, hissing when Lily dabs at his wound and whining when she snaps at him to *'suck it up and be still, Diggory'.* "We've been doing these missions for, what, six

weeks now? They've *never* gone as bad as this one did."

"No one died," Barty points out. "So, hey, it's a win."

"You need to raise your standards," Amos mutters.

Barty winks at him. "Darling, I don't have standards."

"We all knew district two would be harder than the rest," Kingsley reminds them. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but Crouch is right. Despite the hiccup, we achieved what we came here to do, *right?"*

Alice nods. "We got it done, King. The water supply is contaminated. Just a few more days, and district two is safe."

"Don't say contaminated. It makes us sound like the bad guys," Emmeline mutters.

"To some, we are the bad guys," Lily points out, holding Amos' leg still as she pours something over it that makes him hiss and jerk again. "But we did good, so that's all that matters."

"You think they've figured it out yet?" Rodolphus asks.

Lily snorts. "No, honestly, I don't. Between James, Regulus, and Sirius, they're keeping Riddle really busy. We've only been caught in this district, while the other team was caught in ten. But, as far as they know, we just made a tactical retreat. To the districts, and the Aurors stationed in the districts, it just looks like we came in and got run right back out; losses, because we haven't rescued anyone. And viruses spread through districts all the time, people get sick all the time, so it's not like they're going to make the leap to immunity that easily. We've been careful. No pattern. They won't know until the biological warfare doesn't work, and then—well, it's too late, isn't it?"

Dorcas grins in sheer satisfaction, because Lily is *right.*

In the last two months, the formula for immunity has been made, tested, and approved. As such, everyone within the Phoenix has been immunized—every single person—but they haven't stopped there. On Dumbledore's orders, select teams have been going from district to district to—well, contaminate the water supply with the formula.

It had taken some time to create the formula, but it helped that Fiendfyre ants are easy to find in the woods all around the Phoenix, so they weren't in short supply of the missing ingredient needed. There's some irony in that, how everything was all in reach, how all the information was right there, and yet no one saw what was staring them right in the face. If not for Remus, in more ways than one, everyone would be fucked.

It took a bit longer to figure out how they were going to get mass amounts of people within the districts immunized. In the end, the credit went to Dorcas and Poppy for that one. After all, it was Poppy that said it, wasn't it?

Well, in liquid form, he could easily use the biological toxins in the venom to infect a district's water supply, for instance, Poppy had said once, all the way back when theorizing on what Riddle was using the Horcrux Hornet venom for. Riddle didn't do that, though. He went with using it in gas form, likely because it's faster and much more devastating.

But, Dorcas had thought, if he could do that, why couldn't they? Except, you know, with immunity. Through Sirius, it's proven that the components in the formula work when digested, because he ingested Riddle's blood and became immune. Through Vanity, it's proven that it doesn't *have* to be blood, that any form immunity takes will work. And what do all people in districts come in contact with to ingest? Water. They boil their food with it. They drink it. They bathe in it, shower in it, and it gets in open wounds, if they have any.

Through water, everyone will get immunized. They'll ingest it, let it hit their bloodstream, and get sick. It'll spread like a disease, but a life-saving one. All districts have water, because all people need water. The only thing Poppy was worried about was the constant digestion of the formula, which—if people took in too much—could erode their internal organs and kill them in the long-term anyway. But that's where Asher came in, who is a literal genius about poisons and such, and she found a way around that. Don't ask Dorcas what it is, because she

doesn't know. She didn't understand half of what they were saying, and she stopped listening the moment it was announced that everything would work out.

So, as of now, all twelve districts have been handled, the latest being two. All that's left is the war to take the districts. Marlene—along with Lily, Emmeline, Alice, and Remus—are particularly eager for that. They all have people in their home districts they care about, friends or family that may still be alive, people they want to see again. Even visiting the districts as they have been hasn't really allowed anyone to see those that are there.

These have been stealth missions through the cover of night, and Dumbledore has two separate teams rotating on getting it handled. Kingsley has this team, while Edgar has his own. They switch out so everyone gets breaks, and each team has only been discovered once. They always go after curfew that has been instilled in all districts now, thanks to Riddle, so the people in the districts are rarely, if ever, seen.

That didn't stop Lily from wanting to go to district twelve, at least to check if her family was alive, if Remus' father was. That didn't stop Emmeline from wanting to go to nine, or Alice to go to five, or Marlene to go to eleven.

Dumbledore didn't let them, of course. No, of course not. He set the rotation just right so Edgar's team handled those. When *many* people protested this, he only garnered more anger from everyone when stating, quite simply, that they couldn't be trusted to do the mission properly.

Feelings would get in the way. They would try to save people before it was time. It was too big of a risk. He's the leader; he has to make the hard decisions, and he did.

Dorcas hates that she understood his decision—and, though she would never admit it, she knew he was right.

Because Remus is the 'fallback plan', as far as immunity goes, he hasn't been allowed on missions at all. Because Regulus, Sirius, and James are important for broadcasts and stirring up further rebellion, they also haven't been allowed to go. This, as you can imagine, hasn't gone over well with any of them.

As soon as the districts are taken, though, that's it. As long as the war has been going on, they're in the endgame now. Maybe it shouldn't be as exhilarating as it is, but…

Well, it *is* exhilarating. They're almost there. So close.

As if echoing her thoughts, Lily smooths down the bandage on Amos' leg and breathes out, "Look at us, we're on the fast-track to the Hallow."

"First, we have to focus on taking the districts," Kingsley says, "and that will be all hands on deck. So, you know, rest when you can."

"Aw, I love your little inspirational one-liners," Barty coos, then grins when Kingsley flips him off.

"I mean it," Kinglsey says, standing up. "Rest *while* you can, because once the ball gets rolling, it won't stop."

Barty smirks at him. *"Two* one-liners back-to-back. You're on fire today, King."

Rodolphus cracks up laughing, and Kingsley swats Barty on the head as he goes by, heading to the front of the train to let their conductor know they're clear to bring them home. Alice settles in next to Emmeline, fussing over her while Lily moves over with her medic pack, and Barty continues to crack jokes while Rodolphus dissolves into laughter, over and over.

Dorcas doesn't want to rest, though. She can't. The adrenaline from the missions won't let her; it never does. Marlene, as always, is in the same boat, so it comes as no surprise when she reaches out to grab Dorcas' hand and pull her away.

They go stumbling into a separate traincar, sliding the door shut and locking it, pulling down the blinds. Dorcas' heart is hammering away in her chest, slamming against her ribs, and she's breathless even before all her breath escapes her when Marlene pushes her up against the wall.

They kiss like the world is ending, rushed and frantic, riding the wave of adrenaline until it brings them crashing together. Oh, oh, *nothing* is better than this. Absolutely nothing.

Dorcas never wanted Marlene in this war, in danger, and it still scares the fuck out of her to this day, but for each mission they go on together, for every fight they fight side-by-side, for all the times they survive and survive and survive—it's like taking a lit match to a barrel of fuel. It burns through her, triumphant and victorious, until she's lightheaded from it. Every time, she's so relieved, and so, so fucking *aroused.*

It's like—oh, shit, it's like that near-death rush that makes you ache to feel alive, and nothing makes her feel alive the way Marlene does, and nothing lights her up from within the way Marlene *being* alive does. It makes Dorcas feel fucking crazy how they're alive after they could have died, and they throw themselves at each other like they're trying to find something new to survive, chasing that thrill to keep it.

Oh, they keep it, alright. Dorcas meets Marlene in a deep, gasping, open-mouthed kiss and gets swept up in it, yanking at clothes, grabbing each other too rough, except there's no such thing. Harder, harsher, faster. Desperate. Frantic. Yes, yes, yes.

So much yes.

"You—when you—when you—" Dorcas groans into the bend of Marlene's neck, breathing hard, fingers sliding into short, spiky hair. She cut it for Marlene again recently. Marlene loves it, and so does Dorcas. "Oh, you—when you—when—"

Marlene grabs her by the jaw, hard, and pushes her head up to gasp a laugh right into her mouth, which is probably for the best, because Dorcas can't even finish her thought. What she means to say is that when Marlene fights, it's the hideous, beautiful embodiment of war, and Dorcas is so unbearably attracted to it, to *her,* that it's fucking maddening.

Marlene has a smear of blood on her cheek that isn't her own, probably someone she killed, and her knuckles are busted and bruised, swollen enough that the ring on her thumb likely *can't* come off at the moment. It's violence, and they ride it out, fucking as violent as they can both be.

It's not always this way. Sometimes it's gentle, as gentle as they can get. Soft whispers of hands on skin and silk kisses that make them melt. The long, drawn-out sort of love-making. Cherishing each other. They cherish each other a lot, maybe even more than they try to rip each other apart.

They're pure duality, and the differences doesn't mean that one way is better than the other. It's good. It's always good with Marlene. Always has been.

When it's like this, though, it's quick. They can't really last, or drag it out, because they really go at it. Like, *really.* It's rough and dirty, swapped moans, hands down each other's pants like it's the last chance they'll ever get. It leaves them shuddering and clinging to each other, so shaky in the aftermath that they have to sit down and catch their breath.

"Fucking hell," Marlene mutters, chest heaving.

"You're telling me," Dorcas agrees breathlessly, dumping her head on Marlene's shoulder. "That's one for the history books. If this war doesn't kill me, *you* will."

"Good way to go, though, isn't it?" Marlene teases, tilting her head down to grin at her.

"The best way," Dorcas confirms. "That's how I want to die. I want to die with your head between my legs."

"Bit far-fetched, that," Marlene muses. "I mean, we'll get old. Old people don't fuck."

Dorcas lifts her head, eyebrows raised. "Yes, they do."

"Nah," Marlene protests, waving a hand.

"Marlene, they absolutely do," Dorcas says through laughter, watching Marlene purse her lips. "People don't stop being people when they get older, you know. They continue living and such, and if they like sex, they have it."

"You mean to tell me that old people fuck?" Marlene asks, looking like this is the worst news she's heard all week. She looks horrified. "So, like, Dumbledore—"

"Gah!" Dorcas bursts out, flinching instinctively. "No! Why would you put that in my brain?!"

Marlene grimaces. "Sorry, but he's the oldest person I can think of. Alright, Minerva and Poppy, then?"

"Marlene!" Dorcas protests in horror.

"What?!"

"They're like—my adopted *parents!"*

"Oh. Right." Marlene coughs. "Well, I mean, they're old, and you said old people fuck, so—"

"Shut up. You shut up right now."

"Would you rather think about Dumbledore?"

Dorcas is no longer in a post-orgasmic haze of delight. She is now in hell. "Please stop it, I'm begging you."

"Well, now I'm genuinely curious. Which is more horrifying for you, acknowledging that Minerva and Poppy probably fuck like rabbits, or the thought that *Dumbledore—"*

"Ah! Ah, stop it!"

Marlene starts laughing. "Go on, think about it. Do you reckon he tosses his beard over his shoulder when he—"

"No. *No,* shut up," Dorcas hisses, shaking her head. "He doesn't. He just—doesn't. As long as I've known that man, he's always been alone. Never had anyone."

"Maybe he does it in secret. You don't know."

"You hate me. That's what this is. You actually hate me."

"Mm, we both know that's not true," Marlene says, her gaze warm. "Alright, I'll stop. But, I mean, it's…sort of sad, don't you think? The Order is his whole life. The war is."

"Yeah, that's what he chose," Dorcas murmurs, leaning into Marlene again, sighing. "It wasn't always, though. He… I mean, he did have a lover, decades ago."

"Grindelwald," Marlene agrees quietly.

"Yeah," Dorcas whispers.

"Do you think…he still loves him, even now, even after killing him?" Marlene whispers back.

"I think… Well, if it was anything like this," Dorcas mumbles, gesturing between them, "I'm sure he does."

"That's fucked up," Marlene replies, subdued. "I mean, the fact of *who* he loved, and how he hasn't loved anyone else since."

"Yeah," Dorcas says, equally solemn. "I don't think he's a good man, but you have to admit, he's been through enough shit to have reasons not to be. He started the war because of love, at the end of the day. I think about it a lot, because didn't I do the same?"

"Maybe," Marlene allows, "but the difference is, you won't be alone when you're old. You'll have me." She pauses, then snorts. "If I make it through this war, at least."

"You will," Dorcas tells her. "Just so I won't be alone."

"Oh, is *that* why?" Marlene replies with a laugh.

"Yes."

"Mm, motivation enough, I suppose. *Although,* even if I didn't, you wouldn't be alone. You have Minerva and Poppy. Lily. Pandora. Sirius, Regulus, and James. Friends. *And* you've basically been adopted by Cordie. Maximus *adores* you."

This is all true, to be fair. Apparently, needing only one person and putting them above everyone else and the whole world isn't exactly…healthy. It *is* a lot to put on one person. Marlene said they'd work on it, and they have.

As such, Dorcas has essentially found a best friend in Cordelia, Marlene's cousin, and she babysits Maximus with Marlene all the time to let Cordelia have alone time with Riker, because as much as they love their son, all parents need breaks. At first, this was very difficult to manage, because Marlene was still so wary to hold Maximus, but now that he's a bit bigger, looks less delicate and more sturdy, Marlene has tentatively started to actually hold

her cousin's baby. The first time, Dorcas had to sit right there and keep them both calm, but in the end, Marlene had been so fucking pleased about it. She's still quite cautious, but she's gotten a lot better over time.

Friends are simple. Dorcas has had those this whole time, though she never clicked with anyone the way she has Lily and Cordelia, as far as friendships go. Lily is—something else, even to this day. A lover that wasn't, and never would be, but something special all the same. Pandora is like a…co-parent, in the sense that Regulus and James will always sort of be their tributes, which is an odd relationship, but a wholesome one nonetheless. They're all friends, including Remus and Sirius.

It's not just them, though. Because, after months, Dorcas has gotten closer to more people than she ever expected to. Mary, Emmeline, and Alice. Rodolphus, Rabastan, and Asher. All these people she has laughed with, gathered pieces of, picked up secrets and mannerisms from. People she has let herself get to know, and people she has let know her.

Minerva—and Poppy, by extension—is more complex, in that Marlene will never fully be comfortable with Minerva, and Dorcas doesn't ask her to, would never ask her to. Yet, due to being so serious about *working on it,* Marlene has insisted on making sure Dorcas spends time with Minerva, and Poppy. It makes for some very awkward family dinners, pretty much, like Minerva is Marlene's in-law that she despises and puts up with for Dorcas' sake. It is both disheartening and cute, somehow, and Dorcas loves it a lot more than she lets on.

It helps that Minerva owns up to her shit, stern as ever, and doesn't shy away from the things she did. Marlene respects that about her, and she can understand that Minerva was following orders for the progress of the war, but that doesn't change how that affected Marlene. So, they have something of an uneasy relationship, mostly one-sided on Marlene's side, but Minerva puts in the effort, which means more to Dorcas than she could ever express.

But still, as much as Dorcas has tried, Marlene is just *it.* She's always the priority. Everyone else—yes, Dorcas has them, and she loves them, but Marlene… Oh, *Marlene.*

Which is why Dorcas tips her head and kisses the scar on Marlene's neck, murmuring, "I'll have my cake and eat it, too. Me and you, we're going to get old, and we're going to *fuck* until we die, whether or not the war is still going on."

"Well, when you put it like that…" Marlene grins at her and kisses her temple. "Hopefully by then, the war will be over anyway, one way or another."

"Mm, it will be," Dorcas breathes out, letting her eyes drift shut. When she speaks next, soft and sated, she does so without thinking, without having to think about it, because what she says is true. "All wars come to an end."

Yeah, that is true. They do.

All the wars of the world, in all of history, even the longest—they all have one thing in common, no matter their differences. They all reached their eventual, inevitable end, and it's just a matter of when, because all wars come to an end.

All of them.

~•~

Remus is there when Lily returns, despite the fact that it's the early corners of the morning and the whole Phoenix is asleep. But not him. He's always there, waiting for her to come back after she leaves. As many times as she has left, this never seems to get any easier for him.

It gets harder and harder each time for her, too.

The thing is, in this, when you've picked up guns and learned how to shoot them, it's not as simple as laying them down. She wants to, most of the time, but then the opportunity to go, to fight, to *help* is right there in front of her, and how does she turn that away? How is she supposed to refuse?

Lily can't. Mary—well, Mary has asked her to, if not for Lily's sake, then for hers and Bingley's. Yet, when Lily sat her down and explained that she just—she *can't* not go when her friends need her, when she can save people, because she cares so fucking much—Mary

didn't get angry. Mary could have. She could have easily gotten upset with Lily for coming into her life, and Bingley's, after all that they lost, and then choosing to repeatedly risk leaving them for good. She could have broken up with her. She could have let war come in between them.

But Mary didn't.

Mary sighed and smiled, sadly, and she leaned in to press their foreheads together and said, simply, that she understood. And she does, in reverse, because Mary chooses to turn it away, to stay behind, to steal no more guns and help from here, only.

Lily understands that. Mary has a little brother to think about, and the stakes are getting higher and higher. She's a labeled anarchist, a target, so the risk is higher for her now. This isn't saving one of her closest friends from the arena—or attempting to, and failing to. This is mission after mission, risk after risk, and she knows now twice over what it is to brush up against death, and she's done. For Bingley, for the people from her home, for the children she teaches—Mary is done.

There's a lot of bravery in that, Lily thinks. She admires Mary for it, only more so because Mary hasn't fully tapped out at all. She helps where she can, volunteering to help put together packs, learning medical skills to help those who return with any injuries, being the one who soothes the children and reassures the afraid. There's more to war than just those who fight it. There's this, too.

Remus, though. He's trapped by his own blood. Too important to risk until they're sure all the districts have been properly immunized, Dumbledore said, and when the war comes to take the districts, then to go in the Hallow, no one will have to remain behind. It has pissed Remus off. He has his freedom now, except does he? Here he is, imprisoned. Stuck here while his best friend goes out there, and all he can do is wait for her. Haven't they waited long enough?

It hadn't taken them very long after the mission in Azkaban to resort back to how they've always been. The truth is, Lily had already forgiven Remus quite quickly, but she was dragging it out to be petty. More than anything, she's so fucking grateful he's alive, and she can't blame him for who he is; she has always known who he is, and she loves him dearly for it. That's her best friend, through thick and thin, and them being okay isn't even a question. They're always going to be okay. Two bodies and one heart.

"How'd it go?" Remus asks softly, tension seeping out of his frame as soon as she comes to him, letting him wrap his arms around her. He kisses the top of her head.

"Well enough. Ran into a bit of trouble on the way out, but we got off light," Lily murmurs, sliding her arms around his waist and sighing as she leans into him.

"Easy for you to say," Amos grumbles as he hobbles by with Barty's help. Barty coos at him mockingly, and Amos huffs.

"He got a little graze," Lily mumbles, closing her eyes. "He's fine. It's nothing."

"I heard that!" Amos snaps.

Lily ignores him. "We're all fine, and the mission was a success. Dumbledore will be thrilled, I'm sure."

"Going to debrief him now," Kingsley announces, walking along with Rodolphus while Alice and Emmeline follow.

"Feeling alright?" Remus asks into the quiet, once everyone else gets far enough away.

"Eh," Lily says.

Remus rubs circles into her back. "Kill anyone?"

"Couple of Aurors. Headshots."

"Want to talk about it?"

Lily sighs against him. "No, not really. I want a smoke."

"Alright, come on, then." Remus strokes her hair, kisses the top of her head again, and eases his arm around her as they make their way out of the station. "We'll have to be quiet. Sirius is sleeping, and I'd rather not wake him. He hates waking up early, always happier when he gets to sleep in."

"You spoil him."

"I do my absolute best to."

Lily shakes her head, lips twitching, but she doesn't comment or tease any further. She has a soft spot for Sirius she never expected to grow into, but that's Sirius for you. He sneaks up on you before you know it, if you're not paying attention. Once you get past all that charm and cheer, peer past all those countless falsities, you see that he's just…a mess. A complete and total mess of a person, in the most endearing way possible. It's something Lily relates to a lot, especially these days, and it doesn't surprise her that Remus fell in love with Sirius. Messes are his favorite type of people. After all, mess recognizes mess.

Remus and Lily do indeed sneak into his room, taking care not to wake Sirius, who is conked out and drooling on a pillow, his mouth slack and half his limbs tangled in the covers. Remus doesn't have to go very far to get smokes for them; he has them sitting out right next to his ashtray, which he grabs, too.

They go to Lily's room, and they smoke until the room is shrouded in a white cloud, burning embers of their cigarettes and sprawling out on her bed.

Lily doesn't want to talk about what happened, or the people she killed, but she knows she needs to, so she does. With Remus, it's significantly easier than with anyone else. He's so very matter-of-fact about everything, all his morals ironed out and lined up, simple and unshakeable. It's war. People die. If they don't kill, they'll be killed. They don't hurt or kill

people because they want to; they hurt and kill people because they have to—and he knows the difference. Intimately.

Sometimes, Lily needs him to reassure her about that. She needs that comfort from him, because sometimes she forgets, because she never let herself feel anything about her first kill. She erased it and pushed past it like it didn't even exist, simply because Remus wasn't there, and she didn't let anything exist when he wasn't there—not just the good, but the bad, too.

So, they lay there and talk, and they lay there and smoke, and it helps. They eventually run out of words, because they don't need words to be them. They eventually stop smoking, because their throats are raw and their lungs are sufficiently on fire.

Lily is tired, but she gets up to have a shower anyway. Remus departs to, presumably, make sure Sirius won't wake up alone. They go their separate ways, calmer now, nothing to wait for when they're here together again, as they should be.

When Lily gets out of the shower, Mary is in her bed.

"Oh," Lily mumbles. "You're up."

"I have to start class in a few hours," Mary tells her, gaze roaming over her, checking for injuries. "You could have told me you made it back. How'd it go?"

"I didn't want to disturb Bingley, and I didn't know you had class today, so I thought I'd let you sleep more." Lily sighs as she knee-walks her way onto the bed, dumping her damp hair over her shoulder on the pillow. "And it…went a bit wonky, I won't lie, but it ended up alright."

"Everyone make it back okay?"

"Safe and sound. Well, Amos was shot, though it was just a graze. It's his leg, but he's fine."

Mary hums and leans back, turning on her side to face Lily. "Yes, well, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

"I know a thing or two about it, yeah," Lily mutters, lips twitching when she sees Mary's eyes dance with humor.

"Really? How'd you learn about it?"

"This really hot woman in heels stole my gun and shot me."

"Did you, perhaps, antagonize the woman by insinuating that she *wouldn't* shoot you?" Mary asks.

Lily snorts. "Who, me? No, I'd never."

"Mhm," Mary hums skeptically, visibly fighting a grin.

"It all worked out, though." Lily leans in and lowers her voice like they're trading secrets. "Believe it or not, that woman would turn out to be the love of my life."

"Is that right?" Mary murmurs, leaning in, too. She bumps their noses together, strokes up and down, then tilts her way into a slow kiss. A sweet one.

"Yeah, that is right," Lily breathes out when they break apart, her eyes fluttering shut.

"Imagine how the woman feels. The first time *she* met the person who would turn out to be the love of *her* life, she fucking shot them," Mary says, huffing a weak laugh.

"It's a good story to tell the grandkids someday."

"Could you imagine? Believe it or not, kids, Gran Mary shot Gran Lily before she ever learned her name."

"That—" Lily breaks out into a harsh yawn that makes her whole body shudder. She blinks slowly. "That's hilarious."

Mary gazes at her fondly. "You're tired, lover."

"So tired," Lily agrees, "but I missed you."

"I'll be here when you wake up," Mary tells her.

Lily—well, Lily pouts. "Yeah, but I *missed you."* She reaches out and flirts with the bottom of Mary's shirt, slipping the tips of her fingers underneath, stroking skin. "Really missed you."

"You can barely hold your eyes open," Mary says, amused.

"So?" Lily mutters. "You know how rare it is to get a moment alone from Bingley. I love that kid to death and beyond, I truly do, but getting him to go away is like… I don't know, think of a metaphor for something really difficult for me, because my brain is too tired to do it. Whatever you think of, it's that."

"Noted." Mary still looks amused. "We're not having sex if you're just going to fall asleep."

"I won't fall asleep until after, I promise," Lily says.

Mary surveys her for a long moment, assessing, and Lily tries not to look as sleepy as she feels. She inches her hand up higher and presses closer. She's had a shower. She smells good. She's all warm and cozy and sweet. Very fuckable.

Mary apparently agrees, because she says, "Alright, turn over and take your pants off."

"Well, sure, take all the romance out of it," Lily grumbles, as if she's not scrambling to do exactly as she's told.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were a sure thing."

"No reason not to work for it. Where's the *spice,* Macdonald?"

"You complain a lot for someone so eager." Mary chuckles when Lily sticks her tongue out at her before turning over on her side. "I think you've had enough spice for one day anyway. A little bit of vanilla can be good, too."

"Fucking hell, don't I know it?" Lily breathes out as Mary shifts behind her, getting out of her own pants and curling up to her, chest to back. Mary slips an arm over her stomach, resting on hills and valleys of the rolls on her side, easing her hand down between Lily's legs and peppering slow, soft kisses along the curve of her neck. Lily hums. "Feels good."

"Mhm," Mary agrees, humming too. She rocks against Lily from behind, leisurely, taking her time.

It stays like that, hazy and syrupy between them, Mary's free hand tangling with one of Lily's above their heads, while Lily's free hand reaches back to cup Mary's neck, making it easier for her to crane back for a kiss. That's slow and sloppy, too, and very fucking good. Lily is so warm. Her whole body is humming, gentle tendrils of pleasure unfurling within.

Even when they adjust and Mary finally brings their bodies together, it remains at this pace. An easy in and out. A simmer set on low. It stays just like this, a gradual build that Lily

swears she can feel from the top of her head to her fucking toes. It just keeps going and going and *going,* and it's so good.

It's also new. They've never had sex like this before. They actually haven't had very much sex at all, because again, Bingley is basically always around. It's almost like he can sense that they want to do naughty shit, practically popping up nearly every time they even start to get carried away. Lily adores that boy, but if she *didn't,* she'd absolutely strangle him.

Mary and Lily lasted all of a month of taking it slow before they caved and ended up tumbling in Lily's bed. They'd talked about it, of course, because there were a few things that had to happen first. One being, Lily had to get on birth control, because Mary can get her pregnant, which led into the whole *'do you maybe want kids one day, if the world ever gets better?'* talk. That was a little early, maybe, but it went well. They do want kids, if the world is ever safe enough to bring kids into.

In any case, once they got all the necessary steps out of the way, *then* they fell into Lily's bed. It went well. Maybe a little too well, because following that, that's all they wanted to do, and as established, *they barely get to.*

Lily is ready to end this war herself at this point, if only to be able to get out of the Phoenix and into a house where maybe Bingley can have his own separate room, while Lily and Mary can have theirs, with a door that locks.

Anyway, sex is usually not like this. Spice is a good word for it, in the sense that it's often spontaneous and earth shattering each time. Eagerly earnest and earnestly eager. The rush of exploring one another's bodies and walking around on clouds after, satisfied and pleased about everything. All the cliches. Every single fucking one of them.

So, yes, this is new, but it's just as good as every time. It's more intense than Lily was anticipating, admittedly. She's never really had sex like this at all. Slow and savoring. Because it's not even just about getting off, it's about the act itself; the touch between them, shared, passed back and forth; the cradle of their bodies, how they fit and press together, meeting and falling away on repeat in a just-right drag that leaves Lily's lips parted and her head tossed back. She sighs, and she sighs, and she sighs. It's so dreamy she'd envy herself if she was someone else overhearing it. Oh, she's so glad to be herself right now.

Even the peak is drawn-out, seeming endless. It's like Lily's whole body fizzles and pops, bubbles of pleasure spilling over and bursting one by one. Mary buries her face into Lily's neck, her damp hair, and rides it out with her. It's soft gasps and warmth crawling through their veins, gripping each other tight and settling down, nice and easy.

Yeah, vanilla can be good, too. Really fucking good.

After, once they're sated and clean and snuggling, Mary cards her fingers through her hair and teases, "Ready to sleep now?"

"Joke's on you," Lily mumbles sleepily, "I dreamed my whole way through that. A damn good dream, Mary."

"Sounds like it," Mary agrees, stifling a laugh. "Go on, get some rest. By the time you wake up, I should be done with my classes, and Bingley will be excited to see you."

"Mm." Lily smacks her lips and rubs her face against Mary's chest, throwing a leg over her. "Love that kid."

"I know."

"Love you."

"I know," Mary repeats softly.

Lily breathes in and out, in and out, in…and…out… In the end, there's no fighting it anymore, and Lily drifts out. Mary stays with her at least until she falls asleep.

~•~

James yanks at his stupid tie and lets his cane settle against the wall with a satisfyingly sharp clatter, glaring at Regulus and gritting out, "So, what, it's *my* fault?"

"You're the one who said it," Regulus snaps, slamming their door shut and sweeping past him, his scowl firmly in place.

"What is it with you and a proclivity for hypocrisy?"

"Oh, of *course.* How'd I know you would go there? Of course you would. You just can't resist, can you?"

"You did it first!" James bursts out, pausing in fighting with the buttons on his shirt to toss his hands up. "You're the one who said it *first,* so—"

"I don't care!" Regulus hisses, whirling around on him. "I—"

"Right, of course you don't," James says with a scoff.

Regulus raises both hands and sort of…flaps them around his head in sign of frustration. His voice has raised significantly when he declares, "You *know* why. You—"

"Yes, and *you* know why I did. You know *exactly—"*

"But you didn't even talk to me about it beforehand!"

"Forgive me, I'm sorry, I forgot all about the part where *you* talked to me before *you did it first!* Oh, wait—"

"This is different! You went off-script! You—"

James makes a strangled noise of pure incredulity. "Because *you* were the one floundering! Everything I do—"

"Oh, don't start that shit. Fuck you, James."

"—I do for you—"

"We are not the *main event!"* Regulus explodes, waving his arms around in visible fury. James snaps his mouth shut, and Regulus' chest heaves. He gestures with a trembling hand between them. *"We* are not the main event. Our fucked up love story, as fucked up as it may be, is *ours.* Not theirs. Not—"

"I'm not trying to give it away," James says quietly.

Regulus' nostrils flare. "Maybe not, but you're letting them have it, and it has to stop, because it's—it's—" He swallows and lets his arms clap to his sides. "It always gets so fucked up when we have to put it on camera, and I'm—James, I'm so tired. It was different when I announced to the world we'd get married in the Hallow, because I was taking something *away* from them, not presenting it like an apple in front of a horse you're trying to lead where you want it to go. And I didn't think we would get married. We weren't *engaged* then. It wasn't real the way it is now, because I think—I think we actually will get married, and I don't want it to be a reward for them, or for anyone. I want it to be ours. Just ours."

"Have you considered that I was lying?" James asks.

"Oh, please," Regulus mutters, looking away. "You couldn't lie to save your fucking life."

James clenches his jaw. "Maybe not, but I can lie to save Sirius, and I did. I can lie to save *you,* and I did. Love, you were struggling…a lot, and all I said—literally *all* that I said was that we couldn't get married in the Hallow with a war waging, so it'd be nice if we had help ending it. That's *technically* true, but I never said we *would* get married there. Not once."

"You insinuated it."

"Insinuating something isn't the same as stating it. Sirius said that. Sirius is the one who—"

Regulus' head whips around, and James quickly shuts his mouth, but it's too late. Regulus' eyes narrow into slits. "Oh, *Sirius.* This has him all over it. I'm going to kill him."

"No. No, hey, you stop that," James blurts out, voice strained as his eyes bulge. He quickly steps in front of the door the second Regulus starts towards it. "Okay, just—breathe. Remember the breathing exercises—"

"Fuck the breathing exercises—"

"Reg—"

"Move, James. *Move."*

James—brave soul that he is—holds his ground. "Listen to me, this wasn't his fault. He's just—you *know* how good he is at manipulating the Hallows, and—and okay, maybe he gave me a few points to fall back on if either me or you, or both of us, hit a snag and started struggling. I'm the one who chose the wedding option. I'm—you know how obsessed I am with talking about it. I just… I'm sorry, alright? I'm sorry."

"Do you want to?" Regulus mumbles, after a few moments of heavy silence and maybe some breathing exercises.

The aforementioned breathing exercises have been going on for about a month and a half now, ever since Regulus' violent tendencies hit an all-time peak. He sort of just—cracked, basically. It was like something snapped, and he lost it, flying off the handle when he found out people were talking shit about Barty, because they wisely decided talking shit about

James wouldn't go well for them. The whole thing surrounding Barty was about how Regulus used to sleep in his room with him, then stopped when James arrived, and people essentially boiled Barty down to Regulus' discarded whore.

Naturally, this didn't go over well with Regulus, despite the fact that Barty found it hilarious. James has no issues with Barty as of now, regardless of past jealousy, because Regulus has told him all about how Barty helped him get through some of the recent hard times he had. James is thankful for that, and he's sort of Barty's friend now, so even *he* was offended on Barty's behalf. But Regulus? Well, Regulus put someone in the infirmary and very nearly ended up in solitary—again, apparently. Barty, of course, doesn't give a shit that Regulus doesn't sleep with him anymore, and has jokingly admitted to preferring it, since it frees up his time to fuck whoever he wants. James wishes him well in his endeavors.

It wasn't until after Regulus put someone in the infirmary that they found out that Barty was contributing to the rumors and spreading it around that he was more than just Regulus' whore, he was *James* and Regulus' whore. He found it all so, so funny, even when Regulus was beating the shit out of someone. James? Less so. James was worried, and so was Sirius, and it was Monty who brought up the breathing exercises, which seems to have helped.

James sighs. "Do I want to...what?"

"Get married in the Hallow. Is that what you want?" Regulus asks.

"You know I'd be happy to marry you anywhere," James says softly. "In all the districts. Here. The Hallow. The middle of the ocean on a boat. I'd marry you in hell, love."

"Oh, well, don't say that," Regulus whispers. "That's not fair."

"No?" James fights a smile and steps closer. "I can't help it if it's true. I'm a terrible liar, remember?"

Regulus purses his lips. So fussy. It's horribly endearing. "Fine, *I'll* be the prick—"

"You're always the prick," James points out.

"I'll be the prick, as *always,"* Regulus reiterates, giving James a very cross look that James may or may not want to kiss every inch of, "and tell you that the Hallow is off-limits. I don't want to get married there, or on camera, or for anyone else. When we get married, it'll be at home, when the war is over. And it *won't* be televised. And only people *we* want there will be there. And it'll be ours, *just* ours, and that's final."

James' lips twitch. "Yes, dear."

"Oh, shut up," Regulus grumbles.

"Come here," James says gently, reaching out for Regulus' arms crossed defensively over his chest, grabbing his wrists to tug them down, unravel him, and pull him close.

"You know," Regulus mutters into his shoulder, his words muffled, "they say the first year of marriage is the hardest."

"Mm, they do say that," James agrees, brushing a kiss over the scar up the side of Regulus' throat. "Last I checked, though, we aren't married just yet." He pauses, then grins. "Unless we are, and you just haven't updated me yet."

"In my head, we've been married since I was ten," Regulus informs him wryly.

"Oh?" James stifles a laugh. "Goodness, our first year wasn't that hard at all, in that case. Tell me, do you have all our children named, too?"

"Mhm," Regulus hums, leaning into him with a sigh. "Well, I only ever pictured two, because —well, honestly, because it couldn't just be one, so it had to be two."

"Why did it have to be two?" James asks, amused.

"Well, only one would get lonely."

"Why not more than two? Why not three?"

"Because then they'll have to share. Children should come in pairs. Three is just asking for anarchy, James, and honestly? I think three is a cursed number. Look at how Andromeda, Narcissa, and Bellatrix turned out. The Dumbledores, too."

"I—you know, that's a fair point. But, hear me out, four?"

Regulus peels back to squint at him, thinking about it. Finally, he nods and says, "Acceptable."

James falls in love with him all over again, more and more every damn day. He laughs and tugs Regulus back into his arms, holding him, swaying him a little. "Alright, four it is. You've named two already. What are their names?"

"Florimel and Aster," Regulus tells him. James can hear how bashful he feels in his voice, and it's painfully adorable. To fight it, Regulus clears his throat. "Florimel means honey flower; it grows in late autumn, early spring. Aster means star; it's also a flower, and it grows in late summer, early autumn."

"That's really pretty," James murmurs, sweeping his hand up and down Regulus' back. "Flowers… You love flowers. No more star names, then?"

Regulus snorts weakly. "Aster would be a nod to it, I suppose, but I think my family has worn out that tradition by this point, and unless I wanted to recycle it…but, well, I don't. Some traditions are better off broken."

"Yeah, some are." James presses a kiss to the side of Regulus' head and tugs him in a slow circle. Dancing. "You know, it's really cute that you've been planning out our little family since you were ten." Regulus huffs, starts to get prickly, so James settles him by kissing a path down his neck. "I mean it. Just, you know, you talk about our love story only belonging to us, but it's been ours since we met."

"Incredibly one-sided at the start, though."

"Hey, I caught up eventually. Cut me some slack. Besides, it was incredibly one-sided for *me* for ten years."

"Are you expecting me to feel sorry for you?" Regulus asks.

James nibbles on his ear, then has to stop because it makes him grin when Regulus' breath hitches. "You *could* feel sorry for me. I pined for a decade, love."

"Tragic," Regulus mumbles, aiming for flat and careless, but he's a little too breathless to pull it off.

"I'd like to say I spent those years daydreaming of our wedding and planning out our family in my head, but to be honest with you, I knew that you hated me, so my chances were low, and also I was *fiercely* overtaken by hormones, so…"

"So…?"

"So," James admits into the skin of Regulus' throat, grinning there as Regulus' head falls back, "you could say my fantasies usually consisted of other things."

"Oh, did they now?" Regulus whispers, arms sliding around James' neck, fingers pushing up into his hair.

"It was—mm, don't tell Sirius, but I used to *wish* we'd bump into each other somehow, alone, and you'd be mean, and I would…" James huffs out a laugh, nosing under Regulus' chin, slipping his hands down to settle on Regulus' waist. "Well, I'd be bold. I'd find the audacity. I didn't think we'd *be* anything, but fucking hell, I thought about all the things we could *do."*

"I bet you did," Regulus says, inhaling sharply as James nips and bites a path along his jaw. "What, ah—what things?"

"So many things. I'll show you, if you want." James starts walking him back towards the bed. "We fought before, didn't we? Let's make up. That's my favorite part."

Regulus releases a breathy laugh and clings to him, trying to wind around him, almost trying to climb him. He actually gets somewhere through sheer determination, it seems, because his mouth latches onto James' neck as he hangs off of him, feet coming off the floor. James slides his hands up his back, face buried into his shoulder, breathing him in and carrying him along one careful step at a time. His leg is agitated with this soon enough, so they stumble a little, but Regulus drops his feet back to the floor and plants them there, steadying them.

They're kissing then, deeply, not entirely sure how they got there, and James could drink him down, down, down like the most refreshing thing he'll ever taste, and wants to.

Oh, how he wants to.

They go tumbling into bed moments later, quiet laughter spilling out between them. Just them and their roaming hands. Just them and the fantasies they get to explore.

It's like this a lot these days. Fighting and making up. James, at some point, clawed his way out of his depression, which took time that Regulus spent coddling him, giving him whatever he wanted—or needed—and just…being there. He was there every step of the way, the one to hold him when he cried, and the one to hold him when ran out of tears; the one who eventually coaxed him into a shower, then into the Great Hall, then back into trying and living and trying to live.

It was hard. Very fucking hard. It's still hard, especially when he has to see Alice every day. He doesn't talk to them. Doesn't go near them. Doesn't bother them. He just—he watches them drag themselves out of their own depression, a little more each day. He watches them when they go sit with the eleven people who lived when Frank died, because Emmeline made them go meet those people properly, and spend time with that entire group. He watches them hover around Emmeline basically all the time, like they've latched onto her, but it's more than that; it's lingering touches and the comfort of a person who shares your pain, and isn't the cause of it, and is there every step of the way. He watches them leave for missions, and then he watches them make it back. He watches them, knowing that as hard as it is on him, it's ten times harder on them in ways he can't truly understand, and he watches them live with that.

Some days, James gets sucked back into the blame he puts on himself for that, and on those days, he has to go to Sirius and tell him what he's feeling, just so Sirius can remind him that what he's feeling isn't fair to himself. More days than James ever expected, he actually doesn't need the reminder; he remembers on his own that he had no control over what happened, that he never wanted what happened to happen at all, that sometimes bad things happen and that doesn't mean those involved are necessarily bad people; he remembers who Frank was, how good of a person he was, and how—if he were here now—he'd never want James to waste away from guilt.

So, it comes down to trying, and James never really stops trying for long. He tries every day, and some days, he gets better results than others, but the sun rises and he makes a point to try again. That's who he is. He hasn't lost that.

What *hasn't* helped is the strain of going on camera again. James—understandably—isn't very pleased about going from being Riddle's pawn to being Dumbledore's, regardless of the fact that he's technically on the right side of the war now, but maybe he's tired of being a pawn overall? You ever think of that? How exhausting that is, being at the beck and call of someone who doesn't really care about you, being the face of a war—and oh, they are that, aren't they?

Sirius thrives in the position, because he's good at putting on a mask, and he doesn't feel any remorse about asking Hallows to potentially die; in his defense, the Hallows never cared about all the people they *made* die. So, yes, Sirius does the heavy lifting on handling the Hallows for the most part, and from what Dumbledore has heard from his secret informant, it's paying off. All the ground Riddle gained, he has lost again. The ever-changing tide of public opinion has shifted once more to crash down on him. Hallow riots are at an all-time high, and Riddle's resources run thin when he's forced to balance external *and* internal problems.

Regulus and James have mostly been handling rallying the districts, especially those of which are more Hallow-esque than the rest. District one is basically the Hallow once removed; it's where all the technological and medical advancements are made, even home to the creation of Horcrux Hornet venom into biological warfare. District two is Riddle's main army depot, where they're trained and where the highest numbers reside, ready to go wherever they're ordered. District three and four just got so caught up in the glitz and glam of the hunger games that most there don't even realize they're lambs for slaughter—or, if they do, they don't care.

However, from time-to-time, James and Regulus address the Hallow as well, like today. Originally, it was just James who had to give a broadcast, solely to unravel all the lies Riddle spoke with his mouth. James gave a tell-all, in which he did admit to being coerced, and Sirius' testimony backed him up. But, after that, Dumbledore thought it would be prudent for the world to see Regulus and James as a united front, everyone's favorite couple going to war together.

Riddle has shut down a few of their broadcasts, and then Filius found ways around that later, and the loop started again. Over and over, Riddle has to address the world and call for peace, but that has slowly coalesced into him *demanding* people to stop resisting, bringing down a harsh fist of power with threats and fear as his weapon, which—while that may work on some Hallows—only entices those in the districts to fight back even harder. Riddle is in a lose-lose situation.

He's already losing.

He's losing.

He can't win. Won't win. Was never going to win.

James finds a sense of vindication in that, as well as relief. It does make things easier, possibly for a lot of people. At this point, that's what a lot of people are clinging to in dark times. The hope of a war won and a better world waiting.

But, as established, that doesn't keep things from being rather difficult. It's not enough to erase trauma or make every single moment happy. It *definitely* doesn't keep people from

being angry, or upset, or stop their grieving. It also—as James and Regulus prove—doesn't keep couples from fighting.

Oh, oh, how they *fight.* They're probably going to fight forever; they'll probably die fighting. Arguing. Bickering. Fussing. That eternal push-and-pull that keeps them tethered together, like the red string of fate, except it's a rubber band, and as hard as they yank, they go crashing back together two times harder.

It's not necessarily them trying to get away from each other. If anything, it's just…fun. Don't get James wrong, okay? He loves when Regulus is sweet. It exhilarates him, makes him giddy, makes something in him sing and melt all at once. Because, oh, when Regulus is *sweet,* he's so fucking sweet. He can be so, so gentle; so tender; so adoring, like James is something he wants to take care of and worship at the same time.

When James first saw Regulus, that very first time, his first thought was *he's a baby.* So soft and sweet and shy, when—in the end—he grew up to be feisty and mean, and he has both in him now, which means that, *sometimes,* he is both at the same time, or one or the other, or pretending to be what he grew into to fight where he started out, or using where he started out like a shield to hide what he grew into—and the latter has no business being as entertaining as it is, when it's him acting like butter wouldn't even melt in his mouth. James maybe shouldn't be so thrilled by that, but he is.

He loves not knowing what's coming next with Regulus, always kept on his toes. Every moment with him is like a fucking gut-punch. James never sees it coming, and then *bam!* Regulus is crawling into his lap and telling him he loves him, leaving James breathless and glowing from sheer joy, and then *bam!* Regulus is letting venom flood his mouth, hissing and spitting in blazing anger, made of sparks as he cuts James with every insult and takes him apart with every flash of his lovely, lovely eyes, leaving James breathless and glowing from sheer joy, and then *bam!* Regulus is rolling his eyes and calling him an idiot while fighting a smile, leaving James breathless and glowing from sheer joy, and then *bam!* Regulus is snapping at him, angry enough to be harsh and still calling James *his* fiancé while in the middle of telling him off, leaving James breathless and glowing from sheer joy, and then—well, you get the point.

The *point* is, James is so devastatingly in love with Regulus that he loves everything about him, loves fighting with him, even if that means they can rarely fight for long before they're making up. Oh, but James loves making up, too.

Yeah, he—he *really* loves making up. Sometimes, he's pretty sure they argue just for an excuse *to* make up, because he'll be damned if making up isn't their favorite thing to do.

With good reason, to be fair, because it ends like this, with them in bed as they lose themselves in each other, the whole world draining away where nothing bad can ever touch them. The only touch they know, here and now, is fingers cradling scars and mouths kissing them with reverence.

"Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful," James chants between each kiss to every scar he can reach. Fucking hell, he loves getting Regulus naked, purely because it leaves Regulus undone every time James reminds him how beautiful he is, in spite of his scars and, honestly, because of them.

They're the same as James first saw them. Gouged into skin and faded. The one over his heart is the worst, and that's the one James brands with the heat of his mouth the most.

James has his scars, too. The one on his stomach where he was stabbed. The one on his leg from Axus, and one to match Remus' from the tracker in his thigh. The very faded scars that were his first, down on his leg from the bear trap. A whole mapped out story in their skin, their story, and there's something holy about the way those stories align when they come together. Always, always, always, they were going to end up right here.

"What? No, don't—oh, don't you fucking *dare,"* Regulus chokes out, arching into him desperately when he stops.

James grimaces, biting down on his lip. "Ah, sorry, love. Just, um—one second. We need to adjust."

"Your leg?" Regulus asks, and James sighs and nods. Regulus, with his flushed cheeks and starry eyes, proceeds to break out into a smile. "Oh, I've got an idea."

"Do you n—ah!" James yelps when Regulus launches him over and slams him back to bed, making him land with an *oomph* and leaving him winded. Also, the crawling ache in his leg

fades out the moment he's on his back, so…clearly Regulus is a genius. "Ah, I see. Brilliant. Lovely. You're so lovely."

Regulus hums and swings on top of him. He's still smiling, visibly having the time of his life, utterly *thrilled.* "So, what about this? We've done this many times, but tell me, did you ever have fantasies about it like this?"

"My imagination would be severely lacking if I *hadn't,"* James admits, hands settling on Regulus' waist, looking up at him like he's gazing upon a miracle.

"Good as you imagined?" Regulus breathes out, eyes fluttering shut, head tipping back. He's a vision. *The* vision. James' vision is perfect, with or without glasses, though he always chooses to wear them—but, regardless, the sight of Regulus in all his beauty is fucking blinding.

"Better," James croaks. "So much better than I imagined."

"Yeah, *fuck,* it—it really is," Regulus replies, and his voice cracks, and his fingers turn to claws against James' chest, and when the moans start spilling out of his mouth, he folds forward and muffles them into James'.

James takes it. He lays there and takes it all. Takes, takes, takes anything he can get, and wants more, always, even when he's overwhelmed by it all.

And then *bam!* Regulus is slumped against him, sated and calm, curled up close. He lays all over James' chest, both of them breathing. The curls down by his neck are damp from sweat, and he's tracing his initials on James' skin. It's cute. He does that a lot; it took James a few times and a lot of his undivided concentration to figure out what he was writing with the tip of his finger, and when he *did* figure it out, he had to bury his face into Regulus' shoulder as he erupted into laughter. R.A.B. on James' skin, a quiet claiming, a mindless thing Regulus does because he's a possessive prick.

"So," James mumbles eventually, his eyes drooping and one hand lazily carding through Regulus' hair, "can we at least have wedding photos?"

Regulus slowly lifts his head to glare at him.

James grins.

~•~

Sirius waits until Remus' back is turned, distracted as he is by reaching for a smoke, and then he attacks.

Or, well, he *attempts* to attack. Really gives it his all. Puts in the effort. Doesn't hold back, and does his best, and still gets exactly nowhere. Remus, the bastard, has him jerked around and held in place in less than twenty seconds.

"Can I have a smoke now?" Remus asks wryly.

"Hm. Yeah, sure," Sirius replies casually, keeping his limbs loose. Then, as soon as Remus lets him go and starts to turn away, Sirius grabs him—and gets nowhere *again.*

There's a brief shuffle, the rough dig of wrists colliding, the sure grip of Remus' fingers, and Sirius is caught. Oh, he's so fucking caught. Remus has big hands, big enough to hold both of Sirius' wrists together behind his back in a firm grip Sirius can't break out of, despite being strong. And he tries. Well, he tries as much as he can when Remus' *other* hand is buried tight in his hair, fisting it and holding his head in place.

When Sirius jerks against the hold, Remus doesn't let go. He doesn't ease up at all. He just holds on and watches him very patiently. The strong fucker. Sirius should spit in his face.

"Don't spit on me again," Remus warns.

"Stop predicting what I'm planning to do," Sirius grumbles.

Remus looks exasperated. "You *literally* taught me to."

"Yeah, well…" Sirius trails off, then huffs. He waits for a beat, then starts to bring his knee up, but Remus anticipates this as well, with far too much ease. He pulls Sirius in closer by the hair and slips his leg between both of Sirius', quite literally trapping him with nowhere to go. Sirius' heart may or may not be doing some impressive acrobatics at the moment. It's fine.

"Hi," Remus murmurs, lips curling up. He's close. Very close. His face hovers right over Sirius', gaze roaming over his features like he's savoring them.

"Hi," Sirius breathes out, then tries to wriggle his shoulders, yanking at Remus' hands. Remus tugs his head back sharply, holding him tighter, and if Sirius makes a high noise in the back of his throat, no he didn't. Shh, he definitely didn't.

"You're not getting out of it," Remus tells him calmly, infuriatingly certain, and also infuriatingly *right.*

Sirius' pride shouldn't sting; it *really* shouldn't, and yet it does. But in a good way? There's something almost humiliating about it, and something about the humiliation…ah, well, his brain has stubbornly decided that it's good, somehow, when it's Remus. He definitely has some wires crossed up there.

The only person in this world who could incapacitate Sirius in any situation, and swiftly, has always been Effie. *Only* Effie. Sure, other people could get the upper hand, depending on circumstances, but consistently? When he's going for them first? When he's not willing to be stopped? Yeah, Effie was the only person who could handle him every time, without fail.

Was.

Remus now has claim to that, too, because Sirius *did* literally teach him how, with Effie's help. After weeks, Remus has finally reached this point, where Sirius can come at him any way he wants, during any moment, and Remus—does this. Gets a hold of him. Stops him. Doesn't allow him to have any wiggle room to get anywhere or do anything.

Of course, that *was* the whole point. It has admittedly worked wonders on Sirius' state of mind when it comes to worrying about hurting Remus, because Remus…can definitely handle himself. He was already strong to start with, as well as quite dangerous, but train him up a bit, every day, and then…

This. Fucking hell, he's better than *Sirius* now. He could kill Sirius, if he wanted. Hurt him. He could do anything.

It shouldn't be a comforting thought, but for Sirius, it is. You have to see it how he sees it, because this means that, if Sirius were ever to slip away, Remus would be able to stop him from harming him, or anyone. *Remus* will be okay, no matter what Sirius throws at him, and Sirius knows this, because he's spent the last two months throwing everything he could at Remus.

Sirius has woken Remus up right out of bed to attack him. Sirius has attacked him in the middle of the day, in the middle of the night, in the middle of any moment. Sirius has attacked him while he was talking to Lily, while he was eating, while he was in the kitchen chopping vegetables. Sirius has attacked him during an argument, during a conversation full of laughter, and during comfortable silence. Sirius has attacked him with just his hands, with random objects as weapons, and with whatever he could get his hands on.

Naturally, Remus was not thrilled by this…training, mostly when he was in the middle of doing something, and he didn't start out prepared or very good, in all honesty. To begin with, it was Sirius who was pinning Remus down, holding him in place, and informing him of all the ways in which he could kill him in a scolding tone. This rarely got Sirius the results he wanted, because Remus would just get aroused, generally.

So, Sirius called in reinforcements in the form of Effie, and then Remus started to pick up a few things, then more than just a few, and now… Well, now, Sirius is the one caught every single fucking time, and his pride whines and curdles in distaste about it, but it's also so maddeningly attractive when it's Remus that Sirius can barely think straight these days.

"Can I have my smoke *now?"* Remus asks yet again.

"No," Sirius rasps. He can feel his hair pulled tight at his scalp, making it prickle. "No, definitely not, because I'm going to get out of this eventually, you see."

"Sweetheart," Remus says, "you're really not."

"Absolutely I am. Any second now…" Sirius exhales and can't stop his eyes from fluttering shut when Remus' fingers twitch in his hair. Clench-and-release. Fucking hell.

"You're blushing again," Remus murmurs.

Sirius clears his throat, loudly. "No, I'm not." His face is currently on fire. "It's not a blush. I told you, it's—ah, it's from the exertion. Nothing more."

"You're *flushed."*

"From activity!"

Remus huffs a laugh. "From something, alright."

"What do you know anyway? It's *my* face," Sirius mumbles, starting to shake his head, only to clamp his teeth together and swallow a whine when Remus holds his head still.

"It is your face. I just happen to look at it a lot, because I like it a lot, which means I notice things. I know what you look like when you're flushed from *activity,* and when you're blushing because you're really, *really* enjoying what's going on at the time. You—well, your lips are always wet, because you lick them, and your eyes sort of glaze over."

"Lies and slander."

"At this point," Remus continues, "I think you're doing this for your own benefit, because you *like* it."

Sirius licks his lips, helplessly. He tries to roll his wrists in Remus' grip and feels Remus' fingers grip harder, then tries to shake off the thoughts that he could moan about that, actually, only for Remus to—yet again—tug on his hair to hold him still, and…yes, okay, so Sirius gasps. What about it?

Clearing his throat, Sirius' voice is mortifyingly wobbly when he stutters out, "I—well, ah, you—you—actually, *I* think that maybe—um, maybe *you* like it, is—is what I think. So."

"Is that what you think?" Remus asks, audibly amused.

"Yeah. Don't—don't think I've forgotten," Sirius reminds him in a croak, because fuck, he *definitely* hasn't forgotten. "You said you'd slap me. You said that once, which means you must be having a grand time getting to manhandle me all you like, because you want to—and I quote—slap the shit out of me."

"I never said I *wanted* to."

"Right, but would you?"

"That depends on if you want me to slap you or not. Consent is very important, you know," Remus tells him, lips twitching.

"I *knew* it was a sex thing," Sirius hisses under his breath. "I knew it. I could tell by how you said it. Oh, you're *filthy."*

"Sirius," Remus says, exasperated again.

"We were in the middle of a very emotional moment and you made it about *sex,* you utter harlot," Sirius scolds.

Remus snorts. "I didn't, actually. *You're* the one who was—"

"False allegations," Sirius interrupts. "Shut up."

"You were into it."

"No."

"No?" Remus asks.

A beat. Sirius huffs. "Okay, well, it's not my fault that you're sexy. Literally what am I meant do about that? Remus Lupin says he'll smack the shit out of me, and looks at me like *that,* and what? I'm expected to be—normal? I'm supposed to just carry on as usual?"

"Sirius," Remus repeats, this time definitely laughing.

"You're laughing, but I'm serious."

"Aren't you always?"

"You shut your fucking mouth," Sirius says, aghast.

Remus smiles at him, his gaze warm. "You get so mouthy when we're like this, have you noticed? It's cute."

"Fuck you," Sirius mumbles weakly.

"Whenever you want, sweetheart. You need only ask," Remus murmurs, gazing at Sirius so tenderly for him to have Sirius by the hair while talking such filth. Naughty, naughty man.

Sirius huffs. "We're not—talking about that."

"I think we should revisit it. You're throwing off a lot of mixed signals as of late, and I'm pretty sure we've reached the point where it's unhealthy to deny yourself."

"I'm—I'm not denying myself."

"You sure?" Remus asks softly.

Sirius starts to suggest that Remus is only saying that because he's the one being denied, only to hastily snap his mouth shut, because they've had a real, proper fight about that. Remus *really* doesn't like the insinuation that he cares more about sex than Sirius, and that he'd want to push Sirius before he was ready, all things that get Remus raging like nothing else, which Sirius learned the hard way.

They'd fought very badly. It was ugly. Sirius cried. Remus slammed a door and spent the night with Lily. Sirius cried some more and went and slept on the floor in Regulus and James' room. James ended up sleeping on the floor with him, and Regulus threatened to punch Remus in the face (which was a tame threat, mind, so Sirius knows Regulus likes Remus a whole lot), and only didn't because James stopped him.

Then, later, they talked again. They fought some more. Sirius cried again, because—after the arena and Azkaban—he was so fucking fragile and vulnerable that he'd cry over anything, but *nothing* could made him cry as hard as Remus.

In any case, it was eventually worked out. Remus got it into Sirius' thick skull that he doesn't see him as a sex object, which Sirius *knew,* but insecurities and fears aren't the easiest thing in the world to overcome. Sirius just—with his fear of hurting Remus, with his nightmares and guilt, the mere *hint* of sex or anything too intimate made him feel even more guilty, and even…dirty, to a point. So, he just *couldn't,* and he felt really bad about it, except Remus didn't care about having anything Sirius couldn't give him; Remus never wanted him just for sex; Remus would never pressure him, and would be happy to be with Sirius in any way he's comfortable, even if that meant never, ever having sex again.

Sirius had to work very hard not to suck his cock for that, for *saying* it, for *meaning* it. He'd told Remus he was a very good man, and Remus waved him off, informing him that it's quite literally the bare minimum, that this is how it's *supposed* to be, and that he should never accept anything less.

With time, their intimacy issues (or Sirius', really) have gotten better. They sleep together now, throughout the entire night. Sirius remembers the first night he managed it, the very first night that bled into morning and he woke up in Remus' arms, just slowly becoming aware and opening his eyes to see Remus right there, sleeping peacefully. Something in Sirius had mended together in that moment, and maybe it was stupid, but he felt like he could have cried. He almost did.

In the end, he'd laid there and gazed at Remus as he slept, noting every shift in his expression, how his mouth set when it was slack, the soft snores and quiet snuffling noises that made Sirius want to eat his fucking pillow or bite his own wrist of just sink his teeth into *something,* because he knew what it was like to sleep through the night with Remus, knew what Remus was like when at rest, entirely unguarded and completely vulnerable, and it was *cute.*

It still is cute, and Sirius loves every part of it. Loves that Remus kicks his ankles in his sleep, loves that Remus complains about him hogging the blankets, loves when his hair gets caught under Remus' arm or somehow gets in his mouth, loves how Remus claims he's not the little spoon and then almost exclusively ends up the little spoon by morning. He loves waking up before Remus to gaze at him while he sleeps, though that's rare, and it usually doesn't last long before he can't stop himself from reaching out to touch, to graze the pads of his fingers over Remus' features in pure reverence, something inside him lurching with so much love every time.

These days, Sirius' nightmares are less frequent than they were. On occasion, it's Remus who jerks awake, gasping, and Sirius is the one who gets to hold him and assure him it's okay, it's all okay, everything is okay. Sirius still kisses all his scars nearly every night like a ritual to ward off his fears that only works half the time. After the training, the nightmares of murdering Remus slowed down and are a lot less scary now that Sirius knows for sure Remus could fight him off, and *win.*

They kiss and they touch, but never too much or with too much intensity, and they do not have sex.

But, sometimes, Sirius really fucking wants to. He *really* wants to, more frequently and with more desperation with each passing day. There's so much sexual tension between them these days that you could topple it over with a soft sigh. It is, to put it simply, driving Sirius fucking insane.

The only problem is that, as badly as Sirius wants it, he doesn't feel as if he deserves it. He has regressed quite a bit in his acceptance of pleasure, so to speak. Remus knows. He called it nearly a year ago, during the victory tour. *What, are you saying that I'm not allowed to have sex just because I—wait, is that part of the reason you struggle to let yourself accept pleasure?*

Sirius' sexual desire *is* a separate topic from his acceptance of pleasure; it always has been, even if they go hand-in-hand at times. His sexual desire only comes to him when he has a deep connection with someone, and when trust is built. But his acceptance of pleasure? Now, that's more complex.

See, when you're viewed as a sex symbol, sex itself will be casted in a bad light. It becomes the enemy. It becomes *dirty,* because if you're allowing yourself to enjoy sex in any capacity, then you're exactly what everyone who sexualizes you thinks you are; then you *are* the sex symbol; then you're defeated by the enemy. You're everything you scorned. You're everything you were proud of yourself for not being.

It was something Sirius had to unlearn, and work on, and he did—with Remus' help. He realized, no, sex isn't the enemy. It can feel good, and be special, and there's nothing *wrong* with it at all. He realized he isn't what the Hallows thinks he is, and if he was, who the fuck *cares?* What's wrong with that? There's nothing inherently bad about pleasure, giving or receiving, and he learned, slowly, to love it. To accept it.

But that one last thing. That one thing he never fully realized was a part of it, until now, though Remus saw it long before he did. Just that unconscious belief that, since he has done bad, he doesn't *deserve* to feel good. Withholding it from himself, a self-imposed punishment as penance, only applicable to him; he doesn't feel that it should apply to anyone else. Just him.

Sirius has done a lot of objectively bad things, in recent months. He's hurt people. He's killed people. Worse than all that, he hurt *Remus.* That's the biggest one; the one deserving of punishment the most. So, alright, he has denied himself. He knows he has, and of course Remus has picked up on it. Remus picks up on *everything,* the bastard.

"Sirius," Remus repeats gently, "are you denying yourself?"

"Remus," Sirius mutters, trying to turn his head away, then legitimately whimpering and swallowing a horribly loud moan that threatens to crawl up his throat when Remus—as he has been this whole time—holds him in place.

"What I said before about being with me, and touching, it applies to this, too," Remus says. "It's one thing if you don't want it. That's okay. If you don't, you don't. But if you *do,* and you're not allowing yourself to have it, *especially* when I would happily share it with you, then it's a problem. It's not healthy."

Sirius swallows and closes his eyes. "I know, okay? I just—I don't deserve it. You have to know that."

"Pleasure comes with no judge. It doesn't work on a karmic scale, Sirius," Remus murmurs. "Feeling good isn't something anyone has to earn, and frankly, if it was, I don't think one person in this world would get to experience it. Feeling good is just—being human. Sometimes we feel good, and sometimes we don't, and that's simply how it is. Not letting yourself feel good won't make you a better person, just like *letting* yourself won't make you a worse one. It's not about deserving it—but, if it were, I can't think of someone who does more than you."

"How can you say that?" Sirius chokes out. "After I—after—"

"Sweetheart," Remus whispers, sounding strangled, "you have felt such pain. You never deserved it, but you felt it, and still do. Pain doesn't make us better or worse either, only how we respond to it." When Sirius opens his eyes, it's to find Remus gazing at him so sadly. "It's a lot like pleasure that way, and you've certainly experienced one more than the other, which might be one of the most unfair things I've ever encountered. Pain and pleasure are entwined at times, and there's no shame in that, but I daresay you, of all people, deserve a better balance. Who, if not you, deserves to tip the scales?"

"You," Sirius tells him. "Not me. *You.* Remus, you've felt more pain than anyone I've ever known, and—and call me biased, but that's just not right. You should feel good all the time."

Remus' face softens, and he huffs a laugh. "While that would be nice, it's impossible. No one gets to feel good all the time; that's just a part of life. But, unlike you, I don't deny myself pleasure out of the misguided belief that I deserve pain."

"I—" Sirius swallows, sitting on that for a second, knowing it's true. He sighs. "No, *I* deny you. I—"

"Mm, no." Remus arches an eyebrow at him. "I have a hand, you know, and alone time in a shower. Trust me, I'm not being denied pleasure when *I* want it. You're not with me to be a source of pleasure, Sirius, I've already told you that."

Sirius gets so hot so fast that it makes his head spin. He can *feel* the blush pool into his face and spread. "Oh, so you—you just—I mean, oh. *Oh.* Right. Right, okay, right, right, ri—"

"Sirius," Remus says, lips twitching.

"I want you so *bad,"* Sirius groans, chewing on the inside of his lip obsessively and shifting restlessly just to feel all the places where they touch, where Remus has him caught, and held.

"So, have me," Remus tells him simply. "I'm right here. You don't have to deny yourself. If you want me, have me."

"If I start, I won't stop."

"Good."

"Remus," Sirius says in reprimand, in complaint.

Remus just laughs at him. "What? I mean it. *Good,* because you *shouldn't* deny yourself. There's nothing for you to earn here, Sirius. You don't have to earn me back after what happened; I was yours even then. I still am."

Sirius makes a high-pitched noise, rattling like he's about to fall apart, strung so tight that he can feel the incoming snap like the tides tugged apart by the moon. He can't stop himself from tipping into Remus eagerly, desperately—or trying to, and failing to get anywhere because Remus still has him, which rips a rather pathetic keen right out of his mouth.

"What?" Remus asks. "Come on, Sirius, use your words."

"Oh, fuck *off,"* Sirius wheezes.

"Go on," Remus teases, eyes dancing with humor, "tell me what you want. What do you want, sweetheart?"

One question, one endearment, and a slow build-up—and there's the snap. Breathless and begging, Sirius chants, "Let me go, let me go, for fuck's sake, *let me go."*

Remus lets him go instantly, and approximately fifteen seconds after, Sirius is moaning into his mouth and has him pressed up against the wall, because the bed is too far away.

Sirius would like to say that it's not sloppy, or embarrassing, or that there's some finesse to it, but that would be a lie. He just kisses Remus with more fervor he's allowed between them in *months.* Fuck, he hasn't had Remus' tongue in his mouth in so long, and it's so alarmingly good that he could cry. He thinks he might cry, actually. It's so—it's just so—

It feels good.

Yeah, well, Remus has always been effective at making that happen for Sirius, and it's apparently not a skill he has lost in this regard either. He hasn't forgotten, clearly, because he has his hands in Sirius' hair, and he's kissing him with so much intensity that it scalds Sirius and makes him lose his mind. No, like, he's actually quite sure he's misplaced it somewhere. Just gone. Poof. Done away with. Sirius is all body right now.

To put it simply, there's not a thought behind Sirius' eyes at the moment. He's all sensation. He's shaking, and he's on fire, and he feels so fucking good that he could just—he could just *die,* that's how good it is.

Sirius paws at Remus ineffectively, practically useless, just because he's that gone, lost in the daze, trapped in the haze of it all. At some point, he does manage to grip Remus' hips, meaning to tug and somehow fucking that up by accident, so their knees knock and their legs shift, and then—oh, and then Remus' thigh is right there. It's—oh, it's—

Right in the middle of the kiss, Sirius' mouth falls slack, because *apparently,* he can't do more than two things at once. Remus goes with it, though, and yeah, he *definitely* remembers, because he mouths his way down to Sirius' throat, latching on and putting in the work to leave a mark just like Sirius likes.

Sirius' hips jerk, and he moans awfully loud, unable to help it. Remus liked it before and still seems to, if his soft curses and shaky breathing are anything to go by. He's in favor of what's happening, obviously, because his hands slip out of Sirius' hair and over his shoulders, down his chest, and then he's gripping his waist and encouraging him to continue to move.

Sirius does. He squeezes his eyes shut, struggles to breathe, and stands there, fucking *humping Remus' leg* with absolutely no space for shame within him. How can he be ashamed when it feels this good? It burns through him, how good it is, leaves him trembling and gasping and—

And, oh, they've been here before. It's where they started. Sirius remembers it so vividly, that day of the rule change, when he got a little too far in over his head, too caught up in how good it felt while not knowing how to handle it. Too caught up in *Remus.* Here he is again, just the same, and it's still so all-consuming that he has to bang his hand against the wall by Remus' head, as if that will bring him back to earth. It doesn't, and Remus doesn't even flinch, doesn't stop what he's doing, very dedicated in leaving his signature on Sirius' skin.

"Fuck, shit, fucking *shit,"* Sirius curses, stupidly, and Remus rumbles a throaty chuckle against his neck—and yeah, okay, who cares if he deserves pleasure or not? It's worth it. Oh, it is *so* fucking worth it.

"Okay?" Remus checks, sounding downright *drunk.*

"Okay. So okay. *So* fucking okay," Sirius confirms, then chokes out a moan and presses in closer to tuck his face against Remus' shoulder. "Oh, please, please, please, ple—"

Mere moments later, Sirius' muffled pleas taper off into a truly pitiful whimper as he gathers the cloth of Remus' shirt between his teeth and bites down hard. He rides it out like that, twitching and whining and not caring about a damn thing other than how good Remus smells, how good Remus *feels,* and how Remus is just perfect. He's everything good and perfect in this world, pleasure incarnate, and Sirius loves him so much that it's absolutely, unequivocally insane.

When Sirius sags against him like all of his strings have been cut, Remus' lips soften on his skin, turning to gentle kisses. It feels really nice to Sirius, who—at this particular moment—is pretty sure he's a little high. He's all floaty and fuzzy, and he wants to stay just like this for as long as he can get away with.

Yeah, they're going to have to do that again. Sirius knew it. Once he started, that'd be it, and it *is,* and he has exactly zero regrets. Oh, he should have listened to Remus sooner.

Eventually, Sirius' head stops spinning, his ears quit ringing, and his racing heart slowly calms. His breathing returns to normal. He settles and feels—really okay. Pleased. Happy. Relaxed. Yes, much healthier.

Clearing his throat, Sirius lifts his head and peels back to blink at Remus. "So, um, your turn?"

He can feel his face heating up, threatening to melt off all because he just got off very quickly by…well, humping Remus' leg. Still, Remus only looks at him fondly, and much to Sirius' confusion, he shakes his head.

"That's not necessary. I got off about a minute after you pushed me into the wall," Remus informs him, looking amused.

"What?" Sirius blinks harder. "Wait, really?"

"Yes, really." Remus nods. "You failed to notice, but in your defense, you were otherwise occupied and *really* focused."

"Oh, damn. Okay." Sirius stares at him, then coughs, his cheeks growing warmer. He grins weakly and says, "Well, I don't know about you, but I could really go for a smoke now."

Remus busts out laughing, grabs Sirius' face, and presses that lovely smile of his right into Sirius' glowing cheek. Sirius closes his eyes, grinning, and feels really fucking good.

He accepts it, too.

Chapter End Notes

let's go by pairings, in order!!!

dorlene my beloveds <3 i love them so much, yall have no idea. marlene is so fucking funny, i genuinely think she's the most underrated in this fic for her humor. help not marlene teasing dorcas about the sex lives of the elderly 😭 also!!! dorlene making progress on not being toxically devoted to each other!!! love this for them!!! marlene

holding maximus now 🥲 you don't understand what that means to me, just like, her own personal growth and how far she's come. we DO indeed see marlene and dorcas interact with maximus later, it's very cute. they mean so much to me, and i love them bring crazy about each other and being happy and!!! gahhh, it's what they deserve!!!

(brief interlude to include lily and remus because they mean so much to me, and just them being there for each other, remus always waiting for lily to return when she leaves, ILL CRY 😭)

marylily!!! not them using the L word??? HELLO??? but i mean, they both went into the relationship knowing that it was about love, faling in love, accepting love etc. like, they went into it eyes wide open <3 i love that they've just settled into domestic bliss (as much as they can in the middle of a war whatever), and now they act like they've been married for years 😭 also, it's so special that they don't let the war come in between them, and it's also very special to me that mary has opted out of the war as far as battles go, because 1) it parallels the canon idea that mary opted out of the war, and 2) she has every right to, just as everyone else does, and 3) it doesn't change that she's still involved and helping any way she can, and finally, 4) it's a beautiful depiction of mary and lilys dynamic. like, just the way that the war COULD come between them, but they don't let it... I LOVE THEM 😭 also!!! the fact that they've talked about wanting kids!!! how easy and free lily is with her love!!!! it's all so special <3

jegulus. ah, yes, those insane fucks. if i didn't love them so much, i swear id hate them. they're both so unwell and so in love, it makes me sick. also they're both so petty??? 😭 not james throwing "everything i do, i do for you" back at regulus PLS HES SO FUCKING RIDICULOUS I LOVE HIM. i think, like, james is one of the few people that can Handle regulus, because i think, for most people, it's very easy to let regulus intimidate them? and then there's james who's like: look at how pissed off he is, i Need To Kiss Him. like??? james, get a grip. it's okay, regulus isn't much better. james says One Romantic Thing, and he melts. but also, on a more serious note, them discussing how their relationship is viewed like a commodity and regulus expressing that he doesn't like it—this is good! this is a boundary!!! it's very good for them to like, have control over the perception of their relationship, considering the insane amounts of hallows that feel entitled to it, ya know? also², them talking about kids, THEY'RE ADORABLE. and regulus imagining two because kids should come in pairs because HE came in a pair and he can't imagine a life without sirius, i WILL go play in traffic 😭 oh!!! and regulus finally snapping! bet everyone expected it to be for james, but he made quite the impression when he broke that dude's shoulder, so everyone shut up about him and went with barty instead. mistakes were made, clearly. but regulus having to do breathing exercises and like, working on his anger and stuff. rabid man! i love him.

wolfstar, oh wolfstar. how i adore them. one, remus now being trained up and sirius feeling safer that way??? and also attracted to it??? HELP HES SO FUNNY 😭 just like, sirius' pov cracked me up the whole way through, because he's SUCH a mess in general, but he's even more of a mess about remus. they love each other so much ☹️ also!!! them sleeping together now, and healing, and having fights but working through them and just!!! they're so healthy!!! they talk and communicate and are honest with each other and i need to put them in my pocket!!! and sirius' relationship to pleasure has

always been a big thing in this fic, so seeing how it has evolved is so special to me. just, they mean everything to me <3 (i swear if i loved them less, i could talk about them more)

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-marlene awkwardly putting up with minerva for dorcas :(
-lily and mary agreeing to Take It Slow, then lasting a month lmaooo
-barty spreading rumors that he's james AND regulus' Thing On The Side 😭
-monty teaching regulus breathing exercises :(
-regulus last chapter: sirius im so glad you're here it solved all my problems. regulus this chapter: sirius im going to fucking kill you
-james loving that regulus traces his initials on his skin
-sirius calling remus a harlot (this is so funny to me)
-remus: im Not the little spoon. also remus: *is the little spoon more often than not*

The Districts

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone...

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past violence/death/murder/torture
-vague references to past child abuse
-references to past wounds/injuries
-mentions/descriptions of blood
-brief mention of vomiting (no one does, but still)
-mentions of use of biological warfare
-depictions of dissociative amnesia (from sirius' pov, altogether brief, but still distressing)
-graphic depictions of violence
-depictions of warzones
-depictions of guns/gun violence
-depictions of panic attacks
-references to/depictions of child death (due to the warzones)
-vague depictions of child endangerment (due to the warzones)
-depictions of grief
-death/murder

alright, yall, strap in. this one—and the next few chapters—are all very action-packed and war-focused. they're heavy chapters, and people do die. yes, some of the deaths are people we know and care about, not just nameless, unknown aurors. i am begging you all to please read the warnings and heed them, and for those of you who need to know who dies before reading the chapter, i will be putting a spoiler list in the end notes. please, please take care of yourselves!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

District eleven is the first to be taken—and very, very swiftly, too. It goes like this:

"Well," Dorcas says slowly, "that was easy."

"Wasn't it?" Marlene mutters.

Dorcas coughs. "Do you think it'll be that easy everywhere? I mean, it can't be, right?"

"Yeah, I have a feeling that none of the other districts will surrender in the first fifteen minutes," Marlene agrees dryly.

"Right." Dorcas shakes her head and looks around the room full of surrendered Aurors. They literally just laid their guns down, because apparently they've been spread so thin and their working conditions are so shit that they had all agreed to surrender if rebels showed up. At least then they could have a break, was the general consensus. It's still baffling to think about, but district eleven has been rioting *consistently* since Marlene's interview *before* the games, and Riddle has implemented a harsh regimen that left the Aurors all over, but especially here, very fucking exhausted. So, they decided to just…give up.

"Right, uh, what do we do now?" Marlene mumbles.

"Minerva, what do we do now?" Dorcas asks.

Minerva stands there and looks around, and she doesn't seem to have the answers. She looks as lost as they feel.

As it turns out, a war not hard-won is just…awkward.

~•~

The next districts taken are five, nine, and ten. Alice is in five, Emmeline is in nine, and Amos is in ten.

Only one doesn't make it back.

Regulus wasn't very close to Amos, but Barty was his friend. In fact, Barty and Amos have hooked up at least once, but their time spent together went outside the bounds of just sex,

which is how Regulus knows that Barty actually liked Amos as a friend to start with. For Barty, he'll have sex with anyone he finds himself even mildly attracted to or could have fun with; it's love and connection he's never really cared for.

Though it goes unspoken, Regulus knows he's the only person Barty has ever loved, and even that is a very peculiar form of loving. Barty had no desire for a relationship—and still doesn't have that desire—and while he never begrudged anyone the concept of commitment, he did once admit to Regulus that it simply wasn't for him. It's been years, and that's never changed. Barty's commitment and desire falls into the realm of friendship alone, and for so long, the only person that applied to *was* Regulus. But it hasn't been just Regulus anymore.

Now, there's Rodolphus, there's Asher, there's Rabastan. Barty gets on well with Alecto, adores Pandora just like everyone else, and has a rather solidified bond with Mary, Sybill, and Lily—all people he went on his first mission on, a bond forged in the fires of the sky. Amos was there.

Amos isn't here anymore.

Sybill cries into Kingsley's shoulder. Mary rubs Lily's back as her hands shake, and as her voice shakes when she says, "He was supposed to be fine. He was always fine." Rabastan holds Asher's hand as she hangs her head, and Rodolphus closes his eyes like the loss at the hands of war won't be there if he isn't looking, like he wishes it couldn't reach any of them.

Barty gets up and walks away.

"Reg," James says when Regulus stands up.

"No, just—" Regulus shakes his head and tugs his hand from James', stepping away. "We'll be back. I just need to be with him right now, James."

Maybe it's harsh leaving him there like that, but it's—that's just life sometimes. The thing is, though it goes unsaid, there was a time when the only person Regulus wanted to love, and let himself love, was Barty. Like Barty, it was a peculiar form of loving, something with no name. Not just friendship, but not quite romance either. Somewhere in between, a liminal

space they were happy to find consistency in. There's something so terribly human about how they matter to each other.

So, Regulus goes to Barty, and he finds him in an abandoned corridor, sitting on the floor in silence. Regulus sits with him, and he doesn't know what to say. He never knows what to say.

This is what Barty says:

"He was the only person who could find me when you weren't here to look."

This is what Regulus says:

"I'm sorry, Barty."

This is what no one says:

It's war. What did you expect?

~•~

The next districts taken are eight, seven, and four. In eight, a Phoenix heli-carrier goes down right in the middle of a neighborhood that ends with over thirty casualties, up to and including children, various Aurors, and Order members.

Sybill is not the pilot, but Lily is there when she finds out about it, and so she is there when she sees true, intense fear bloom in her eyes. There are twelve people at the table; Sirius, James, Regulus, Mary, Rodolphus, Rabastan, Asher, Dorcas, Sybill, Lily, Kingsley, and Cordelia. They all look at her, a war pilot on standby, and no one looks as haunted as Kingsley and Lily do, except for maybe Sybill herself.

Sybill sees Emmeline approaching the table and scrambles up, rambling about a superstition that the first to rise at a table of thirteen is the first to die, and she doesn't want to die. She wants to fly, then make it safely back to the ground.

In district seven, an entire group of fifteen people die at the hands of biological warfare ruthlessly deployed by Riddle. No one knows how or why, because every other person in all the districts are immune, yet those fifteen people—for some reason—are not. Lily is subjected to watching Remus pace and rant about this for *ages,* her heart aching at how Remus has been manipulated into taking the weight of this on himself, so intrinsically tied to immunity that, when said immunity fails for reasons unknown, he treats it as a personal fault.

They never find out why those fifteen people weren't immune when everyone else is. They never will. Sometimes, in life, things will always be a mystery.

Lily isn't in district four, but she's there when a Phoenix heli-carrier is called in. She watches that Phoenix heli-carrier fly out. She doesn't get the details until later, but that Phoenix heli-carrier and the team on it takes down three Hallow heli-carriers before it goes down itself.

Sybill is the pilot, and Lily is there when Kingsley returns, eyes hard and battle-bright. He does not cry until Lily is in front of him, until she tentatively reaches for him, until he pushes her hands away from him and falls into Alice instead as Lily says she's sorry, because she is, because it hurts so much. Because Sybill is her friend—was her friend—and she should be here, but she's gone, and Lily is so fucking sorry.

And then Kingsley does. Kingsley cries, and he clings to Alice, and he says, "I knew, I knew, I knew it would happen."

And Lily wants to turn back time and fix the mistake that made him right. Lily can't, and he has turned away from her, and she says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I made it happen."

And everyone stays there. They stay there, and they mourn, and they do not say, "It's war, it's war, what did you expect?"

It isn't until much later that Lily thinks about those twelve people at the table and remembers that there was one no one thought to count. Sleeping peacefully from the safety of his mother's arms, a baby safe from war, Maximus was there.

Thirteen people after all.

Sybill stood up first.

~•~

The next districts taken are three, then two.

In three, those sent out from the Phoenix have an ugly, ugly fight, since many of those in the district fight alongside the Aurors. Not all, but enough that it's a battle hard-won.

But the battle is won, if you ignore that over half of the district is either dead or forced into compliance, kept as prisoners on Albus' orders at least until the war is won. These people, so mind-washed by the Hallow and the games; these people, just wanting to defend their home and their life as they know it. So many people dead or turned into prisoners of war, and who are the good guys and the bad guys anymore? What does it mean when the 'good' side is doing the very things they're fighting against? Following orders. Being controlled. Sheer slaughter.

Alecto returns with her brother, Amycus, in tow. Not just him, but his wife and two kids, her niece and nephew. Amycus is put into solitary with his wife, Xena, because they were two who fought on behalf of their home, and the behalf of the Hallow. Alecto had to fight him, and maybe, perhaps, that's why he let himself and his family be caught.

But he loudly and proudly does not agree with this side of the war, appalled and disgusted that his sister is an anarchist, willingly and on purpose. He never went into the games, never had to, and so he can't understand. It was Alecto's money from winning the games that kept him and his family well cared for.

Sirius learns all of this because he is there when Alecto comes to Andromeda with a request to help her care for her niece and nephew until the war is over and Amycus can be released with his wife, Xena, and trusted with their freedom—because, right now, Albus has decided they can't be.

"Andy," Narcissa says, looking at her, and Andromeda sighs before reaching out to offer hands to little Burgundy and Belfast, promising to introduce them to Dora. The promise of friendship is what gets them to reach out and follow.

Alecto dumps her head on Narcissa's shoulder, exhaling heavily and croaking, "Thank you."

"Think nothing of it," Narcissa murmurs, carding her fingers through Alecto's hair and looking right at Sirius, holding his gaze. "Family is often difficult. Trust me, I know."

Sirius' lips twitch up faintly, and he thinks about how Cissa hugged him when he returned, and he thinks about how Cissa and Andy never quite lose that layer of frost in their voice when they talk to Regulus, and he thinks about the way Bellatrix tried to kill the cousin she hated the most and died at the hands of the only cousin she really loved, and he thinks about all that's left of the Blacks and how, dysfunctional as they are, they're still here, and he thinks *oh, this fucking family.*

In district two, Sirius is there. He's not alone. Regulus goes with him, as does Effie, Monty, Remus, Lily, and James. As do many, many others, because district two is going to be the biggest fight. Rodolphus and Rabastan also return to their home district, refusing to stay behind.

This is how it goes:

District two has an entire training center full of extra Aurors that no other district has, which means that there's *a lot* of fucking Aurors to fight, and that's not even including those in the district that also align against those they call anarchists.

By now, at least, Riddle has had Aurors travel to the Hallow in preparation. The Order now has control of transportation in the form of the train, and the only district that can get directly into the Hallow by anything *other than* the train is district one; this means that no more Aurors can go to the Hallow than Riddle has already called, and it means that no other Aurors can get sent out to the districts to fight, other than those already there. Of course, Hallow heli-carriers can take flight, but they're met with the Phoenix heli-carriers, a war in the sky that both sides are losing; all Phoenix heli-carriers go down, but they're taking plenty of Hallow heli-carriers with them when they do.

In short, Riddle is leaning into his tactical retreat, but that doesn't necessarily mean he's lost the war just yet. The fact that his main weapon—biological warfare—has been entirely dismantled is a major setback, but it likely only invigorates him to hold his ground even more. The Hallow—yes, that will be the true fight. District two won't even compare.

On the way to district two, James sits down next to Monty and shows off the brace for his leg; between Sirius and Filius, as well as a couple of others, they all came together to help find accommodations for those with any disabilities. For James, this means a brace that ensures his leg won't buckle—though they can't help with his pain other than supplying some meds to take the edge off (which Poppy did)—and a new, fancier retractable cane that stays standing when James leaves it in place and snaps into itself with one squeeze of the handle.

For Sirius, this means hearing aids that are actually very fucking cool, if you ask him. They essentially filter noise for him, so those at higher frequencies (such as screams, which are his main issue for being triggered) will be muffled. They also just—look cool, honestly. The way they settle around the curve of his ear, mercury silver like a flash of jewelry past his hair. Sirius may or may not have spent days wearing them and trying to needle compliments out of Remus for them, which Remus was more than happy to give him.

For Regulus, this means stainless gloves—as in they're made out of material that won't stain, which will mean he won't get blood on his hands. He's also supplied with a small tube of something Asher cooked up for him; just one little smear on the edge of his nostrils and the end of his nose should keep him from smelling blood—and pretty much anything at all, which he doesn't seem to like, as it's the loss of one of his senses, but it's better than vomiting when he's surrounded by blood and coming into contact with it. Sirius also suggested getting him an umbrella in case it rained, and Regulus didn't speak to him for two days, so apparently he took offense to that.

While James is wrapped up with his dad, Sirius sits next to Regulus and can't be still. Can't stop moving. Watching Remus talk with Lily across the aisle, watching his face, the way his

lips shape around his words and the way his scar shifts with his changing expressions—and Sirius is watching him so intently that it takes him a second to notice that he has started to cry. A quick look around shows him that Rodolphus and Rabastan—who sit right across from him and Regulus—have not noticed, and everyone else is caught up in conversing with others, so Sirius hastily swipes at his face to get rid of the evidence, thankful no one saw, and then—

"Why are you having a full fucking meltdown? You're so dramatic," Regulus mutters, and Sirius' head snaps towards him, utterly aghast. This little shit.

"Oh, you want to go there? *You,* Reggie? Need I remind you of the time you thought I died in the arena, and you—"

"I didn't—"

"Oi, Rodolphus, back me up on this, older brother to older brother," Sirius calls out, then huffs in offense when Regulus elbows him sharply in the side. "You saw it, right? He *absolutely* had a meltdown, didn't he?"

Rodolphus hums. "He sure did. It was gut-wrenching, in fact."

Regulus looks at Rabastan and shakes his head. "That didn't happen."

"I believe you, man," Rabastan assures him, jerking his thumb at Rodolphus. "All he does is lie, so yeah, I believe you."

"When do I lie?" Rodolphus sputters. "Name *one time—"*

"You told me you didn't steal my pillow months ago, and I know it was you. I *know* it was."

"It wasn't! I'm telling you, Bas, it was someone else!"

"Who, then?"

"Um. Well, okay, I don't know, *but—"*

Rabastan gestures to Rodolphus, raising his eyebrows pointedly. "See? Liar."

"I do see," Regulus replies with a straight face, looking completely neutral as he nods in agreement.

Sirius stares at the side of Regulus' face until, finally, Regulus' gaze darts towards him very briefly before he quickly looks away, because he's a lying, sneaky little shit of a pillow thief and has no shame in it. Sirius shakes his head and looks away, reaching up to swipe a hand over his mouth to hide his grin. Rabastan and Rodolphus continue to argue about who the pillow thief is, and Sirius doesn't interrupt to inform them of the real culprit, because he knows it's his brother.

James is also looking at Regulus with a grin, utterly smitten, the fool that he is. Regulus stole the pillow for James, which Sirius only knows because James told him in one of his rare moments of delight in the early days after making it to the Phoenix. He'd been so pleased—almost shy—about how Regulus was essentially coddling him at the time, said he felt *spoiled.* Which, these days, he is. Everyone's guilty of it, but Regulus is the worst. What James wants, James gets.

"I'm not having a meltdown, by the way," Sirius mumbles as he drowns out the growing argument between the brothers across from them, because siblings can never argue normally.

"You were crying," Regulus replies quietly.

"Crying is okay sometimes," Sirius tells him.

"Mm, I can almost hear Mother and Father screeching about how it's not," Regulus muses.

Sirius raises his eyebrows. "You can hear that far? All the way to hell?" Regulus snorts, and Sirius knocks their shoulders together. Across from them, Rodolphus has Rabastan in a headlock. "No, I mean it. I'm okay. We're okay. We're *going* to be okay. We'll go in and get it done."

"Me and you," Regulus says.

"Me and you," Sirius agrees.

"And me," Effie declares warmly as she dumps herself right in between them, pushing them apart to wrap each arm around their shoulders and squeeze them close to her. Sirius beams at her, and Regulus very bravely withstands the affection. After a beat, Effie snaps, "Boys, stop it."

Rodolphus and Rabastan immediately let each other go and straighten up, while James and Monty stifle laughter. Lily and Remus, on the other hand, look over curiously with that shared hint of defiance in their eyes, like they heard *stop* and automatically have the impulse to *go*.

"Yes ma'am," Rodolphus says.

"Sorry ma'am," Rabastan adds.

Effie hums, pleased, and settles into her seat. "Now, who wants to hear the story of how I made the head gamemaker of my games piss himself?"

Everyone stares at her, because they do, in fact, want to hear that story. Sirius has already heard it, and loves it, but he's happy to listen again. It's a good way to pass the time.

So, time passes, and they arrive.

And, though district two won't compare to the final battle in the Hallow, it's absolutely fucking *dreadful.*

Sirius has never fought with all his loved ones together like this. Sure, they've trained, and sure, they've all had experience with fighting by now, but that's not *quite* the same as all of them being in the middle of a warzone together.

The first person he freaks out about is James, because—well, because James freaks out first. No one is expecting it, James least of all, apparently. The first explosion, and James dives down, hyperventilating and petrified. The others don't see, already caught up in fighting, and it's just Sirius who reaches him, frantic with worry because he thinks James is injured, but James—isn't.

"What?" Sirius gasps out. "James, what is it? What's—"

"I thought—I—I—" James lays there, wild-eyed, chest heaving. He's shakily patting himself down, his whole body rattling. "The—I heard the explosion, and I—"

"Oh," Sirius whispers, realizing all at once what the problem is. James looks so fucking scared, and why wouldn't he? He's been on fire before, and everything around them is burning already. "Okay, um. Fuck."

"The flames," James wheezes, gripping desperately onto Sirius' shirt. "It's—the heat is so intense, so—"

"Okay, hey, look at me. James, look at me," Sirius says, reaching out to grip James' jaw and force him to look. "Breathe with me. Come on, in and out."

James breathes with him, slowly calming, still shaking afterwards. "I'm—Im sorry. I—"

"You have nothing to apologize for," Sirius states firmly, then reaches up to take his hearing aids out. The part that hooks into his ears have soft ear plugs on them, and Sirius peels them off, holding them out to James. "Here, this should keep the explosions from being too loud for you."

"Sirius, I can't take—"

"Shut up, yes you can. Mine still work. It'll just be a little rough in my ear, and that's fine. Take them."

"Thank you," James whispers, and takes them.

"The heat—" Sirius halts, his brain stalling out. "Just try not get too close to the flames, and don't look at them. Is—will that work? James, can you do this?"

"Yes," James says quickly, swallowing harshly.

Sirius studies his face, then murmurs, "If you can't, that's okay. There's no shame in it. You—"

"I'm doing it," James cuts in forcefully, firming his jaw and taking a steadying breath. "I'm not leaving any of you. I can do it. I will."

"James," Sirius starts.

"I promise I'll be okay," James insists, blowing out a harsh breath. "Don't—please don't tell anyone, okay? You can't tell anyone. Just—I'll be fine, Sirius, just help me up."

"Okay, James," Sirius says softly, then helps him up, and they go right back to it. And survival is a funny thing, isn't it? James knows his limits—even the ones he has just learned—and he knows how to survive, so he works around that and with that. Sometimes that's the only thing that can be done.

The fight continues on.

The truth is, being with people you care about during these sort of moments doesn't make it easier. If anything, it makes it harder. A warzone isn't a place to be distracted; you can't even think past all the chaos and the will to survive for yourself, let alone anyone else, so being with people you desperately don't want to lose in a place so very easy to lose them is just a recipe for disaster. Sirius—doesn't handle it well.

The moment Sirius loses sight of Remus, the mission becomes inconsequential. Fighting the Aurors doesn't matter. Finding Remus is the only thing that matters, and when he can't, he's gripped with a panic attack so sudden and so strong that he blinks once, then blinks again to find himself in a new spot, throat raw in the midst of screaming Remus' name so loud that it's a wonder the whole world doesn't hear it.

Imagine you go to war, and when you get there, you flicker in and out. Amongst all of that mayhem, there's mayhem within that wreaks havoc on the state of your mind. You are here, and then you are not, and you can't remember. You can't remember and you can't remember and you can't remember and you—

It'd be nice, wouldn't it, if there was some sort of magical answer to solve the issue? If Remus just popped up in front of him whenever Sirius needed him. If the war would stop for one second so Sirius could reach for Remus and have him again.

That doesn't happen, though.

What happens is that Sirius blinks and finds himself with Rabastan, and no one even knows he hasn't been here this whole time. People are yelling, and there's gunshots, and Sirius can see James, Regulus, and Monty across the street ducked behind a building to stay in cover, and Sirius can see Lily, Effie, Rodolphus, and Remus being dragged into the building. The training center where so many Aurors are.

"We need to get inside!" Rabastan shouts, leaning behind a large bin next to Sirius, watching his brother be dragged away with a whine caught behind his teeth. He tries to surge forward right into the gunfire, shouting, "Rodolphus!"

Sirius snags his arm and slams him back against the bin, taking a deep breath and forcibly holding him there. Okay. Sirius is here. He's here. The screams and gunshots are muffled, but the earth trembles with them. Sirius is here, and he can feel it. He's here. Okay.

"No," Sirius snaps when Rabastan tries to wriggle away from him. "Listen to me, if you run in there alone, you're going to die. We'll need to go in together, which means getting across this street, which means I need to signal to James that we need help. You can't leave until then, so stay put."

"And if it was Regulus?" Rabastan hisses, wheeling around to glare at him. "He's my *brother!* I have to—"

"You have to *stay put,"* Sirius cuts in harshly. "How do you think Rodolphus would feel if you ended up dead, huh? Take it from me, it would break his fucking heart."

Rabastan bounces in place like staying put is the most painful thing he's ever experienced. "Then—then we have to do something, because we need to *get to them."*

"I know, okay? Just—let me get James' help." Sirius exhales and swivels his head to look across the way, finding James looking back, right at him. They stare at each other past all the gunfire and explosions, and Sirius doesn't know how he knows, but he does know that they're breathing in and out at the same time, the same pace, together.

Sirius holds up his gun at James, who cocks his head. Sirius then points his gun and makes a sweeping motion and taps the side of the bin. James' face lights up, and he nods.

Honestly, they'd kill it in charades.

A moment later, James, Regulus, and Monty are providing cover fire as Sirius and Rabastan take off running, mostly going in hope that they won't get shot. Along the way, Rabastan stumbles over his feet and goes down as Sirius is running swiftly up behind him. It's easy to yank him right back up and shove him into sprinting again, dragging him along until they make it to the others.

"You're as insane as Bellatrix," Rabastan chokes out when they crash against the wall with James, Regulus, and Monty.

"I resent that," Sirius mutters, barely sparing him a glance before he focuses on the others. "Okay?"

"We're fine," James says, his voice strained, still visibly shaken from his own struggles and continuing on in spite of them anyway. "The others were taken inside. We—we need to get in there, but we might not make it without—"

"I'll provide cover fire, and you all go," Rabastan declares, turning to face the street. "One of us has to stay behind, or no one's making it through that door. May as well be me." No one protests, because no one wants to stay behind when the people they love are inside. Not one person would want that. "Just, hey, make sure—you have to get Rodolphus. You have to."

"We'll do our best to," Regulus murmurs.

"Get him out," Rabastan croaks, swinging his gun up and jerking his head as he crouches down for a new vantage point. "Just get him out. That's all that matters. Keep him—keep him safe."

"We need to split, two going in through the front, two going in the back," Sirius states, and then there's a beat of silence as they all look around at each other and realize no one wants to part from anyone else.

Finally, Monty clears his throat and says, "Alright, well, I'm claiming Regulus. We'll take the back."

Regulus looks oddly charmed by this.

"Hey, be *careful,"* Sirius and James announce at basically the same exact time, and Regulus rolls his eyes as Monty snorts. They're clearly thick as thieves, because Regulus' lips curl up when Monty knocks their shoulders together, and they slink off while whispering to each other, Monty chuckling quietly as they go. James and Sirius exchange an exasperated look.

Getting inside the building is easy enough, but there's a lot of opposition waiting. Sirius has sparred with James plenty over the years, and especially recently, but they've never really been in a situation where they've had to fight together.

Frankly, it feels like Sirius has morphed with James to form a larger, much more dangerous beast. It's not just flowing together and working around each other well; they work fluidly as one. Perfect extensions of one another. It's as if they read each other's minds before a thought is even fully formed, and it's—well, it shouldn't be fun, war isn't fun, but fighting alongside James *is* fun. It's thrilling. It's exhilarating.

Sirius is a swift killer, one or two strikes and that's it, his opponent is dead. No muss and no fuss and no playing games. He wins a fight before it even begins, usually. James is not as efficient, but he has a further reach and is genuinely good at multitasking. He can shoot one Auror while whacking another one with his cane, and he makes it look easy.

"You're fucking brilliant with that, you know," Sirius compliments at one point, nodding to James' cane as he plants it on the floor after hitting an Auror with it so hard that teeth fell out and they immediately crumpled to the ground.

"Don't tell anyone," James whispers, like it's a secret, "but it's satisfying as hell to swing it about."

"I can tell," Sirius says, amused. "Remind me not to get on your bad side, yeah?"

James frowns. "I don't have a bad side." Sirius looks down at the bodies at their feet, half of which James gets credit for putting there, and then he looks up and raises his eyebrows. James coughs. "Okay, well, I don't have a bad side *you* could ever get on, how about that?"

"Works for me," Sirius muses, admittedly pleased by this.

"Want to try?" James offers, holding out his cane.

A pause. Sirius reaches out and takes it. As it turns out, it *is* satisfying as hell to swing it about. He's not as good with it as James, though, and can't multitask between gun and cane the same way he does. Sirius has never thought about it, really, but now that he is… Well, James' weapon was never really the hatchet from his first games; he won't even pick one of those up now. The cane, however, is clearly the weapon for him, the one that brings him comfort and security the same way daggers do for Regulus. It makes sense, in a way, that James' weapon would have this duality; made to help, yet capable of harm if necessary. A lot like James himself.

Sirius has given James his cane back by the time they make it outside the room those taken are being held in, waiting to meet up with Monty and—ah, shit. Regulus isn't here.

"Where's Regulus?" Sirius demands immediately, his heart seizing in his chest to find Monty entirely alone.

"Look," Monty whispers, waving them over to the door so they'll peer through the tiny glass window on it. All they can see is Effie, Remus, Lily, and Rodolphus being shoved around by Aurors, struggling with their hands bound behind their backs, clearly not complying. Monty isn't focusing on them, though. "Regulus is—"

Before he can finish or explain anything else, the sound of gunshots from within the room echo out to them, muffled, but they can't find the source. Aurors just start dropping out of nowhere, and Monty wastes no time before bursting into the room to help. Sirius and James scramble to follow.

It's a grueling fight inside, but it's not just the three of them. Effie headbutts the Auror holding her and starts fighting with her hands tied behind her back, at least until Monty can make his way to her and set her free. She thanks him sweetly when he does, then snaps an Auror's neck only seconds later.

With no warning, there's a clatter from above, and Regulus drops from a vent, landing on the Auror dragging Rodolphus down to put the gun to his head. Rodolphus just narrowly escapes death because Regulus is a *smart* little shit. In the meantime, James and Sirius are fighting to get to Lily and Remus, though the point turns out to be moot. Before they can make it, Lily and Remus have already gone back-to-back and untied each other without even having to look or speak, which Sirius does have to admit is impressive.

The moment Sirius has a path to Remus, he's going. He makes it to Remus just as he throws an Auror aside with a grunt, spitting out a furious, "You dumb cunt," with a glare that could melt metal and blood splitting his knuckles open. Sirius' knees may or may not go all wobbly in response to this.

"Hey, hi, are you okay?" Sirius chokes out as soon as he reaches Remus and actually gets to reach for him, hands on his cheeks, searching him for any sign of pain or injury. "You're okay, right? Are you hurt? Are you—"

"I'm fine." Remus blinks rapidly, his chest heaving, face flushed. He nods. "Sweetheart, I'm fine."

Sirius has never known a relief as intense as this. It's pure adrenaline, honestly, leaving him shaky in the aftermath. He rides the wave by throwing himself back into the fight, stumbling into Regulus and Lily at one point.

"Smart thinking, by the way," Sirius comments breathlessly after tossing someone into a wall. Regulus is in the middle of withdrawing his boot from an Auror's crushed windpipe, but he looks up and frowns. "The vent. That was smart."

Regulus blinks, then gives a faint smile and raises his shoulder in a half-shrug. "No one ever thinks to look up."

"You okay?" Sirius checks.

"Yeah. You?" Regulus replies, then seems to relax a little when Sirius nods. "Where's James?"

"He's—" Sirius stops when he swivels his head to find James in the middle of…fighting alongside his parents? That's not how most families have group bonding time, Sirius thinks, but the Potters aren't like most families, are they? Sirius has never known a family brighter than them, and together, they're all blazing. Even Monty—not one for conflict—is something else when he really gets going, especially if the people he loves are in danger. "Yeah, as you can see, he's fine."

With that, Sirius resumes fighting.

Eventually, more from the Phoenix burst in to help, meaning the barracks have been taken, which means district two is losing. It's good, and though the battle lasts for a long time, it is nonetheless a battle altogether won.

"Where's Rabastan?" That's the first thing Rodolphus asks when everyone is in a position to stop and breathe.

"I never saw him come in," Regulus says with a frown. "They took the street outside, so he should be here."

Rabastan isn't here.

He's not in any room on any floor. He's not loitering outside dealing with various Aurors or members from the district that survived. He's not among those heading back to the outpost for medical treatment, and so—as terrifying as it is—the next place to look is among the dead.

Rabastan isn't there either. None of the dead bodies gathered or the dead bodies not yet gathered are him.

Rodolphus isn't handling it well.

"Well, where did you fucking leave him?" Rodolphus snaps, visibly at the end of his rope, his shoulders tight and his eyes a little wild. There's something there in his expression that Sirius understands; he imagines that's how he looked the day he watched his little brother tip himself into a crimson river and thought he died. That look there. Sirius has felt that.

"There's no reason he would be here," Regulus is saying as they go to the last place they saw Rabastan, crouched down by a wall to get them inside to save his brother. "He would have left and come inside if he—"

Sirius comes to a screeching halt.

Memory is a funny thing, isn't it? He has a more complicated relationship with it than most, and he's already forgotten so much today, but what he does remember is Rabastan falling. In the middle of all that gunfire, Rabastan fell.

No one wants to stay behind when the people they love are inside. Not one person would want that.

Rabastan didn't want that, not at first, so why did he change his mind so quickly? In between wanting to rush in to save his brother and wanting them to promise him they would do it for him, Rabastan fell. That's what changed.

"Wait," Sirius blurts out. "Rodolphus, don't—"

And it's too late. They're already there. All of them there, stepping past burning debris to take a corner and find Rabastan exactly where they left him, gun in limp hands, glassy gaze locked on the building his brother was dragged into, clearly waiting for his brother to come back out.

"Bas," Rodolphus says. He takes a step forward. Takes another. Makes a noise. "Bas? Rabastan?"

No response.

Rodolphus kneels down next to him. The gun clatters to the ground, and Rodolphus gently eases Rabastan back from where he's curled up. There's blood on his stomach from a gunshot wound. It's dried. Blood isn't flowing anymore.

He's all bled out.

A horrible, sick noise crawls out of Rodolphus, and he chokes out, "Oh, Bas, no, no, no," and keeps chanting it as he folds forward and cups the side of Rabastan's head, bringing it to his shoulder, cradling it there.

Sirius can't look away. He's shaking, trembling, frozen as he watches something he'll never forget, and something he'll always selfishly want to. Sirius watches, and all he can think is that he was right—it did break Rodolphus' heart.

The worst part, for Sirius, is that Rabastan likely never got to see Rodolphus make it out at all.

The worst part, for Rodolphus, is that his little brother is dead.

~•~

The next district taken is twelve.

This is how it goes:

Lily is home. Six years, and she's *home.* Six years, and she will be crossing the train tracks with Remus beside her once again. Six years, and so much has changed, but it's her and Remus here together like nothing has changed at all, like some things can never *be* changed.

Oddly, it's a comforting thought.

What isn't a comforting thought is the lack of people Lily wants to be here. She has Remus, but that's all. All of the others had wanted to go—Sirius, especially. He threw a fit so bothersome that only Remus could calm him down, not James or Regulus or Effie or Monty or Marlene or Mary or Pandora; no, just Remus. Because Dumbledore decides who goes where and who's cleared for what, and he decided only Remus and Lily would be going to twelve, as the others were needed for other things going on in the background. Sirius, naturally, did not like this, and it wasn't until Remus soothed him that he stopped threatening to choke Dumbledore with his own beard.

In any case, there's a whole team here, but the only person that Lily is close to that's here is Remus. Maybe there's something fitting about that, and honestly, Lily shouldn't *want* her friends in danger—she doesn't, but she just—she does want them here for the comfort she's always seeking these days. People keep dying. Grief is choking them all.

And yet, here she is, still fighting.

As the time ticks by, so slowly, Lily keeps herself busy by helping where she can, taking everything out of her pack just to put it in again, loading and reloading her guns, and thinking about Bingley and Mary.

Yeah, Lily is home, but home is waiting for her elsewhere, too. It's strange to think about, to look at how far she's come, how much she thought she lost and all that she ended up gaining. She has so much family now, so much love in her, and in her life. So much, in fact, that it terrifies her—the difference is now, after all this time, she's grateful to be afraid.

Lily thinks about loss a lot now. Amos is dead, and they try so hard to remember him as he was, efficient and funny and a bit huffy at times, but always reliable when people needed a person to rely on. Sybill is dead, and Lily can't think about it too much without her guilt strangling her, and she can't think about how Kingsley won't look at her, or talk to her, or have anything to do with her. Rabastan is dead, and Rodolphus has fallen silent like there's

nothing worth saying if his brother isn't there to hear it, and Asher never leaves her lab and never cries, but always looks on the brink of it.

So many people are dead, and no one knows how to fill the spaces left behind now that they're gone, and it's a hollow feeling. Such a hollow, desolate feeling.

But they try. Those who remain try, because the war is still waging, and they don't have a choice. There is no stopping, or slowing down, or skirting around the living nightmare that life has become. They're all afraid and only holding onto those they do have, that are still here, all that harder for it. They're all absolutely terrified, and it's just love. The worst, destructive parts that love has to offer, but love all the same.

And, despite this, Lily hopes to invite more fear into her life. She hopes with everything in her that Petunia and their parents are here, and—if they are—Lily is going to do whatever it takes to get them to safety.

Lily's heart jumps when it's finally time to go.

"Ready?" Remus murmurs as he steps up beside her, following the crowd heading for the latch.

"Ready as I'm ever going to be," Lily breathes out. Their hands are full, holding guns, but she wishes she could hold his.

Remus bumps their shoulders together. "As soon as we break past the train tracks, we split off and take the path through the old, abandoned park. You remember the one where—"

"Where we kissed," Lily says, huffing out a laugh and sharing a grin with him. "Yeah, how could I forget one of the worst moments of my life?"

"Well, at least I'm unforgettable."

"Your tongue is. You use entirely too much."

"First of all, it was my first kiss. Second of all, I've gotten much better. Third of all, it wouldn't matter if I had or not, because Sirius appreciates my tongue, unlike you."

Lily snorts. "Sirius likes everything about you. I'm, like, one hundred percent positive that he would happily gag on your tongue and say thank you afterwards, like it's a gift."

"How do you know he hasn't?"

"Hey, at least he's happy."

Remus chuckles as he adjusts his gun and reaches up to grab onto the ladder, climbing his way up. Lily follows him, taking his hand when he offers it at the top.

And then, once everyone is gathered, they go.

The main fight will be located at the barracks for the Aurors, getting the upper hand there before mass amounts of Aurors get to spread out. Not all Aurors will be there, of course; the head Auror in the districts get their own houses, and there are the Aurors on patrol to worry about as well.

Lily has a feeling that they'll hear gunshots before they ever make it towards the end of the district where their houses have always been, and that turns out to be true. They make it as far as the park, splitting off from the group, before they hear the first round of gunshots and screams.

Naturally, chaos unleashes after that.

Remus and Lily run. They tear off towards home like they were always rushing to get back there, like if they run fast enough, they can turn back time until they're somewhen else, back before the world crumbled around them.

Through the park, over a fence, down an alley—and then they turn on an old, familiar street, coming face-to-face with a patrol of Aurors. Five of them.

Lily raises her gun and begins to shoot.

When they're in close quarters to the Aurors is Remus' time to shine. He's always been a bit like a blunt instrument himself, just in how he uses his body, how he barrels into things he knows he shouldn't. When he was young, he punched walls and spit in the face of Aurors dragging him to whipping posts. He had blood in his mouth more often than something sweet, and so that became his favorite meal.

He's not like that anymore, not really. Calmer now. Much more level-headed. But his body still bears the scars and he still remembers his favorite taste; it's all about what one can never forget, and Remus always recalls the thrill of chaos.

And there's Lily, right there with him, so different from where she began as well, but no more free from the call of chaos as he is. They go into it together, bullets flying and fists following. Remus crushes an Auror's windpipe, and Lily bashes another's head in with her gun until they stop moving.

Seven people go into the fight; only two walk away.

People are flooding the streets, the call of chaos singing loud enough for them to hear. Some people rush towards it. Some people run away from it. Some people, Lily recognizes. Young Venice who was fourteen the last time she saw him, and now he's twenty and shouting for his husband to stay close. Mr. Sanders runs with his twelve year old son that Lily knew and his four year old daughter she's never met, his wife nowhere to be seen. Gemma, Lily's ex-girlfriend, is sprinting towards the gunshots with a hammer in hand, clearly ready to fuck some shit up, and Lily doesn't even care that Gemma cheated on her; she's so fucking proud to see her go.

"Remus," Lily gasps out, because the street splits off in two directions—one towards her house, and one towards his.

"Go," Remus says, meeting her eyes.

It's all she needs to hear. She presses a fierce kiss to his cheek, then lets him go, and then goes herself. When they run, they do so in opposite directions, just like the first time, but this time—oh, *this* time, Lily is sure they'll find their way back to each other again. Unbelievably, they always do.

"Hey! Hey, oh, you're an anarchist! You're—"

The Auror never gets to finish as Lily tackles them to the ground, shoves her gun beneath their chin, and pulls the trigger. Blood splatters, as does brain matter and bone, which Lily leaves behind as she scrambles up and continues on.

Yeah, maybe Lily is an anarchist. Or, maybe she's just a woman defending her life and all those she loves, fighting in a war for a better world. The lines tend to get a little blurred out here in the field, when she hands out death and doesn't even slow down to mourn it. Less human like this, with blood and guns for company. She's a killer, and she always will be for all those she has killed. The world made her this way just as much as she did, and yet the lines blur anyway.

Because these Aurors—well, most don't have lovers, they're not allowed for the first twenty years; they don't have families, save parents and siblings, which they voluntarily left behind to pledge loyalty to the Hallow; but is anything ever so simple? Look at Lyall, Remus' father. Over thirty years of service he gave to the Hallow, to Riddle himself, and twenty years of which he spent entirely alone. If this war happened decades ago, Lyall would be dead in the street, his brains blown out, and Remus wouldn't be here.

And what does any of that matter anyway? The value of human life isn't measured in the connections they make. A person entirely alone in this world deserves to live just as much as anyone else. Everyone is worthy of life, and yet here she is, here so many people are, taking lives, taking and taking and taking. Oh, how they take what isn't theirs to take at all.

So, yes, the lines blur. It's war, but the idea of anyone truly being on a *right side* is a foolish notion. It's all murder, really. Carnage. Violence. *Wrong.* And, though Aurors choose this life, they're as trapped as everyone else.

Some will die. Some will survive. That goes for all sides; that's just the reality of war. But here, when the two sides collide, and death is within reach, everything starts to blur.

Screams blend together.

Gunshots sound the same no matter who shoots.

Everyone bleeds, and everyone feels pain, and everyone is here until they're gone. It blurs, and it blurs, and it blurs.

And then, abruptly, everything comes into sharp focus as Lily skids to a halt on the street, her chest heaving. She stops and stands at the end of a rock-lined path she's walked for years, kicking the stones to see the dented-in dirt beneath, then giggling when Petunia snapped at her to put them back in their place. Everything has a place, Petunia always said, and she made sure each and every rock stayed where it should.

The rocks remain, but the house is gone.

Lily's home is gone.

The foundation for it was never sturdy to begin with, but she never expected it to collapse. It has. The walls and roof have caved in, left in a pile of rotted wood and rubble. It's decrepit, abandoned, left years untouched. No one has been here for years. No one has *lived* here for years.

If Lily had to guess how many, she would say six.

~•-

Remus' experience in twelve goes a little differently.

It goes like this:

Remus sees the sea-foam green door of his childhood home, and then he sees it open, and—foolishly, for just a moment where he is disoriented—he thinks his mother will be the one to step out and call him in for supper.

It's not. Obviously.

But it is his dad. It's his *dad.* Lyall Lupin, in the flesh, six years since the last Remus saw him—and it's him, looking old and worn as he comes down the front steps. Alive.

"Dad! *Dad!"* Remus shouts, tearing down the sidewalk faster than he's ever moved in his life, feeling something swell within him so buoyant and desperate that he can't breathe around it. It's his dad. It's his dad. It's his dad.

It's his dad, and Remus could be a child again for how badly he needs him right now, and maybe he is a child for this one moment, because he is weeping in a mixture of beautiful grief and hideous relief the *second* Lyall's gaze lands on him. Lyall's expression fractures immediately. Remus sees Lyall mouth his name, shell-shocked, unable to raise his voice.

Lyall has seen him as a young boy stumbling over his own feet, giggling between his parents who held each of his hands in one of their own and swung him to make him laugh louder. Lyall has seen him as a young teen stumbling over his own feet, groaning against Lily who held him up and avoided touching where his back was torn to shreds. Lyall has seen him as a young man stumbling over his own feet, crying as he runs right for his dad after six years of being forced apart.

And each time, every single fucking time, Lyall is the one who catches him when he falls. Throughout Remus' whole life, Lyall has always been there to do that, and that—at the end of the day—was what he was always trying to do. They fought about it so much for so long, especially after Hope died, because something in Remus wanted, desperately, to fall and not be caught. And he did. He got his wish. The one time Lyall wasn't there to catch him, Remus stumbled over his own feet and landed so hard that, for some time, he didn't know how to get back up. But he learned, and he's grateful to have learned, and he never would have if Lyall kept on catching him.

What Remus learned, most of all, is that he wants to be caught again, and he is. Without missing a beat, Lyall catches him.

Remus goes stumbling over his own feet and right into his father's arms, and it's like something bursts in him until he's overflowing. He's already crying when he makes it there, but once he's there, he's crying about so many things all at once, things he's never cried about before.

Crying about the day he became a servant. Crying about all the pain, and fear, and torture. Crying about killing Greyback, and crying about killing Lucius, and crying about all the killing he has done with no remorse; but he finds it here, his remorse and maybe his shame, because for a second, while in the safety of his father's arms, it feels as if the war comes to an end.

"Remus, Remus, Remus," Lyall chants, choking on his name like he's strangled by it, and he's crying, too.

"I'm sorry. Dad, I'm so sorry. I'm—"

"No, no, don't—"

Remus weeps into his shoulder, burning with how much it hurts, how much hurt he has in him; he's trying to dig it out, rip it out, fling it away from himself and finally breathe. "I didn't mean to. I never meant for that to happen. I'm sorry. You were right, Dad. You were right, I'm sorry, I'm—"

"Shh, son, stop," Lyall soothes, pressing his fist against Remus' back, holding him so tight, rocking him a little. His other hand comes up to cradle his head, fingers digging in rough from caring so much. "Don't apologize for who you are. Don't you dare. I'm so proud of you, Remus. *So* proud."

Remus is pretty sure he nearly throws up, that's how hard he cries. It just keeps *going,* like a leaky faucet that never stops dripping, one so backed up that it finally breaks open under all the pressure. Remus has held on so long, only letting go here and there, in small spurts, but this cracks him wide open. The little boy in him who was so angry at his father just wanted him to be proud of him, really. That's all he wanted.

It's one thing to read it in a letter. It's something else to hear it from the source. It unravels Remus until he's shrinking down, and then he's gone, and then he's born anew.

There's still a war waging around them, and after all the tears and all the relief that courses through him, Remus feels about ten feet tall and fucking bulletproof. He peels away from Lyall and just looks at him, tearstained and breathless, because it's his dad. It's his dad. It's his dad.

"Okay," Remus says, his voice wobbly. "Okay, yeah. That's really—yeah. Yeah, alright."

"I love you," Lyall informs him firmly, and Remus fights for his life not to cry again. Lyall clears his throat and reaches out to grab Remus' jaw, shaking his head a little, then pats his cheek. "Had to say that, too, since I haven't gotten to in a while."

"Yeah, me too, Dad," Remus croaks. "And—and listen, I would love nothing more than to catch up and talk and—just all of it, but we have to go. I have to get you out of here, somewhere safe. And I know you won't just *go—"*

"Remus," Lyall cuts in, "where are we going?"

"Oh." Remus blinks. "You're—wait, just like that?"

"Just like that," Lyall replies. "Lead the way, son."

Remus, who was not anticipating it being this easy, is sort of lost for a second. He opens his mouth, closes it, then clears his throat and scratches the side of his head. "Right. Alright, yes, but—just so you know, I'm going to have to kill people. Maybe. I mean, probably. Just to—"

"Do you have an extra gun?" Lyall asks.

"Um, yes?"

"Give it to me."

"Dad—"

"Remus, I was an Auror for over thirty years. I've been trained to shoot since before you were born. Give me a gun."

"You know," Remus mumbles, "fair point."

Lyall nods in approval and takes the gun Remus gives him, pointing it down to check the safety, then clicking it off with the familiar ease of a motion done many times. With that, he looks up at Remus and smiles with wrinkles beside his eyes, a hint of mischief Remus has seen in the mirror there in his gaze when he casually repeats, "Like I said, son, lead the way."

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The last district taken is one.

This is how it goes:

Narcissa goes, so Sirius and Regulus are the first to demand to go as well. Albus allows Regulus, only, and Sirius rants and raves, and it takes the combined efforts of Effie, Monty, *and* James to get him to calm down. He spends the entire mission being absolutely fucking unbearable—twitchy, angry, and very fucking scared. The only person who really gets it, at least the way he does, is Andromeda. Along with Sirius, she's terrified.

Meanwhile, Narcissa abandons Regulus approximately five minutes into the battle. Just—poof. Gone. He can't find her *anywhere,* so he's left fighting with a couple of strangers from the Phoenix—he uses the term *strangers* lightly, because he knows their names and has seen them plenty in the last few months. These 'strangers'—all of them—are killed.

"Wait, wait, this one is Regulus Black," says one of the Aurors with a gun to his head. "He's on Riddle's list."

"What list?" says another.

"Do you *ever* check the bulletin, Tim? Fuck's sake, the list of anarchists he wants captured and brought to him," is the exasperated reply.

They all look at Regulus.

Regulus arches an eyebrow. He says nothing, and they all seem rather unnerved by his silence. He's killed some people, but he doesn't know how many. Maybe that's for the best.

"Alright, get him to his feet," says the one that's not Tim.

"I'm warning you, *Tim,"* Regulus snaps, "if you touch me, you're going to die."

Tim doesn't listen to him, and five minutes later, Regulus is breaking Tim's hand and kicking not-Tim into a signpost before launching another not-Tim into the side of a car so hard that

the window crunches and dents in with splintered glass from the impact of their body. Tim yells from his knees, fingers going in all the wrong directions, and Regulus is just about to snap his neck when a new not-Tim comes flying out of nowhere to tackle Regulus to the ground.

There's a scuffle. Regulus may or may not nearly rip someone's ear off. Either way, by the end, Regulus stands up to find many bodies of not-Tims littered all around him, while Tim himself is dead at Narcissa's feet. Look who finally showed back up.

Well, Regulus told Tim he'd die. No one ever listens to him. Maybe they should; he's starting to think he's some sort of prophet or something.

"I'm alright," Regulus says, because Narcissa is looking at him, gaze flicking over him critically.

"I don't care if you are or aren't," is Narcissa's bland reply as she flicks blood carelessly off her fingers.

Right, of course. He's dead to her, after all.

But, well, Regulus knows firsthand what it feels like to care deeply for the dead, even long after they're gone. Narcissa says she doesn't care, but she doesn't abandon him again.

They stay together.

They fight together.

They make it back, together.

~•~

After all the districts are taken, there isn't a celebratory event to note the ultimate win that this is, because considering all the losses, it's not much of a win at all.

Instead, there's just a gathering in the Great Hall to pause and remember those that have been lost already, even before the final battle in the Hallow takes place.

The numbers alone are sickening. It's not just Amos, Sybill, and Rabastan. It takes some time before everyone gets all the numbers and all the names, so much information spread all throughout the Phoenix that it's hard to see past what you're already involved in to find out about any of the others. Edgar Bones didn't make it, leaving behind his sister, Amelia, to not only grieve him, but take over his position. Majesty didn't make it either, and they didn't have very many friends, mostly stuck to themselves, but they were someone. They were a person, mysterious and often alone as they were; they had life in them, thoughts and hopes and dreams, and now they're gone. So many people are gone, just like that, just in the first part of the war before they could even see the last of it.

It's a hard thing to wrestle with, this heavy grief they're all meant to just set aside so they can be prepared for the final battle. What else are they meant to do, though? What did they expect?

They all knew this was coming. They all knew war would reach into the pools of kinship between countless people and gut the innards of it like emptying out a pumpkin. So many seeds torn away and crushed into nothing; seeds of friendship, seeds of romance, seeds of family. All of them planted and ruined in various stages, left with nothing but growing pains and, worse than that, the pain of absent growth altogether.

War is cruel. It's cancerous. The end of the world is always tied to war, isn't it? Maybe this is why; because war is so much more than just war. It goes beyond bullets and blood and bodies. War comes in like a flood, like a disease, and it claims anyone who comes in contact with it. Even the living can't get free from it; they're as claimed as the dead are. Once war touches them, they're branded to their last breath. In this world, most people have been branded for a lot longer than they stepped on their first battlefield.

What they don't know yet, and what they will learn, is that it's not the first battlefield that ruins you.

It's the last.

They're either ruined through death in their last battle, or they live long enough to go into the next, and what comes after the last? No one knows, and they're not there yet, because they're here. They're all right here, trapped in the aftermath of the first.

It's a heavy, grief-soaked aftermath for all. Not a victory. There is no triumph. There's only the acknowledgement of those lost, and perhaps that alone is invigorating enough for those left to continue to fight. If not for themselves, then for those who no longer can. A fight that doesn't stop just because people fall; a fight that continues on in their honor.

Some people see it this way, and some people do not. Some are angry, and some are scared, and some are so hurt that they can't see the point of anything, let alone fighting. Some people give up. Some people try harder. They all grieve, though, all of them—and, for all the differences in the people who remain behind, one thing is the same about those who are gone.

The world is a little more hollow without them in it.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you coming here to find the list of people who die/are confirmed dead in this chapter, SPOILERS AHEAD, in order as they go:

amos diggory (off-screen and not described)
sybill trelawney (off-screen, but it's mentioned that she goes down with a team in a heli-carrier)
rabastan lestrange (also sort of off-screen, he's shot and bleeds out, found later by his brother and others)
petunia/lily's family are heavily implied to be dead (and this will be later confirmed for sure)
edgar bones (off-screen and not described)
majesty mildred (off-screen and not described)

the rest are unnamed/unknown, but death is very prevalent through the whole chapter.

to those of you who have finished:

would you believe me if i said that it can and will get worse? 😬 i mean, believe it or not, we get a slightly lighter chapter after this one, but then after that... yeah, it's rough from here on out.

going by districts, i think district 11 surrendering is a really good reflection of how ill-equipped riddle is to handle this war, and these issues. like, he hasn't been handling it well at all, and it's already been shown that he's in a lose-lose situation here. the moment his greatest weapon—biological warfare—was rendered useless, he really had nothing else going for him.

then we get districts 5, 9, and 10. rip amos, you will be missed 😔 that was rough on barty, and like, that whole moment between regulus and barty was so special to me. that line about how there's something so incredibly human about how they matter to each other really hits. and there's something very interesting to think about here, because regulus was barty's only friend for a long time, sort of like regulus was evan's only friend, except barty got the chance to make more, and evan never did.

the next districts are 8, 7, and 4. in 7, we find out that a small group of people died to biological warfare, because for some unknown reason, the immunity just didn't take for them. this reflects real life, in that there are some people—even just small percentages of people—who have issues with certain medicines etc, and there's ways to deal with these things in the modern world where these people have access to help and medical advancements etc, but in this world? they don't have that support, and they're in the middle of a war. it's fucked up, and what's worse is that remus feels responsible.

in district four, we lose sybill. rip to her, i miss her already, and god, kingsley and lily do NOT handle it well at all :(just the tragedy of sybill trying to outrun her own superstition (canon reference), only to slip up in her state of panic and not count maximus... and then kingsley not having anything to do with lily, who blames herself. we see more on them later.

then we get districts three and two. we finally meet alecto's family and learn more about them! she is...not a fan of children lmao, which we see more on later. oh, and the moment of sirius thinking about his family!!! a very fucked up, dysfunctional family, but they're still here, alive and kicking!

in district two, we get a lot!!! there's finally james and sirius fighting together, and sirius helping james with his issues with fire/explosions, though james still doesn't want anyone to know about it. we also get some brotherly bonding moments, only for us to lose one half of a different set of brothers. rip rebastan 😔 unsurprisingly, i got very attached to rodolphus and rabastan as brothers and as characters, so this was. difficult for me. the fact that he was injured and essentially sacrificed himself to make sure rodolphus would be saved...

then we get districts twelve with lily and remus, and they have entirely opposite experiences there. lily returns to find her family has been dead the whole time. remus returns to find lyall alive. we see more on both of them later, i promise!

district one is last with narcissa and regulus, and they're still not okay, really, but...well, it's exactly as regulus said. the care is still there, just bitter and full of resentment now. very complex.

i know that things seem really fast/rushed right now, but just a reminder, these people are in the middle of a war. they CAN'T stop and properly grieve. trust me, there will be plenty of that later.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-regulus "pillow thief" black
-the entire potter family being badasses
-monty and regulus being two peas in a pod!!!
-regulus "maybe im a prophet" black 😭
-regulus always thinking to look up <3
-remus collapsing into his dad's arms :(
-lyall "give me a gun" lupin (he's definitely remus' dad lmao)
-dorcas, marlene, and minerva feeling awkward because they didn't have to fight 😭
-sirius being frantic about remus!!!
-james letting sirius try out his cane HELP
-lily and remus teasing each other about their kiss

Before The War

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death/murder/torture
-references to past violence
-brief mentions of feeling sick/vomiting (no one does)
-heavy depictions of grief
-one brief moment of someone...threatening children??? it's lighthearted and not actually a threat that would be followed through on, and the children know this, and the children are not scared/harmed. the children are fine, but i still wanted to warn for it just in case!!!

that's...it? honestly, i think that's it... squinting at the list very suspiciously, because it's very short, but like. i genuinely do think that's it. enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the aftermath of taking the districts, there's a little time for those left to have something akin to rest. Take a breather. Sift through all the rubble and aftermath of battle to collect the dead and mourn them. Find the people who remain and hold them. Get a break before the final battle.

For Lily, it goes like this:

"They're dead, aren't they?" Lily whispers, looking at Lyall, hands shaking. "My family is dead, and it was my fault."

"No. No, Lily, that wasn't—" Lyall stops, then exhales heavily and reaches out to grab her arms, gently squeezing them. "I'm sorry. Let me start there. Believe me, I know those words hardly help, but they are true nonetheless."

"Lyall," Lily says, "please just tell me."

"Three days after—after it was announced that you died while attempting to flee…" Lyall swallows, his gaze so sad. "It was a public execution. A spectacle. They made an example out of them." Lily chokes out a harsh noise, reaching up to cover her mouth, tears building and tears spilling. "I'm so sorry, Lily."

Lyall is right. The words hardly help. In fact, they don't at all.

The worst part is that Lily knew. She knew her parents and sister were dead, and that they died because of her. She knew, and she has known for six years.

Oh.

Oh, they've been dead for six years.

And she knew that. She *knew.* She knew, she knew, and she didn't know, not really, not the way she knows now, for sure. She knew for those six years, and what did she do with that? She grieved, and clung to that grief, and refused to live past it. She became jaded, and she encased herself in something hard and unforgiving, impenetrable by anyone.

Then Remus returned. He returned and broke through, and she still had all that grief, but with it, she found life. She found all the life she had lived in the six years she spent doing her absolute best not to. She found love in her and around her, and found the will to accept more of it, no matter how terrifying it was. She found hope. She dared to hope.

Lily managed to find hope, and let the fear in, and she never saw it coming until it did, all at once, slowly. Six years of grief held so close, then dispensed in the form of love. Lily doesn't even get six years of hope before it's crushed.

It turns out some things *can't* be changed; her family is dead, and though it may have for Remus, six years can never change that. They're dead. They've been dead this whole time.

She has to feel it again, and it's worse the second time. Maybe it shouldn't be, after so long of acceptance, but even the tiniest bit of hope makes it hurt all that much more. And this—this is what Lily was afraid of. This is what she fought never to feel, and she has to feel it. She has to. She can't stop it.

For some reason, she leaves Lyall and goes to Kingsley. She isn't sure why it's him, except—yes, she is.

"You were right," Lily chokes out, standing before him where he waits as the only person who can grant her forgiveness, and there's no hint of a forgiving light in his eyes. "My family is dead because of me—my sister, my parents, all gone—and I think you were right. You—you said I do love and care, but you also said—you said no one would be at risk of dying if it wasn't for me, and you were right. You were right."

Kingsley looks at her for a long moment, and he looks so tired. A broken man still fighting, somehow. He breathes in, then he breathes out. "Do you want me to say I was wrong? Is that why you came here? Because that's what you want to hear?"

Yes, Lily thinks, desperately and selfishly, because she's human and wants to be absolved. Wants relief. Wants the pressure to be lifted. Wants forgiveness.

"No," Lily lies, her eyes stinging. "I just want—I want you to know I'm sorry, Kingsley. I'm so fucking sorry."

And she knows those words don't help.

She's known that for six years.

She'll always know that, now.

And so will he.

"What happened to your family, that wasn't your fault, Lily. That was never your fault," Kingsley says quietly.

Lily's breath punches out of her, and she makes a whining noise, helpless in the back of her throat, shuffling towards him and reaching for an embrace because they're both in so much pain, and where else can they alleviate it if not with each other? Except Kingsley steps back, and stays back, and swallows thickly as he shakes his head.

"That wasn't your fault," Kingsley continues in a croak, "but Sybill—" His voice cracks. His eyes sink shut. His face twists up. "She, um. She—she would have never been a pilot, if not for you. And I can't—I know, logically, that you—that you're not really responsible, that you never wanted it to happen, and that you loved her, too. I know that, but I can't—I can't just —"

"Kingsley," Lily says, her voice strangled.

"I'm sorry," Kingsley replies, gaze downcast, "but it's not water under the bridge this time, Red."

"We'll never be okay again, will we?" Lily whispers, and she has her answer the moment Kingsley lifts his gaze to hers. Something is lost, between them. Their friendship went down when Sybill did. She can't come back, and this won't either.

"No," Kingsley whispers back, "we won't."

He shuts the door, and Lily steps back again and again until she bumps into the wall across from his room. She slides down it and sits right there in the silent hallway until, finally, she buries her face in her hands and cries.

Some time later, there's the sound of careful footsteps, and someone sinks down beside her. A small arm comes around her shoulders, and a smaller hand cups the side of her head, fumbling through petting her hair.

"It's okay," Bingley whispers. "You can cry, Lily. Nothing to be ashamed of, remember? It just means you care, right? See how much you care? That's special. That's what the world needs."

Lily helplessly sobs out something only slightly resembling a laugh into his shoulder, wishing more than anything that she wasn't crying like this in front of him, but being unable to stop. He's thirteen—almost fourteen now—and yet, sometimes, he's wise beyond his years.

"Is that right?" Lily rasps, sniffling and scrubbing harshly at her face, chest stuttering on a broken, pained inhale. Oh, how it hurts to breathe around it, all this grief, fresh and aged alike.

"Yeah," Bingley murmurs with a nod, offering her a tiny, tentative smile. "The world needs people who care as much as you. That's what's going to save it."

Lily can't help it; her expression collapses, screwing up as she starts crying again, harder, and she twists a little to bury her face in his shoulder once more. He pats her head and strokes her hair, eventually humming the same tune under his breath that Mary does when she's drawing.

Lily closes her eyes on her tears, and she listens.

~•~

For Dorcas, it goes like this:

"You know," Dorcas mumbles, "we talk a lot about the war ending, but never what we'll do after."

"Maybe that's because a part of us never expected us to make it this far," Marlene muses quietly.

"Maybe," Dorcas allows, "but we have."

"Only a bit more to go," Marlene murmurs, "and then what?"

Dorcas gazes down at Marlene's hand. It's the hand with the ring on it, which Dorcas idly, lovingly fiddles with, spinning it around Marlene's thumb. "What do you want to do?"

"Loaded question, Meadowes," Marlene says, blowing out a deep breath. She clears her throat. "I—I don't know. I'm never not at war, and that's just…my life. It's harder, I think, for me than anyone else. Harder to be out of war than it is to be in it. I feel steadier in it, and I remember those years after the arena, when I was a mentor, when I wasn't supposed to be fighting anymore. I couldn't handle it. I didn't know how the fuck to do it, so when this war is over, Dorcas, what do I do then?"

"No, I—I get it," Dorcas admits. "I made the war a priority for so long, and then you, and it's always been about fighting for me, even *for* you. I don't really know what we're supposed to do either, but it's not impossible to figure out. Between us, we can figure it out, right? Together."

Marlene's lips curl up. "Yeah, we can figure it out together."

"Aw, are you two canoodling?" Cordelia coos as she sweeps into the room, pushing in through the cracked door with Maximus perched on her hip. She moves over and sits him down, practically on top of them. "Sorry to break it up, but you two are on babysitting duty."

Maximus is fourteen months old—nearly fifteen—so he can walk, but it's mostly a toddle and he prefers to crawl. He's a wriggly little thing, and very vocal, but the closest he's come to saying his first word is screeching *Da!* at Riker, just to proceed to spit up milk all over him, much to Riker's dismay and Cordelia's amusement. He's always shrieking with laughter, which he's doing right now as he wriggles all over Marlene and Dorcas, whacking them with baby fists.

"Cordie, you can't just dump your baby on us and leave!" Marlene complains.

"Yes, you can, Cordie," Dorcas counters with a stifled laugh as she tugs one of her braids from Maximus' very determined fist. He grins up at her, and she grins back.

"Dorcas said anytime, Marls," Cordelia sing-songs, winking as she backs up towards the door. "Riker and I have been flirting with the girl next door for ages, and she finally picked up on it, so we're taking the opportunity while we have it—you know, since the world is ending and all that."

"Not the world, the *war,"* Marlene grumbles. "Or it is soon."

"Close enough," Cordelia says.

"Have fun! I want *all* the details!" Dorcas calls after her.

"Babe, I'm going to memorize it start-to-finish *just* for you," Cordelia calls back, cackling as she shuts the door.

Marlene huffs and drops her head back to the pillow. "I hate that you two became best friends. Stop being best friends with my cousin. I take it back; you *don't* need more than me, actually, especially not if it's her."

"In the wise words of Cordelia—we're best friends now, no take-backsies," Dorcas teases.

"That bitch," Marlene mutters.

"Marlene's saying mean things about your mummy again, Maxie," Dorcas whispers to Maximus, booping his nose. "She does that all the time, doesn't she? Mean, mean Marlene."

"Because your mummy is a bitch," Marlene informs Maximus, who flops over to grin and reach for her face. Marlene grunts when he knees her in the stomach, then pretends to eat his fingers when he tries to stick them in her mouth.

Dorcas lays her head over on her pillow and watches Marlene with Maximus, her face softening. Ridiculous as it is, nothing gives Dorcas baby fever like seeing Marlene with him. It took time before she was ever comfortable, and she only became so when he was bigger and more durable, but she's still so careful with him. She's so gentle like this, and doesn't even know it.

"Hey," Dorcas says softly.

"Hm?" Marlene asks distractedly, gaze warm as she scrunches her nose at a beaming, giggling Maximus.

"I love you," Dorcas breathes out. "All of you, and more."

Marlene glances at her and lets Maximus wrap his tiny fingers around her thumb, where the ring is, where that scar is. She smiles and says, "Right back at you, Dorcas."

~•~

For Sirius, it goes like this:

"I'm still thinking Draco," Narcissa muses, and Sirius trades a look with Regulus, then they both hastily look away so they won't laugh. Hey, at least it's not Nymphadora, and it's not like they have room to judge when it comes to odd names. "I really like that for the baby."

"Baby? What baby? Who's baby?" Alecto asks as she dumps herself down at the table with a weary sigh, looking very, very tired. Burgundy and Belfast are fighting over Dora the second they arrive. "Gun, Bel, no hitting!"

"But Auntie! He's being *stupid!"* Burgundy shrieks.

"Dora likes *me* the most! Tell her, Auntie!" Belfast yells.

"Does not!"

"Does too!"

"Does not!"

"Does too!"

"Does—"

"Enough!" Alecto bursts out, slamming her hand down to the table and making Burgundy and Belfast shut up very quickly. Nymphadora looks like she's having the time of her life, but Alecto? Not so much. She breathes very, very carefully. "I know the concept is hard to grasp in your puny, developing brains, but you two can *share* Dora's company, and be her friend at the same time. Now, the next time one of you hits each other, I'm going to break your fingers. Got it?"

"Got it," Burgundy and Belfast mumble, hanging their heads, and five minutes later they're peacefully sharing Dora.

Alecto cradles her head between both hands, eyes sinking shut as she mutters, "I fucking hate kids."

"Weren't you ever close with them before?" Andromeda asks.

"Not really. I visited, of course, but I mostly just spent time with Amycus and Xena. I showed up with toys and gifts to entertain the children so they'd leave me alone," Alecto admits with a sigh, lifting her head. "Anyway, what baby?"

"My baby," Narcissa says. "I'm going to have a baby."

"You—" Alecto stares at her, stricken. "What? No. *How?"*

"Well, Lucius wanted a child," Narcissa explains. "We never had sex, so I brushed him off by saying I'd only have his child through other methods. This did not deter him, so he—well, basically he's my sperm donor. I went and got it when I helped take district one. After the last battle, if I survive, I'll—"

"No!" Alecto blurts out. "No, don't do this to me. Please, for the sake of my sanity, don't have a baby."

"What does this have anything to do with you?" Narcissa asks.

Alecto groans and drops her head to the table, so Sirius helpfully answers, "Cissa, come on, she's obviously in love with you."

"That," Alecto mutters, pointing weakly at Sirius.

"And she hates kids," Sirius adds.

"Also that," Alecto agrees.

Narcissa considers her for a long moment, then says, "Well, you're very dear to me, you know this, but I want to be a mother, so either move on or settle in."

"Can I just spoil it with gifts and you handle the rest?"

"Well, I was planning to handle it all anyway, so sure."

Alecto bangs her head against the table. "Never should have gotten invested in a Black. I knew it. I said it to myself, and then I did it anyway. Such a horrible family. I hate all of you."

"Yeah," Sirius says, grinning, "we get that a lot."

"Also," Narcissa adds, as if Alecto hasn't just confessed to being in love with her, "I grabbed some things that belonged to Bella as well." The mood instantly changes, and Regulus goes very still and makes himself smaller, like he's shrinking in on himself. He tenses when Narcissa looks at him. "I picked up her favorite dagger. I think you should have it."

Regulus goes rapidly pale. "I—no, I—I couldn't—"

"I think she would want you to have it," Narcissa cuts in for clarification. "I also think it'll do you some good to have a weapon that reminds you what it costs to use it."

"Cissa," Sirius snaps, sitting up straight. It agitates him how Andromeda and Narcissa treat Regulus sometimes, ever so slightly different, harsher, colder, leaving him on the outside of things, as if he doesn't even have a full place in the family. He has refrained from getting into arguments with them, if not for Dora's sake, then because Regulus asked him not to.

And look, Sirius gets it, okay? He does. Sort of. He *understands* that Narcissa and Andromeda are showing commendable maturity in every interaction with Regulus, because the fact that he killed their sister hangs over them at all times—and it doesn't matter about their personal issues with Bellatrix, because at the end of the day, she was their *sister.* If it was Sirius, then Narcissa would be long dead if she was the one responsible for Regulus' death, while the only reason Andromeda would scrape by is because of Dora, and even then, Sirius would hate her for the rest of his life.

Yes, he—he gets it, and Regulus gets it, and they both know that the situation was fucked up, because Bellatrix tried to kill Sirius—and nearly did—and it was the *hunger games,* so it's not as if it was a simple thing to come to terms with. Andromeda and Narcissa have handled it with poise, mostly, but they'll never treat Regulus the same, and it makes Sirius *angry,* because he knows it's something that Regulus is hurt by, even if he'll never admit it, not to anyone.

All Sirius can do—all Regulus will allow him to do—is be the one in the family who accepts him, fully, and treats him warmly. So, that's what Sirius does, and—when he can—he jumps to Regulus' defense at the first sign of Narcissa or Andromeda being too hard on him. He can't make them feel differently than they do, but he sure as shit can train them to tread carefully in how they talk to and treat his brother. They're family, but Sirius will absolutely kick the shit out of them if they're too mean to Regulus; no one can be too mean to Regulus but him. That's just how it works.

But then there's Regulus, kicking him sharply under the table and giving him a warning look before focusing on Narcissa again, breathing in and out. He nods. "Alright. I'll take it."

"Good," Narcissa says, heaving a sigh. "Personally, I wouldn't give you shit, but it's not about what I want; it's about what Bella would have wanted—which, Sirius, that's why *you* won't be getting anything."

Sirius snorts. "Yeah, okay, fair enough. I don't want anything that cunt owned anyway."

"Sirius!"

"What, Reggie? I'm just saying!"

"Well, maybe *don't* just say!"

"I can say what I like!"

"You shouldn't."

"But I *can."*

"But you *shouldn't."*

"But I *can."*

"But you *shouldn't."*

"But I—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Alecto bursts out, slamming her way to her feet, making her chair and the table clatter. Without a word, she whirls around and marches away. Narcissa hides a smile behind her hand as she goes, and Andromeda shakes her head in visible amusement, looking over to check on the kids.

Sirius and Regulus share a glance.

"But I *can."*

"But you *shouldn't!"*

~•~

This is how it goes for James:

"I'm really worried about him," Pandora whispers, her gaze locked on Rodolphus across the room, fingers tangled together in her lap. "Losing Rabastan… It's like…"

"Losing a touchstone," Regulus murmurs, and James can see the tension that bleeds into the muscles of his back, knotting them all up. He avoids Rodolphus in all manners, even looking at him, like losing a brother is a disease he's terrified to catch. It's a horrible thing, ostracizing someone out of fear that their grief could claim you next.

"A touchstone," Pandora repeats, lips tipping down.

"Losing a brother is losing a touchstone. How do we measure ourselves without the very criteria it takes to recognize ourselves?" Regulus says quietly. "When you lose a brother, you lose you."

He says it so simply, so bluntly, like he knows.

James supposes, in a lot of ways, he does.

"I don't know how to help him," Pandora croaks. "He helped me. Every time I asked to train, he said yes. Should I—do you think I should offer to train with him? Maybe take his mind off things? No, that's stupid. There's a war on, and we're going for the Hallow next, all of us. We need to rest now, but he's—"

"Pandora," Regulus cuts in gently, "sometimes there's nothing that can be done."

James doesn't agree with that. Doesn't like it, the way Rodolphus has folded himself away from everyone, a wisp now, not alone yet so lonely. He doesn't want to be acknowledged, and so no one acknowledges him. James feels like that's wrong. Grief is meant to be shared, he thinks.

So, without warning, James grabs his cane and pushes to his feet. He walks away and walks right over to the table that Rodolphus sits at, pulling back a chair and sitting with him. He gets no acknowledgement or reaction.

The thing is, so many people have lost those they love now. In the battles to take the districts, there were many killed. A lot of *casualties of war,* someone called it. A mere statistic in the making; someday, people will look back on these battles and describe them in numbers instead of names.

But, here and now, everyone is grieving. It hangs heavy and acrid in the air, like the sweet rot of decay is seeping through the walls, like ghosts follow around those who will always be haunted by them. It chokes. It strangles. It suffocates.

And yet—people carry on, because they have to. Because what else is there to do? They can't stop now. They can't give up now. They haven't even reached the point where they can start healing and rebuilding yet, so everyone is trapped in this frozen state of grief and living, and living with grief.

So, people still laugh, and they still smile, and they still talk. They provide help when and where they can. They keep busy and focus on what's next. But—just the same—there's this, too. There's silence. There's despair. There's this sense of drifting lonely in a hub of people, a sea of so many beating hearts except for the ones that stopped.

Rabastan's heart stopped, but Rodolphus' didn't. Rabastan's heart did beat once, though, not that long ago. He was here. He was here, and he was loved, and now he's gone, and he's still loved. Is that not grief? Love that poisons itself without the beating heart it's aimed at still here to cleanse it?

Grief is love, and love shouldn't be done alone.

"Tell me about him," James says. "If you want."

"What?" Rodolphus croaks, lifting his gaze slowly. The blank, dead look of his eyes makes James' stomach lurch. It's such a terrible thing to see. Something everyone instinctively wants

to shy away from, not wanting to come in contact with it.

"Your brother, Rabastan," James murmurs. Rodolphus flinches, and James remembers the way Rodolphus told him to look at Frank lying on the ground, dead. James didn't want to, but he had to, because as horrible as it is, not looking at it won't stop it from being there. "If you want to tell me about him, Rodolphus, you can."

"You knew him," Rodolphus whispers.

"Not as you did," James replies. He puts his hand to his chest, genuine, heartfelt. "Share him with me. I'll feel this with you, as much as I can secondhand. You don't have to feel it alone."

And so, slowly, haltingly, Rodolphus begins to talk. It's stilted and stiff, starts and stops, the first act of stories abandoned before the last, when it seems to become too much for him. He remembers his brother in bitten-off pieces, tiny facts he can share that don't send his guts spilling out into his lap.

He says, at one point, "He was so stupid. Bas was so fucking stupid. I don't know why he did that. Why he wouldn't—why he—why couldn't he have been okay? Why did it have to be him? It's—it isn't right. He's—he was younger. I was supposed to go first, not him. It's so stupid, it's all so stupid."

James can hear how angry Rodolphus is, and he doesn't have the words to help him, but he listens. He sits right there and listens, and aches, and feels it with him.

Pandora arrives next, not too long after James. She's always the one who puts in the effort, and it seems to disarm her that she's doesn't know how to now, with him. She touches his shoulder, unsure, and he looks at her without the smile he would always save just for her, warm and flirty, despite the fact that she never quite seemed to pick up on the latter. A small sound escapes him, quiet and hurt, and her hand cups the side of his neck, then his cheek, and she pulls him into her. She stands and he sits, and her arms wrap around his head like she's going to protect him, his face buried into her stomach. James looks away, looks over to meet Regulus' eyes, staring and beckoning with only his gaze until Regulus puts aside his reservations to come over and join them, too.

He isn't the last. Eventually, more and more people come. Pandora ends up in the chair with Rodolphus, on him and curled around him, letting him rest his head on her chest with his eyes closed, breathing and breathing and breathing. Sirius shows up at some point, with Dorcas and Marlene in tow. It isn't long before people come in by the droves. Lily and Mary, Barty and Asher, and more and more and more.

And they talk about Rabastan. They talk about Amos. They talk about Sybill. It's a memorial in the only way they have, the living left behind to celebrate and mourn the dead. It spreads all over from table to table, so many gone to talk about and not enough words in the world to explain how heavy the loss is.

It's the first time that Asher cries, finally, after all this time. Cries, because Rabastan said they'd make it through life together, and die together, and they didn't. And, after she cries, she laughs because Rabastan told her before he went on the mission that, if he didn't make it back, she'd just have to go through hell without him, because one of them should get to see what waits on the other side. So, she will keep going, just to see. Just to see. Isn't that life, in spite of grief?

And what is grief?

Grief is many things. What it feels like to James, even now, is the cold nights of his first arena, bodies huddled together for warmth and the touch of humanity in a place where humanity is so hard to find. They search for it together, and they share it however they can, and they feel it for each other and with each other. It's not hope, not really, but it's intimate. There's a lot of intimacy in grief, just as there is in love.

They do not talk about the war, because there is no space for the war here, when it has taken so much already. They do not talk about winning the war. There's no winning a war; there's only starting it, enduring it, and ending it.

Before the end, they endure, and they endure, and they endure.

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For Remus, it goes like this:

"So, wait, they told everyone that Lily died?" Remus asks, feeling sick. "And that *I* killed all the Aurors?"

Lyall nods. "Suppose they didn't want to explain that she managed to get away. And, well, it's not like they knew where she went, did they? Easier to blame it all on you and say she died to make sure no one else got the bright idea to run."

"That's fucking awful," Remus whispers.

"It was, yeah. Messed that boy up, too. That one that was dating Petunia at the time. You remember?"

"Dursley, wasn't it?"

"That's the one. He went off the become a mayor for her honor or something, going on about making sure no one did anything like Lily did that ended with Petunia dead. It went to his head, of course. Never liked me much, honestly, and the feeling was mutual," Lyall mutters. "He brought you up to me a lot, nearly every time we spoke; it was always about how my son murdered all those Aurors, and I was one once..."

"Dad, I swear I only killed Greyback," Remus blurts out, his eyes wide. He pauses. "Um…at the time. Listen—"

"Remus," Lyall cuts in, sighing, "I'm not—look, I've had six years to do a lot of thinking about…a lot of things, and to be honest with you, I don't care. I just—don't care what you did, or didn't do; what you've done, or what you will do. You're my son. That's what matters to me. Nothing else."

Remus exhales and pushes to his feet. "Okay, good, because I honestly had no idea how I was going to defend myself."

Lyall chuckles, and Remus gives him a lopsided smile, feeling ridiculously warm. He's—yes, okay, he knows that everything is really shit at the moment for a lot of people, but oh, he's so fucking pleased that his dad is here. He's been with him every single second since they got back, save for half an hour he spent babbling to Sirius about why he's not with everyone else, to which Sirius blinked a lot, nodded rapidly, and laughed a little breathlessly as he pushed Remus to go be with his dad and promised that he'd be along at some point.

"To the people who love you, there are some things you don't have to defend yourself about at all," Lyall murmurs. "Listen, I know we haven't really gotten to talk about everything, but there's something I think we should discuss."

"I don't like to talk about being a servant," Remus announces immediately, his shoulders going tense. "It was—I mean, I do talk about it, in general, like with Lily and Sirius, but… Dad, I don't like to linger on it and keep rehashing it over and over, and I don't—" He swallows harshly. "I don't want you to look at me and that be all you see."

"Remus—"

"No, I know, okay? I know I'm your son, and I—I know that all you said was true, but it's still… I've had to…learn things, and unlearn things, and relearn things—and I just—that's all I can give you. I'm sorry, but I—"

"Remus, stop," Lyall says quietly, reaching out to catch his wrist where he's throwing his arms around in the middle of a worked-up tirade. "You don't have to tell me what you aren't comfortable sharing, and I—I don't need to know anything other than what you want me to know. I—I know—I *do* know that you've been through the unimaginable, and you can't possibly know what I would give to take all the pain and suffering you've felt so you didn't have to. I would, if I could."

"I wouldn't let you," Remus mumbles.

"And I would try to take it anyway," Lyall replies, "because you are my son, and this is what it is to be a parent. Another, much harder part of being a parent is realizing that, no matter how much we might wish to, there are some things we can't shield our children from. I—

struggled with that for a long time, and I only succeeded in pushing you away. For that, I'm sorry."

"Dad—"

"We fought that day."

Remus closes his eyes. "Dad, stop it. Don't do that. It's not your fault. It was never your fault. I was always going to do what I did; it was my choice to make, and I made it."

"I know," Lyall says. Remus opens his eyes. Lyall looks weary, and sad. "I know that now. For a long time, I didn't. I thought a lot about how I could have done it all differently. If maybe I had helped you, instead of trying to stop you. Supported you, instead of trying to smother you. It took me time to realize that you were just—growing up. Making your own decisions. Setting the course of your life. I could no more control that than I could stop wanting to, just to keep you safe."

"No matter what you did," Remus whispers, "I was always going to end up there, Dad. No matter how you handled it, my mind was made up. There was nothing you could have done, but I know now that you tried. You really tried."

"I couldn't have tried harder," Lyall croaks, "but I could have done better. I'll do better now. I promise."

"You know how you can do your very best?" Remus asks.

Lyall pauses, then raises his eyebrows. "How?"

"Stay here," Remus says softly, holding his gaze. "When the final battle happens, don't go. Stay here, and wait for me to get back, because I need you here. I just got you back, and I need to know I'm not losing you again. So, stay here, Dad. Please."

"You'll be there."

"I know. I'm asking you to let me go, and let me come back."

"Well…" Lyall stares at him for a long moment, swallowing thickly, and then he exhales and nods so very stiffly, like it's killing him to do it. Remus feels something in his chest unclench all at once in sheer relief. "Yes, alright. I'm not entirely sure my hip would really let me be much help anyway, and if I help you more by being here, then I'll be here."

"Thank you," Remus breathes out.

Lyall opens his mouth like he's about to respond, but then a knock at the door gathers their attention. Remus tugs his wrist from Lyall's grip, frowning as he heads to the door. Lyall has only been settled in his new room for a bit, so who's—

"Hi," Sirius greets warmly when the door opens. His eyes are sparkling. Pretty, pretty, pretty.

Remus nearly melts. "Hi."

"Is that boy of yours at the door?" Lyall calls out, and Remus grins the moment Sirius looks delighted and flustered by this title, his face turning red.

"Yeah, Dad, it's him," Remus replies.

Sirius bites his lip. "Is this a bad time?"

"Well, don't stand around, Remus. Let him in," Lyall says, clicking his tongue. "Been worried about him."

Me? Sirius mouths, looking mildly alarmed, and Remus chuckles as he reaches out to grab Sirius' arm and tug him inside. Sirius smiles at Lyall. "Hello, Mr—um. Sorry, Lyall."

"Nice to see you again, Sirius," Lyall greets, amused. "You seem well, all things considered. Are you well?"

"Well enough," Sirius says, "all things considered."

Lyall's lips twitch. "That's fair."

"You look well, too, sir," Sirius adds. "I'm glad you're not dead." Remus snorts the moment Sirius looks horrified by the words that just tumbled out of his mouth. "Sh—oot, sorry. I mean, it's true, but that's—there wasn't very much tact in how I said it, was there? Just—I'm glad you're *okay.* That's what—"

"Remus," Lyall cuts in, "are you *sure* you found him in the Hallow? Absolutely sure?"

"Actually," Remus corrects fondly, "he found me."

"Respectfully," Sirius says. "In a very respectful manner. I treat Remus with the utmost respect."

"This isn't true," Remus lies, and Sirius chokes, his head whipping towards him in disbelief. "Dad, he uses me for sexual favors and tells me he owns me."

"I do *not!"* Sirius bursts out, eyes bulging. "I have *never—"*

"He makes me do his laundry—"

"Remus!"

"I even cook for him—"

"You're literally a cook here! You cook for *everyone."*

Remus keeps his face perfectly neutral when he adds, "And he won't let me break up with him either."

"That was *you!"* Sirius yelps, his head swiveling to look at Lyall, whose shoulders are shaking. "Sir, he's—oh. You're laughing. You're—" He stops, then flicks his gaze between Remus and Lyall, and Remus finally breaks out into a grin. Sirius huffs. "Oh, for f—ah, that wasn't funny!"

"That," Lyall wheezes, "was *hilarious."*

"Why are you the way you are?" Sirius grumbles at Remus.

"You see how he talks to me, Dad?"

"I see. It's despicable."

"Truly," Remus agrees.

Sirius rolls his eyes. "If you two are finished messing with me, I was going to say Effie and Monty were hoping to meet you, Lyall. They're my parents." He pauses, then coughs. "Well, adopted. I adopted them, really, or they adopted me, or we all just adopted each other. Whatever, it all works. The point is, my actual parents are dead."

"Oh," Lyall says, and then, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Trust me, there's no need to be," Sirius assures him, waving a hand. "Anyway, if you're not feeling up to it—"

"No, I'd be happy to," Lyall says quickly, pushing to his feet.

"Okay, good, because they're waiting at the end of the hall," Sirius replies sheepishly, leading them out of the room.

It takes Lyall all of five minutes with Effie and Monty to settle in and essentially wave Remus off, *insisting* he's fine, and Remus can go relax. Remus is admittedly a little huffy about this, but doesn't want to show it, so he hides his frown and leads Sirius to their room, tired down to his bones.

As Sirius follows him in, he asks, "Okay, my love?"

Remus grunts as he falls into bed after a long, long fucking day. A hard day. They're all having a lot of hard days these days. All he wants, now, is to curl up with Sirius and toss the whole damn day away. Be done with it.

"I'll take that as a no," Sirius mumbles, then huffs out a weak laugh when Remus turns over and lays all over him. Sirius' fingers slide into his hair. "Yeah, okay. Fair enough."

"I'm not moving," Remus says. "Ever."

Sirius hums. "Fine by me." He scratches at Remus' scalp, which would honestly make Remus purr if he was a cat. "You're thinking about your dad, aren't you?"

"A bit, maybe," Remus admits. "I think Effie and Monty adopted him, too. Haven't seen him in six years, and he waves me off the second he makes new friends."

"Oh, you poor thing," Sirius coos, clucking his tongue. He fakes a pout when Remus lifts his head to glare at him. "Are you feeling left out? Snubbed, perhaps?"

"You know what?"

"No, what?"

Remus huffs. "Bite me."

"Of course," Sirius replies, then promptly does just that, dipping his head to clamp down on the side of Remus' arm so hard that Remus yelps and pats frantically at the side of his head. Sirius lets go, licks the indentation of his teeth, then looks up with a grin. "What? You told me to. You know I do whatever you say, Remus, don't look so shocked."

"Oh, yes, this one is on me," Remus says flatly. Sirius coos at him some more and grabs the sides of his face to pull him in, smacking a kiss to his forehead, then tilting Remus' head up to nip playfully at his chin. Remus rolls his eyes and lets him do it, then frowns up at the ceiling. "He's just so—agreeable now. I asked him to stay behind for the final battle, to stay here, told him I needed him here—and he just…said okay. Just went with it. Whatever I need, he said."

"Mhm." Sirius nibbles along his jaw, humming to show that he's paying attention.

Remus frowns harder. "And Lily—I mean, what happened to her family—"

"Sad," Sirius murmurs against his skin.

"Yeah," Remus agrees, sighing. "In a way, her parents were basically like a second set for me, and—well, okay, Petunia was a piece of work most of the time, but she was Lily's *sister,* you know? I grew up with them. It's just—fucked up. And it's hard, because I—I got everything back, pretty much. But Lily? I'm the only one who returned to her. Just me."

Sirius makes another noise and drags his teeth along the line of Remus' throat, not quite biting down, just—there.

"I told Dad I only killed Greyback, and he said flat-out that he didn't care either way. That it didn't matter. That I'm his son, and that's all that matters to him."

"Why do you sound agitated about it?" Sirius mutters, then lifts his head to catch Remus' earlobe between his teeth.

"Because—I don't know. I just—I guess my dad has always been, like, the epitome of judgement for me? My own personal judge; he was always weighing my actions and deeming them inappropriate or unacceptable, and now…" Remus sighs, his eyes fluttering shut. "I—I don't know if—if he's—"

"You don't feel that he's judging you properly enough, or harshly enough," Sirius surmises, pulling his mouth away long enough to speak, then going right back to Remus' skin.

"Yeah," Remus mumbles. "Maybe? I just—I think I sort of put all the weight of what I've done aside until he could set it down on me, and now he isn't. Shouldn't I—feel it?"

"Be forced to, you mean? Because no one could make you feel as bad about yourself and the things you've done as your dad, so you believe he should make you feel that way again? Like you can only feel it through a conduit of your father's disapproval. Like a punishment."

"I—I don't know. Maybe? I guess?"

Sirius says, "Personally, I don't think you should feel anything but good at all times, but if you need to feel something bad, I can handle that," and then he ducks his head and buries his teeth into Remus' throat, making him hiss.

"Sirius!" Remus bursts out. He tangles his fingers into Sirius' hair and yanks fretfully, groaning in disbelief when Sirius detaches and lifts his head to arch an eyebrow at him. "What the fuck? That actually *hurt."*

"Yes, exactly. See how stupid and pointless it is to seek pain through those who have no desire to give it to you? Didn't you teach me that, Remus?"

"Well, I got my point across a lot more gently!"

"And I got my point across a lot more effectively," Sirius informs him smugly. "Stop frowning at me. You're pouting and grumpy and *not paying attention to me."*

Remus gapes at him. "I'm trying to have a conversation! I'm coming to you with my problems —"

"Except they're only problems you've made up in your head, and I won't stand for them to make you unhappy." Sirius pokes at the bite mark he left behind. "Your dad *loves* you, Remus. He loves you so much, and he wants to know how you've been. It's not like *you'll* tell him all the details, so that's why he's talking to Effie and Monty, because they're parents, too. They know what it is to worry about children. They're, you know, actually *good* parents. They're the good parents club. I think it's sweet."

"Right, but—"

"And he's staying because you asked him to, because it *is* what you need. You only just got him back. He's letting you go, and he's letting you have something to come back to. That's *important,* Remus. It's so important."

"I know, I just—"

"And he's not judging you, because you do not need to be judged, or punished. Haven't you suffered enough? Remus, it would take years of indescribable acts of violence for you to ever balance the scales between what you've done versus what you've been through. You have more than paid whatever dues you believe you deserve to, and you *never* deserved to. Besides, this is war. You're not the only one in it, remember?"

"Yes, okay, I get that," Remus grumbles, deflating with a heavy sigh. "I know everything you're saying is true, but I just thought—I really thought it'd be different."

"I know," Sirius murmurs. "We all struggle with change, Remus. We all have to adjust. It's rarely easy to do so."

"I'm supposed to be the sensible one," Remus says, eyeing him and fighting the curl at the corners of his mouth.

Sirius seems to notice it anyway, if the way his eyes soften are anything to go by. "It's okay, don't fret, I'm only sensible when you need me to be."

"Hm." Remus reaches up to touch the side of his neck where the ache has dulled to a low, almost pleasant throb. "This wasn't very sensible, though. What's that all about?"

"I want to eat you sometimes," Sirius announces casually.

"Consume me whole?"

"Every bit of you, by the mouthful, bones and all."

Remus snorts. "Freak."

"Your fault," Sirius says, his gaze warm.

"Come here," Remus replies quietly, tugging Sirius closer until Remus can sprawl out all over him again. He sighs as Sirius begins carding his fingers through his hair, eyes drifting shut as he listens to Sirius' heart thump-da-thump. "How are we supposed to go to war tomorrow?"

"Like we've been doing this whole time," Sirius tells him. "We just go."

"It would have been a lot easier for me to do at twenty," Remus admits. "There are a lot of reasons not to, now."

Sirius is silent for a beat, and then he murmurs, "But aren't those reasons the same reasons to go? It's like a trap—the very people we don't want to risk leaving or losing are the very people we fight for and with. What else can we do?"

"We could run away, like you suggested," Remus mumbles.

"No, we can't," Sirius says softly.

"We're not really free, are we?" Remus whispers.

"Not yet," Sirius whispers back, pressing his face into Remus' hair. "Soon. Really soon."

Remus lifts his head slowly, then cranes up to meet Sirius' mouth with his own, pushing up on his elbows to deepen it. Sirius hums, then bites his lip, then pulls away the moment Remus gets his legs under him, on either side of Sirius, and looms over him, looking down upon him.

"We have to live to see our everything," Remus declares firmly, holding his gaze. "We've made do with our something for long enough, haven't we? I want everything now."

"I told you I'd live for you," Sirius says, hands coming up to cup his face. So tender. So much love there, in the cradle of his palms. "I will. I'll give you everything, Remus. We'll have it."

"Soon," Remus agrees. "Really soon."

When Remus dips in to kiss him, Sirius arches up to meet him halfway, and it's good practice for the everything they're going to war to fight for. Soon, they'll have it.

Really soon.

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For Regulus, it goes like this:

"Are you mad at me?"

Regulus doesn't like that his voice comes out small, on the verge of breaking, but he also can't help it. There might not be anything he hates more than James being mad at him. In fact, Regulus hates that more than he hates rain.

James blinks at him. "What? Why would I be mad at you?"

"Because of Rodolphus. Earlier. When I was—" Regulus swallows and looks away. "I know I came across as callous. It wasn't—I was being cruel."

It hurts, is the thing. Rabastan was a friend, and Regulus remembers refusing to get attached to him in the arena, knowing how much it hurts to lose someone through having already lost Evan. In the end, Regulus came to care for Rabastan anyway, and a part of him is glad that he did, because he's grateful to have known him. It just fucking aches to know that he died anyway, and Rodolphus—oh, that's something that tears Regulus up inside, just how hurt Rodolphus is, how different he is now, because he lost a brother. Regulus is scared of that, scared to brush up against it and feel it himself; being near Rodolphus makes Regulus want to knock Sirius out and hide him away somewhere safe until the war is over, because he can't—he can't go through that. Can't go through losing his brother.

He's glad, though, that he did get over himself and be there with Rodolphus earlier. He just wishes he had done it sooner. Feels sick with guilt that he didn't.

"It's a difficult topic to engage with for you. Losing a brother. I'm not angry with you for the things you struggle with, Reg, you know that," James murmurs, eyebrows furrowed.

Regulus frowns at him. Frowns some more. Keeps frowning. It makes James' face soften. The fool finds it endearing when he frowns, but he finds nearly everything Regulus does endearing. It gives Regulus heart flutters, even after all this time.

"Are you pouting?" James asks, amused.

"No," says Regulus, who is pouting. James raises his eyebrows at him, eyes bright behind his glasses, dancing with fondness and humor. "I'm really not. It's just—I mean, you went right to him. You—you made a lot of people feel good tonight for the first time in a really long time, James. And I was—I'm the one who was standing in the way of that. Or trying to."

"Reg—"

"And that was my instinct. Do you get what I'm saying? My instinct isn't to take care of others. It's self-preservation and taking care of *mine,* except I'm shit at that, too."

James purses his lips. "I'd say you're a lot better at it than you give yourself credit for, love. And, if you remember, you *didn't* stand in the way of it. The thing about comfort is—it's not

always easy to give, or take. When it came down to it, you didn't stand in the way; you joined in. That's what matters."

"But it wasn't my *first* instinct," Regulus insists, a lump forming in his throat, "and I—I don't think it ever will be."

"It doesn't have to be your first," James replies. "If it's that important to you to be comforting, all that should matter is that you take chances to be, instead of turning them away. Do you honestly believe *my* first instinct is *always* to comfort?"

"You're always comforting to me," Regulus mumbles.

"And you're always comforting to me," James responds, his face splitting into a smile. "We're in love. I'm pretty sure that's how it's supposed to work."

Regulus squints at him, not entirely sure if he believes that James *always* finds him comforting—there's absolutely no fucking way, but the mere thought makes him feel entirely too happy to describe. So, naturally, he treats it with suspicion. James huffs a laugh and holds out his hand, beckoning Regulus to come closer with a gentle curl of his fingers.

Regulus goes, obviously.

"Talk to me," James murmurs, taking Regulus' hand and threading their fingers together, interlinking them. He rocks against him and rests his chin there on Regulus' shoulder, gazing at him under his eyelashes. He's so heartbreakingly pretty that Regulus falls into the old habit of hating him.

"I just want to be good at it, you know?" Regulus whispers. He rocks his forehead against James, inhaling deep, his free hand creeping up James' arm. It fits against the back of James' neck, holding him there. "I want to get it right at least once."

"Reg, you get it right as much as you don't. You're getting it right, right now." James leans in and bumps their noses together. "Look at you, love. You're a natural."

"Yeah?" Regulus breathes out, tipping his head to feel James' cheek under his lips, James' hair against his hand, James' fingers tangled with his own. "I really comfort you?"

"It's like—" James exhales, quietly, then shifts on the bed to scoot closer to him. His throat sticks when he swallows. "Do you remember the night before our first arena?"

"I remember," Regulus admits.

James cups the side of Regulus' neck with his free hand, and they're just leaning their heads together, talking softly as if trading secrets. Maybe they are. "You said then that I might have died after that night—could have the very next day—and yet, I wasn't scared. I should have been scared. I was before, even when Sirius was with me, but with you—"

"With me?" Regulus prompts.

"With you," James whispers, "it's like nothing else exists. Just you, just us, and that's all there is. And, when it's just you and just us, there's nothing to be afraid of. You want to take care of me, but the thing is, you already *do.* You have for a long time."

"I try my best," Regulus admits, because he does. Slowly, every day, his best gets just a little better, and it comes to him just a little easier.

"I know you do." James catches his face in his hands and kisses one corner of his mouth. "Ah, I'm—just in general, I'm overestimated, and it—it raises these standards that I feel compelled to meet. You're the opposite, in a lot of ways."

"Are you saying I…underestimate you?"

"Probably, in some ways, but it's—I don't think it's a bad thing, how you do it. More like… Well, I'm a bigger man, and usually more cheerful than most, but you still look at me like I'm something that needs to be protected."

Regulus huffs and mutters, "You are. Just on principle."

"Because you don't like me to be in pain, and you care about me with every lovely little beat of your heart. How dare you think you're not good at it? Regulus, there's no one better."

"Oh, don't say that."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because I love you, and when you say things like that, it makes the little beats of my heart skip. I value being alive these days, you know. Stop trying to kill me, please."

When James laughs, it is warm and lovely against Regulus' skin. "I knew I'd wear you down someday. Look at you, I'll make a romantic out of you yet. It doesn't get more romantic than a skipping heart."

"Wait until you hear what it does when you smile."

"What's that?"

"It flutters," Regulus admits.

"Ooh, it *flutters,"* James repeats, sounding downright giddy, utterly delighted. He rears back, beaming at him, smiling. And there it is; flutter, flutter, flutter.

Regulus releases a weak laugh. "Fucking hell, how stupid is that?"

"How long has it been fluttering?" James asks.

"Started when we met," Regulus says. "Hasn't stopped since."

James grins and rocks forward with something resembling a silly little giggle. "See? What did I say? Some things can't be taken away from us. They could fix my eyesight, but I'll always need my glasses. They could try to rip your heart out, and yet there it is, still fluttering just for me."

"Oh, don't go getting a big head now."

"I can't help it. You've just inflated it massively."

Regulus groans out a helpless laugh. "If I didn't love you, I swear I would hate you. Even when I fucking hate you, I love you. It honestly makes me sick."

"Lovesick."

"Oh, fuck off."

James presses a grin against his jaw, kissing him there, then kisses a path all the way to Regulus' mouth. It's easy to fall into it, and to fall altogether when James tugs him down. They stay wrapped up together until James jolts and pulls away.

"Er," James says, blinking rapidly, his glasses lopsided.

"What?" Regulus huffs, digging his face into James throat like a particularly pissed off cat demanding affection, and when James doesn't give it to him fast enough, meaning instantly, he digs his nails into the back of James' neck in reprimand, needy and wanting and terribly fussy about it. "James—"

"There's something—" James tugs on the side of his shirt over his hip, pulling it up, and then: "Oh."

Regulus blinks and looks down. "Oh, yeah, that. Narcissa gave it to me earlier. It was Bella's favorite dagger. Sorry, let me just get that out of the way." He reaches down to swiftly slip it out of his waistband, craning to gingerly sit it down on the dresser before focusing back on James. "Anyway, let's—"

"We're not supposed to have weapons," James says faintly, his gaze latched onto the dagger with unwavering focus.

"I know, but Narcissa snuck it in. No one knows I have it, and they *won't* know, because they'll confiscate it—or try. They won't get very far; I'll kill anyone who makes the attempt."

"Regulus."

"What?" Regulus mutters, scowling. "Look, I know that seems extreme, but it's important, alright? I'm always going to have it on me as a reminder, and because—honestly, as strange as it may be, *that's* a comfort to me." He pauses. "Well, not in bed, obviously. You don't have to worry about that."

James coughs. "Oh. Right. That's…great."

"Were you worried?" Regulus asks, frowning now, admittedly stung by the thought. "James, I'd never hurt you, especially not with a damn dagger."

"Never?" James asks weakly.

Regulus cards his fingers through his hair, trying to get his gaze to fall away from the dagger. "Never. I promise."

James bites his lip. "Not even if—"

"Never," Regulus cuts in, grabbing his jaw and forcing him to look at him, wanting to reassure him. "Never, James, not for any reason."

"Oh," James mumbles, wilting a little bit with what Regulus imagines is relief. "Um, yay for me, I…guess."

Clearly, the surprise dagger has ruined the mood, because James seems oddly down now, so Regulus sighs and reaches out to cut off the lamp, bathing the room in darkness. He turns over and fumbles to find James in the shadows, drawing him close and wrapping both arms around him.

"Go to sleep, James," Regulus says softly. "We need to rest. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Hey, Reg?"

"Yes?"

"No matter what comes tomorrow, I want you to know I love you," James whispers. "Before all of it, and when we make it through, and when all of it's over—I love you."

Regulus closes his eyes. "I love you, too."

Chapter End Notes

you know, reading this chapter back, it really is a lot lighter than i remembered it being... 🤔

anyway, from the top!

we start out with lily, which is where we get the answers about her family! and it's just. so fucking devastating, because like. we watched her claw her way to a point that she could feel hope again, and then it was crushed. oh, and her and kingsley! yeah, that's rough, too. like, kingsley can acknowledge that lily wasn't all to blame, really, but he also can't separate her from it either. there's something very gale-esque about that situation, in that lily was so war-driven, and in a way, she's responsible for a friend losing someone they love. but it's not that simple either... it's just a really tragic situation :(also bingley coming to comfort her, IM GONNA CRY

and then there's an immediate tone shift to something lighter with marlene and dorcas, which is. shocking! weve never really gotten to see them just chilling out and being sweet like this, and oh!!! them with maximus!!! it's so special to me. remember when marlene couldn't even hold him? 😭

following them, we get sirius, which is where we find out where narcissa went when she abandoned regulus in district one! she wasn't joking when she said she wanted to be a mother!!! also lmaoooo alecto hating kids and being like "oh no, ive been babytrapped" 😭 oh, and regulus getting a dagger!!!! and it's bellatrix's favorite!!! and regulus and sirius bickering, i love them so much <3

and then again, tone shift to something heavier with james!!! he's so!!! gahhh, i want to squeeze him, because he's just so fucking CARING. like, he cares so much, and ofc he's the one to step up and cross into that dreadful territory of grief to try and offer solace and help in any way he can. just, so beautiful. what he did was so beautiful to me, i adore him.

following james, we get remus!!! more answers for why lyall thought remus killed all the aurors etc, and the explanation for why vernon was mayor, as well as the type of mayor he became. and just. that conversation between remus and lyall was so, so necessary, and so important! but also, both of them fucking with sirius lmaoooo. i adore them. and then ofc that moment of sirius being there for remus and kind of, like, talking him out of his own head. taking care of him 😭😭😭 (yes, that was a bones and all reference btw, i have no shame or regrets)

and then, lastly, we get regulus and james!!! they're so special to me. like, regulus' personal growth is so lovely, he's come so far, he really has. im ridiculously proud of him. and like, him wanting to be comforting, especially to james 😭 HES SO LOVELY I NEED TO HUG HIM!!! just them having little folded away moments and being sweet and even regulus indulging james and being romantic. i just remember when they were in their games and regulus had to like, formulate romantic moments between him and james, but he was so awkward and didn't know how and he really just COULDN'T, and

it really shows like, how starkly different it is when they're alone and not putting on a show. oh, and lmaooo, james' knife kink jumping out GOODBYE 😭

regulus: james ill never come anywhere close to you with my daggers, i can't believe you'd think i would!

james: oh... :(great... :(such a relief... :(

lmaoooo, i love them so much.

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-bingley comforting lily by humming a tune that mary does because he unconsciously finds it comforting :(
-dorcas being best friends with cordelia
-marlene grumbling about dorcas being best friends with cordelia
-"mean, mean marlene" <3
-alecto calling narcissa a black and despairing that she got invested in her lmaooo
-narcissa "either move on or settle in, im doing this my way" black being an icon <3
-sirius thinking no one can be mean to regulus but him 😭
-pandora comforting rodolphus
-asher crying about rabastan :(
-the complexity of grief and how it can ostracize someone, and james pushing back against that
-lyall not giving a shit what remus has or hasn't done and just being a good dad—or trying to be <3
-lyall worrying about sirius and checking on him!!!
-effie and monty being lyalls friends <3
-sirius chewing on remus the whole time he was with him in this chapter lmaooo (idk why that happened, he insisted on it, he just really wanted to ig. valid of him, if you ask me)
-regulus and his heart flutters 😭
-jegulus being sweet <3

anyway, the next chapter dives very quickly into the war and its—very gruesome and heavy, so i want to warn for that yet again. and i will again for the chapters, but i really want to reiterate it beforehand as much as possible, okay? okay.

Prisoners of War

Chapter Notes

hello, all! before we even dive into the warnings for the chapter, i want to reiterate once again that this chapter and the next are very, very heavy. they're gorey, bloody, and violent. theres fucked up situations and depictions of war. there is death, too. so, like, please be warned, please read the warning list, please go to the end notes for spoilery warnings if you need them, and please take care of yourselves.

onto the warnings:

-references to past child death/murder
-descriptions/depictions of blood
-graphic depictions of violence
-graphic depictions of injuries/wounds
-guns/gun violence
-brief depiction of a panic attack
-references to and depictions of fear/grief/pain
-brief depiction of someone being mauled (vague and we don't see it in detail)
-references to child death (but also not really??? you'll see what i mean)
-depictions of murdering children??? except not really??? you'll see what i mean
-death

i will be putting a little list in the end notes containing spoilers for in-depth warnings for 1) who dies in this chapter and how, and 2) a couple of the more violent things in this chapter. it's valid of you need them!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once all the districts are taken, it's time to take the Hallow.

If you ask Aberforth, it's going to be a bloodbath.

Thanks to Sirius, Regulus, and James—and a good portion of the credit goes to Minerva as well, for the shift she made in the Hallows as head gamemaker—there's a significant amount of Hallows who are rioting already. Albus will have all his surviving numbers, as well as all volunteers from the districts that are willing to go, and at least a fraction to the Hallows themselves fighting on the behalf of a promised better world. It will be a long, hard push to reach Riddle, and once he falls—if he falls—the war will come to a halt.

None of this changes the fact that a lot of people are going to die over the course of all this. Children, parents, families. Aurors, Order members, and those caught in between. How can a near guaranteed win be called a win at all, when so much loss is what it takes to get there?

So many people have died already.

And Albus—foolish Albus, in all his hubris—has the audacity to look Aberforth in the eye and ask him not to go.

Don't go, Albus said. Two words, spoken softly, aged with pain. It's an echo of a time long ago, when Aberforth casted aside the shattered remains of his pride to say it first. To look his brother in the eye and beg him. Don't go. Please don't go. Don't do this. Don't leave me.

Aberforth has felt his pride crumble to pieces at Albus' feet one too many times in his life, and he won't allow it to happen again, not this time. Aberforth has lost, and lost, and lost. So has Albus. At times, more so than the brotherhood between them they tore apart with their own hands, loss seems to be the only thing they share. A little sister lost. A brother lost. Home and safety and a life free from war—lost, lost, lost.

Albus has lost so much, even more than Aberforth, and Aberforth has no sympathy for him. None. All sympathy has been smothered out of him year after year when he only had a tree to call family, when all he had to be attached to was a place he called home, when everything he had to make it home was gone, and he still couldn't bear to leave it, because living with ghosts was still better than living alone.

How dare Albus stand here in his steel box beneath the dirt, his iron throne he made his own, and look over all the carnage he wrought with no stakes in it for him to understand the cost of his own choices? No, Aberforth won't allow it. Albus has lost so very much, but Aberforth is still here, still his brother, and it's Albus' choice to wage war—all choices have consequences, he said. Yes, well, he should face them, too.

What happened to Ariana, that's on Albus.

They blew her up. An explosion, one that left her nothing but charred remains, and in more than a few pieces. They send home tributes they can, for funerals and such. When they sent Ariana home, she came in ashes. She was fourteen. Albus and Aberforth planted her with a tree, so she could be healthy and grow, like she never got the chance to in life.

If Aberforth is honest, some part of him craves it. Dying, as his little sister did. Not because he wants to be dead, but simply to teach Albus a lesson he never quite learned. Or to make him feel the full brunt of his own choices; the only stakes Albus has in this war now are winning it, and Aberforth. Some part of Aberforth doesn't want Albus to have both.

"I will go," Aberforth says.

Albus' eyes sink shut. "Aberforth, please."

"You can stay here, Albus. Stay here and stand above it all. Watching from on high. An eagle's eye view." Aberforth grunts and shakes his head. "Or a phoenix, I should say."

"You are—old," Albus states, eyes fluttering open.

"Yes, but war doesn't discriminate between elderly and youth," Aberforth informs him, holding his gaze.

"Riddle knows you're alive. You are surely a target; if he doesn't kill you, he'll use you to get to me," Albus says, his voice tight with strain.

"He can try," Aberforth retorts, "but what good would that do? You and I both know the war is more important to you."

Albus stares at him for a moment, then looks away all at once. Over fifty years, and it still hurts. It still stings. Albus chose the war over Aberforth long ago, and he will always do so.

"Aberforth," Albus croaks.

"I'm going," Aberforth cuts in sharply, allowing no argument.

"You are not the young man you used to be. Neither of us are. If you—" Albus' voice cracks. "Abby, if you go, you may die."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Aberforth shrugs and stands up on creaky knees. "Either way, I'm going. I'll be out there, and you think about that, Albus, when thinking of all those lost to your war. If you won't put value on these lives, I'll *make* you."

"You seek to punish me," Albus says softly.

"Someone has to," Aberforth replies sharply.

"I've already lost one sibling," Albus whispers, eyes shiny with the tears that fill them. "Wasn't that punishment enough?"

Aberforth turns and heads for the door. As he goes, right before he leaves, he says, "Apparently not, because here you are again, making choices that might cost you another one."

Aberforth slams the door on his way out.

~•~

Severus stares at the Hallow map on Riddle's desk, gaze locked on the middle of it. Riddle's castle. It always has been the heart of the Hallow—a cold, cavernous heart shriveled and black, rotting right in the center. How fitting.

"They're in?" Riddle asks, standing at his window, staring out across the grounds. He has a gun on his hip. Always does these days, even when Severus is in the room with him. He has all those he's taken in his castle equipped with guns now; all the government officials that have always licked his boots, even, and the Aurors he has stationed all over the castle.

"They breached from the monitored entrance twenty minutes ago, and from district one in the last ten," Severus murmurs.

Riddle hums. "How long until they reach the traps?"

Severus glances at the map, staring at the red X's in the streets that surround the castle in all four corners. All of them indicate traps engineered usually with the games in mind, meaning they're controlled by the same building where the games have been controlled for years.

Whatever armies go there, they'll be hard-pressed to survive. It's just the hunger games unleashed in Hallow streets, except the goal is to have no Victor.

"If they keep pushing in as they are, I'd say an hour at most, sir," Severus says. That's something he wasn't quite expecting; the final battle is going so fast.

"That soon?" Riddle replies.

"The Aurors are overwhelmed," Severus admits. "Sir, we're severely outnumbered, and the death toll—"

"Very well," Riddle cuts in. "Have all Aurors retreat to the castle and hold the perimeter as soon as the opposition reaches the range of the traps. They can wait at the castle's perimeter once they've fallen back, but they're not to return before the opposition makes it within range; I want the Aurors to hold the line as long as possible and kill all that they can."

"Yes, sir."

"As for you, select a few teams to go out and get those I want and have them brought here."

Ah, not good. This was not something Severus anticipated, nor something planned for, and he has no way to get in contact with Albus about it. Still, he just nods. "And the rest?"

Riddle raises his glass of wine, taking a slow sip as he gazes out the window, the reflection of his expression in the glass chillingly empty. "As long as those traps are up and running, no one will live to make it through. Let them come."

"Yes, sir," Severus says quietly, gaze briefly dropping down to the map again, staring at the center. The most treacherous place to reach; a heart impenetrable from the outside.

And yet, and yet, here they come.

~•~

The thing about battles is that they're disorganized; what you think—or even hope—will happen most likely won't. You can plan and have a set route, but plans will get derailed and you'll find yourself going off course with no way back.

There's a lot of death, blood, and pain here. Trauma in the making. Very easy to get lost in. Very easy to get lost, period.

They all say—of course they all say they'll stay together, and then, inevitably, they lose sight of each other. They split up, a haze of mayhem trapping them all and making it impossible to stay within reach. There's war all around, and it's difficult to keep up with, too much chaos to keep your footing in.

Somehow, within the first hour, Regulus loses Sirius. He's there one second, moving fluidly with the ease of someone right at home, and the next time Regulus looks up, he's gone.

Nowhere to be found. The realization is sheer terror.

They've misplaced a lot of people, pushing in towards the center of the Hallow. Effie and Monty were with them, and now they're not. Narcissa, Rodolphus, and Alecto weren't too far away the last time he checked, and now he can't see them at all. Sirius and Lily were with Remus, while Marlene and Dorcas had been with Minerva and Poppy—and who knows if they're all still together, in all of this mess?

Regulus is not a very optimistic person, and war isn't really a place to look for positives. War isn't really a *place* at all; it's an event the same way total devastation is, a man-made disaster as ever-lasting as the world's worst hurricanes. That being said, *James* would try to find the silver-lining, and it's almost like a personal challenge for Regulus to do the same thing; that age-old adage—do you want to be with him, or be him?

For Regulus, it used to be both. Sometimes it still is.

It generally always is when it comes to stressful situations, because Regulus is so fucking stressed, and he would like to have the sort of strength James has to look for the bright side, rather than steep in the misery of it all.

So, the bright side—Regulus has James here with him, close by and radiating warmth, as always. He's safe. Not harmed, other than the usual scrapes and bruises that come with running and fighting as hard as they all have already. There are others here, too. Pandora, Barty, and Alice. Just them, out of all those they started with. A group of five lost in the haze of bloodshed.

Then the Aurors retreat, which is a positive, right? Should be, shouldn't it? There are countless dead in the street and far too many killed already; it *should* be a good thing that the enemy falls back and isn't here to do any more damage.

Regulus doesn't trust it.

There's a thin line between being courageous enough to hope in spite of the hopeless and being idealistic to the point of naivety. James has played jump-rope with this line before, and

it never ended well; at best, it got his feelings hurt, and at worst, it got people killed. He can't change who he is no more than Regulus would ever want him to; just the same, Regulus can't change that—in some ways, many ways—he is nothing like James. Not that long ago, even less than a year ago, this would have been something Regulus was ashamed of, but with time, he has learned it's not always a bad thing.

It's Regulus—due to his suspicion and general lack of trust in anything good in life—that manages to get this group of five safely tucked away in an alley approximately three minutes before everything that was already shit in the first place proceeds to go even more to shit.

The thing is, war isn't quiet. There's usually gunfire, screams, explosions—things such as that. And there *was* before the Aurors pulled back, and now there's not. Regulus prefers the quiet, generally, but not here.

Here, quiet is bad. Quiet makes him tense. Quiet makes his ears ring and sends chills down his spine. Quiet, here and now, never really lasts long—and it doesn't.

From the distance, a terrible shriek curdles through the air, followed very quickly by some of the most grotesque sounds Regulus has ever heard in his life. Snarls paired with the chilling noise of ripping and tearing, the rough pull of skin off bones like stitches being torn apart. Someone, somewhere, sobs and gurgles, audibly feasted on by *something.*

Instinctively, everyone within the alley drops down low, hugging the wall and holding very still, frozen in place and looking around at each other.

They don't move.

They don't breathe.

Regulus meets James' gaze and holds it, never looking away as the low, ominous rumbling draws closer. They can all hear it, the rough panting, heavy like a large beast. Somehow, Regulus is reassured by simply staring at James, looking at him and seeing the love there he promised the previous night that he would feel through all of this. It's there, right there, and if

Regulus is going to die, he's grateful this is what he gets to see before he goes. He hopes James can see that it's returned.

There's another scream in the distance, and the sound of a beast approaching halts. They listen to it leave, the harsh snarl of a target located fading the farther away it gets. Regulus' eyes sink shut, his lips parting around a shaky exhale.

A beat later, Regulus' eyes snap open when he hears a new approach from the opposite end of the alley, closest to him. His head whips around, and he could laugh when he sees who it is. He almost does laugh, in fact.

Rita fucking Skeeter.

She comes to a halt as soon as she sees them. Yes, them, the last group she would ever want to meet in a situation where death is within reach. She freezes like wounded prey before starving predators just waiting to swarm.

The thing is, Regulus knows some Hallows genuinely had no idea that the games were wrong. He knows that some of them were essentially brainwashed. He knows that some of them couldn't understand the impact of what they were partaking in, or what they were contributing to. He knows that some of them never, never had bad intentions.

Like Huey, for example. A sponsor who only ever meant well. When the time came, he did the right thing. He's out here somewhere now, still choosing to do the right thing. Even fucking Slughorn, after all that he did, made the choice to do the right thing in the end, and he's back at the Phoenix now to help how he can, too cowardly to fight and die, but not hiding away from any of this either. And there's Minerva, a Hallow who has done horrible things in the name of the right thing, and is still doing that now, out here somewhere, fighting. She has been fighting this whole time and has, objectively, done more for this war than the very man who ordered her to.

But some Hallows… Some do know. Some of them aren't ignorant; some of them simply don't care. Or they *liked* it. More than just something they were used to, it was something they enjoyed. Rita—she's one of those. Regulus can tell just from looking at her, just from the fear in her eyes, the fear of someone who knows they've done wrong, and all the wrong they've done has caught up to them. She knows.

Regulus straightens up. Slowly. Stands up all the way. Meets her gaze, eyes full of tears, dress torn and nails broken and one heel snapped off so she's wobbling in place. Her blonde curls tumble around her head, messy, and her chest heaves as she darts her gaze around at everyone, clearly taking in how quiet and still they all are. A group relying on stealth. They have guns, but shooting them is *not* the goal.

Pandora stands up right next to him, just as slowly, a quiet sort of grace to her. She has trained, and trained, and trained—but she has never taken a life in close quarters, one-on-one, with more than a gun. She's looking at Rita as if, for the first time, she actually wants to. Regulus remembers how much Pandora despised Rita, because she almost seems to embody the direct opposite of everything Pandora stands for and believes in. Pandora—a Hallow just like Rita, except she always cared about people; she wanted the very position that Rita had just to do something with it, to honor those lost and treat tributes with kindness they deserved. Misguided, still, but so much *care* in her intentions, regardless.

Pandora's hand slowly slips into Regulus'. He's holding something, so it's not his hand she's reaching for. She loves to hold hands, always has, but not this time. No, not this time.

Rita swallows and whispers, "Don't kill me. Please don't kill me. I want to live. Please."

Pandora holds her gaze and says, "Die thinking of all the tributes who wanted the same," then snaps her hand out and covers Rita's mouth to muffle her shout of pain as she buries Bella's dagger she took from Regulus in the side of Rita's throat. Rita jerks, eyes bulging, and Pandora rips the dagger back out, an efficient snap of the wrist. Easy, slow, she lowers her to the ground, covering her mouth until she stops choking and falls silent and limp, eyes glazed and head drooping over.

Carefully, Pandora cleans the blood off the dagger so Regulus doesn't have to look at it, then gives it back to him. Everyone is silent, staring at Rita's dead body.

"477," Regulus says softly.

"What?" Pandora asks.

"Her days were numbered, after the Victory interview for James and I," Regulus murmurs, tilting his head as he gazes down at Rita with satisfaction. "I kept count. She got 477."

"476 too many, if you ask me," Pandora mutters bitterly.

"What do you think is out there?" Barty mumbles, turning his head to gaze out into the empty street. "What's happening?"

Alice exhales shakily and croaks, "The Aurors retreated, so they abandoned the Hallows—those that were helping us fight and those that weren't. It's too quiet out there now."

"Everyone can't be dead that quickly," James whispers. "Not all at once like that. They have to be hiding."

"They are," Regulus murmurs. "There's something *out there."*

Pandora leans her head back against the brick wall, eyebrows furrowed, deep in thought. "Riddle will use whatever means necessary to keep us from reaching his castle. I think the Aurors are meant to be a last line of defense, if they've retreated, so there's something else to get through first, and my guess is that getting through it isn't supposed to be easy."

"Or possible," Alice adds.

"Oh, yay," Barty grumbles. "Love that for us. My money's on something designed for the hunger games."

"Barty!" Pandora gasps, her head snapping up and her hands flying out to cradle his face, making him blink, startled by the abruptness of it. "You're a genius. I could *kiss* you!"

"You have my express permission. *Please* feel free," Barty says, and he only looks mildly disappointed when Pandora smacks a kiss to his forehead, pulling back to beam at him. Mostly, he looks pleased—and also like he doesn't want to show how pleased it makes him. His eyes are sparkling. "Not exactly what I meant, but I'll take it. Also, why am I a genius?"

"Because I think it *is* something designed for the games," Pandora whispers excitedly, swinging her head between all of them, all while rolling Barty's head around on his neck with the distracted push-and-pull of her palms on his cheeks. "I mean, why *wouldn't* Riddle use that? But it's not impossible to beat; someone wins the hunger games every year."

"No, really?" Alice asks sardonically, arching an eyebrow.

Pandora's face turns red. "I—yes, okay, so you three would know that, obviously, but what I meant is that, every year, the things in the hunger games are defeated by at least one, right? Because it's *designed* that way. Chances are, it's not designed that way now, meaning whatever we're fighting is supposed to kill everyone it comes across, but that doesn't change that it's *designed."* She swings her head some more, smiling brightly, and then her smile fades as they all stare at her blankly. She pauses in moving Barty's head around; he blinks slowly, looking dizzy. "Hello? Someone's controlling it."

"Yeah, Pandora, we know," James says slowly. "Riddle, right?"

"He wouldn't know how," Pandora counters. "I mean, he's likely giving out orders and such, but all things in the hunger games are controlled from one place."

Alice blinks. "Oh, shit."

"Yeah." Pandora's eyes light up. "If I can make it to that building, and make it to the gamemaker room, then I can use the control boards to destroy the designs. Everyone will have a clear shot to the castle. We'll only need to break through the Aurors, and then it's just getting to Riddle."

"Pandora, *you're* a genius," Regulus declares, and Pandora grins at him. "Are you sure you can do it?"

"She has worked the control boards before," James says fondly, his lips curling up. "We get her there, she'll get us through. Just one question, though. Where, um, is it? Like, as far as directions go, I have no idea how to get there from here."

"It's alright," Pandora assures him. "I have the home field advantage. I need to go that way."

As one, everyone turns to follow where she's pointing directly out the mouth of the alley, meaning *towards* the sounds of the beast in the distance. Because of course.

What else?

~•~

Dorcas dives to the ground in front of Marlene, reaching out to frantically cradle her face as her chest heaves and her hands shake, the whites of her eyes showing in sheer terror.

"I can't, I can't, I can't," Marlene chants, rattling up against the signpost and struggling for air. "They're just—"

"They're not *real,"* Dorcas cuts in, gripping the sides of her face and forcing her to look at her. "Marlene, they're not real. You *see* what they turn into when people hesitate to shoot."

"But what if—just some of them—what if—"

"They're not. I promise you they're not."

Marlene sobs out, "I can't do it. I don't—I can't—"

"Okay," Dorcas whispers. She swallows harshly and leans forward to press their foreheads together. "Okay, you don't have to. I'll handle it, alright? I'll take care of it."

"They're coming," Marlene chokes out.

"Shh," Dorcas says softly, rocking back and picking up her gun. "Close your eyes. Just close your eyes, darling."

Marlene closes her eyes and keeps them closed.

Dorcas turns around with a lump in her throat as she listens to the pitter-patter of tiny feet hit the ground, watching the group of children who barely reach her hip come careening around the street corner. They're crying. Calling for their parents. Begging for help.

Dorcas lifts her gun in shaking hands and begins to shoot.

The thing is, she saw it firsthand. She saw these facade of children morph into creatures the moment someone didn't shoot, the moment they got too close. Shape-shifting in mere seconds, splitting out of the skin of children to change into a towering, skinless beast with too many teeth. She has seen head after head of those who hesitated ripped right off, because how does someone slaughter children so easily, even just the illusion of them?

The best way people could find to fight back was laying down landmines and running, letting the creatures trigger them, but not every single one was triggered, and many of the creatures slipped through the cracks. That leaves shooting them; so many people couldn't do it, and so many people are dead now because of that. Perhaps if it wasn't Marlene's life on the line, Dorcas wouldn't be able to either.

The worst part is, when you shoot them as children, they fall as children, and so Dorcas will never be entirely sure…

She'll never really know if…

The bodies, when they fall, are small. It'll haunt her forever, she thinks. That question she'll never have answered.

What if one of them—just one—is real?

She knows they're not. She *knows* that, but something in her revolts against it so hard that she knows she will never, ever be the same. Because this? Nothing compares to this.

Riddle must think it's something of a cruel joke. After all, wasn't a major selling point of the opposition that they didn't agree with slaughtering children? And now, here he is, using that against them. Weaponizing it.

Exhaling shakily, Dorcas lowers her gun the moment she can and rips her gaze away from the carnage, feeling sick to her stomach. She whips around and lurches towards Marlene with trembling hands to cup her face again.

"Don't look," Dorcas wheezes, reaching down to help Marlene to her feet. "Come on, follow me. Don't look."

Marlene doesn't look, and Dorcas guides her away, winding through back alleys and taking shortcuts, keeping an eye out for any more children. They slink along one street and dip swiftly into an open, empty shop when they hear strange noises in the distance. Together, they duck low behind a counter, peering over it curiously, trying to—

"Don't scream," is the only warning Dorcas gets before a hand clamps down on her mouth to muffle the instinctive sound she tries to release, while Marlene suffers the same fate.

It's short-lived, though, because their panic fades when they turn to find Sirius and Lily waiting behind them, their free hands up to hold their fingers to their lips. Lily draws her palm away from Marlene's mouth at the same time that Sirius removes his from where it covers Dorcas'.

"Screaming bad," Sirius whispers, looking very pale.

"The children?" Dorcas asks.

Lily frowns. "Children? What children?"

"The—you haven't seen—" Dorcas halts, then swallows thickly. "Nevermind."

"There's—stuff out there," Sirius says quietly, still looking rather shaken. "Um, it's—it's from Emmeline's arena, so…"

Dorcas blinks. "Oh, shit. Wait, *no children."*

"What?" Lily asks, yet again.

"It's in sections," Dorcas murmurs, closing her eyes and trying to map out the route in her head. "The children were the four blocks north of Riddle's castle. We came west, trying to close in, because a straight shot is impossible. He's—oh, he's keeping us trapped. Here, it's—what is it?"

"I—I don't know what it's called?" Sirius rasps. "They didn't use it for long in her games. It was too—efficient at killing, I guess, and they wanted…killers, not just death."

"The tar shit?" Marlene mutters with a grimace, and then Dorcas grimaces right along with her. Yeah, she remembers the 'tar shit', as Marlene calls it. Puddles of a black substance strongly resembling tar, but it's mobile. It bled through walls, crawled over the ground, seeped out of trees and dead bodies; when it came into contact with flesh, it—well, it devoured.

Sirius swallows. "Yeah, the tar shit."

"Hey," Marlene says softly, reaching out to touch his arm, searching his gaze. "What happened?"

"Remus," Lily chokes out. "We were—I mean, we were all running together, running from it. We got cut off, lost Remus, Emmeline, and Rodolphus along the way."

"We looked for them," Sirius says, and his voice cracks, his eyes wide and wild. "We've been looking for them all over, but we can't—we can't find them, Marlene, and it—it takes in people whole. Just swallows them up, then they're gone, never found again, and *we can't find them.* We—"

"Okay, no," Dorcas cuts in firmly, because both Sirius and Lily look petrified and dangerously close to falling apart. "No, listen to me, they're fine. They're all extremely adept, and extremely smart. If they're not here, then they *left.* My guess is they have a destination, and it's best if we follow them."

"But, like you said, we can't get to the castle, and if we can't, then *they* can't," Lily grits out.

"I'm not talking about the castle," Dorcas counters. "No one is getting to the castle until these traps are dismantled."

Sirius blinks, then blinks again, then his expression falls flat. He huffs. "Oh, of course. The gamemaker room."

"Yep," Dorcas confirms. "Which means we have to backtrack, because going through this section and the next is too much of a risk. Come on, Marlene and I know which way to go."

"What's the section you just left?" Lily asks, hands flexing on her gun, ready to go in a heartbeat.

Dorcas pauses and looks at Sirius and Lily, then swallows harshly and says, "Right. Let me explain the children."

~•~

"Fleamont! Fleamont!" Euphemia shrieks, fighting *hard* against Poppy's hands as they forcefully drag her back, struggling to do it as she flings herself against her ferociously, like an unstoppable force.

"Euphemia, stop!" Poppy barks, arm coming around her shoulders to roughly yank her back and slam her against the brick wall on the side of a building.

Euphemia's chest heaves, eyes bulging. "Fleamont. They took him, Poppy. Put him in the back of a van and—"

"Yes, I know," Poppy interrupts sharply. "They took Minerva, Alecto, Narcissa, and Aberforth, too, and they're patrolling the area, it seems like. They kill some people and take others, while the rest of us try not to get caught by them *or* the very massive snake slithering through the streets, one of which will kill you by simply *looking you in the eye."*

"Oh," Euphemia wheezes, "is that why so many people are dead, even though all the Aurors retreated?"

Poppy nods jerkily. "One look is all it takes, but only in the eyes. You can look at the body, the scales, whatever—just as long as you don't look it in the eyes. So, don't look up."

"Can't we just shoot it?" Euphemia mutters, dropping her gaze immediately, feeling a shiver work its way up her spine. She hates snakes. There were snakes in her arena.

"Bullets ping right off the scales. It can't be killed," Poppy says, heaving a sigh.

"How do we get the others back?" Euphemia asks.

"Right now, we need to focus on staying alive. We can't do anything else," Poppy replies, her voice clipped. "All we know for sure now is that they're alive. They're alive. They *are."*

The truth is, they don't actually know that.

Euphemia stares down at her feet, trying to breathe past the utter terror of seeing her husband dragged away from her by a group of Aurors, brown sack tossed over his head, and thrown into the back of a van. She couldn't make it in time. They'd been split up from the start, trying to find each other and any of their children, and he was who she saw first, only to watch him be taken from her. She has to get him back. She has to.

That can't be the last time she ever sees him alive.

It can't be.

~•~

James isn't expecting there to be beasts *plural* and neither, apparently, is anyone else. Really, they'd only heard the one, so being attacked by a whole pack of what looks like a cross between an oversized dog and a piranha—by that, James means teeth, a whole lot of fucking teeth—is a shock.

There is a moment where Alice is in very clear danger, backed against a wall with one beast about to lunge, and then James dives for them without even thinking about it. He slams them to the ground and swings himself around on his back to press the barrel of his gun against the beast's chest as it snarls and snaps its jaws on top of him. He can hear Alice wheezing beneath him, crushed by his weight. He grits his teeth and pulls the trigger, and he doesn't stop until the beast goes limp on top of him. He grunts as he shoves it off, then hastily rolls off Alice and tries to help them up. They smack his hand away with a glare and stand up on their own.

James would be upset about it, wilting in despair about the whole situation, but the beast proceeds to get right back up. It doesn't come at them. No, it…goes to the rest of the beasts.

The beasts as a separate entity are a problem, but when they conjoin? James has never seen anything like it, the way they meld together, grotesque morphing of muscles and skin to form a mountain of one lumbering beast that has teeth at the head and the center, gaping mouths snapping at them.

All they can do is run.

James thinks, to himself, that it would make more sense if it was him that got separated from everyone else. Not because of his leg; he has his brace, and he can run, so that's not an issue. Not because of his fear of fire; as terrified as he is with every explosion, and the way the world is burning all around him, it's all still going so fast, too fast for him to really freak out, locked in survival mode, and it helps that Sirius gave him his ear buds again, and it helps that James is dressed to feel the heat as little as possible. It's not his injuries, or his fears.

No, he just can't fathom it being anyone else.

Especially not Regulus.

The moment Barty goes down, Regulus freaks the fuck out. Even James doesn't have time to lose his shit before Regulus dissolves into immediate hysterics. James is pretty sure he's never seen Regulus move as fast as he does in that moment, shrieking Barty's name in a shrill, high-pitched shout of sheer terror as he goes barreling right for the beast.

The very same beast that hunches down over Barty and eats the gun Barty is shooting it with, along with his whole fucking arm. It's one of the most sickening things James has ever seen.

Regulus stabs it in the back, gripping the handle of Bellatrix's dagger and yanking it down to split the beast open. It roars and stumbles back, rearing up and swinging around while

Regulus is still attached to shake him off. Regulus tumbles down behind it, dagger in hand, landing next to Barty.

James, Pandora, and Alice were behind the beast, which now means the beast is heading right for them, clearly pissed off. Barty's arm can be seen between the teeth on the beast's stomach, blood and tissue and bone torn apart.

"Regulus!" James shouts, stumbling back as Pandora and Alice frantically yank on him. *"Regulus!"*

"Okay, okay, I've got you," Regulus is chanting, slipping in Barty's blood and helping him up as his head rolls around, eyes unfocused. Both Regulus and Barty are as pale as they can get, and equally drenched in Barty's blood. It's gushing all over them, but Regulus hardly seems to notice it as he takes Barty's weight and starts dragging him in the opposite direction.

"Regulus!" James calls desperately, whining as Alice and Pandora force him back, yelling at him to run. The beast is after them, chasing them now, not Barty and Regulus.

"Go! I need to get him somewhere and take care of him, or he'll bleed out!" Regulus calls back. "James, *run!"*

So, James does.

As much as he hates to go in the opposite direction of Regulus, James does just that, because at least if the beast is coming after him, it's not going after them.

Maybe, with the proper window of opportunity, Regulus will be able to actually make sure Barty doesn't die.

~•~

Sirius is moving carefully right next to Marlene—being cautious to avoid tripping any landmines as they exit this section—while Dorcas and Lily move farther up ahead, because they have proper training for locating and navigating landmines, though they haven't come across any.

The distance between them turns out to be an issue when a van cuts them off. It screeches to a halt in between each pair, and Aurors begin to pour out.

"Run!" Lily shouts.

"Marlene!" Dorcas shouts next, and then they all scatter.

They're far too outnumbered to do anything other than run, and Sirius barrels right behind Marlene through an alley, darting down it behind her, because traveling through the streets with the landmines is too dangerous. The alley is closed, though. A dead-end.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck,"* Marlene chokes out. "Dorcas—"

"She ran. Lily and Dorcas ran, so they'll be fine," Sirius says, because he did see that much. They tore off with Aurors after them, just as Marlene and Sirius did. "If anyone stands a chance of getting away, it's them. Dorcas knows the Hallow."

"Right. Right, okay," Marlene agrees, exhaling shakily like she's willing herself to believe it. "We, on the other hand, are screwed, aren't we?"

Sirius looks around, then—because big brothers can learn from little brothers, too—he looks up. He wheezes out a laugh and croaks, "I've got an idea."

Five minutes later, Sirius and Marlene are slipping in through a window on the building by the fire escape. The apartment they slip into is empty, and Sirius crouches low by the window to watch the group of Aurors check the alley, then leave. A few minutes after that, he hears the van drive away. Tires over rubble. Aurors cursing before they go.

"Lily and Dorcas got away," Sirius murmurs.

"We should go meet up with them," Marlene says, and Sirius nods, pushing to his feet. Unanimously, they decide to travel through the building together, rather than go back to the street, in case the van comes back. "What was that all about, do you think? They weren't trying to kill us."

"No, they wanted to capture us," Sirius mutters with a frown, easing out into the hall with Marlene and heading straight for the stairwell to reach the ground floor. "We can't be the only people out here, Marlene. There's the Hallow protesters and the people who rushed the Hallow with us from the districts and the Phoenix. What, are they—rounding all of us up?"

"Not many left here, in this section," Marlene replies quietly, a haunted quality to her voice. "The—the children—the way the Hallow manufactured the creatures… Sirius, they tore through practically everyone in this section. We—we don't even know if Minerva and Poppy got away, because they were separated from us before the Aurors even retreated."

"Everyone is *fine,"* Sirius grits out, because he refuses to believe anything else. "They're all fine. We're all fine, okay? Everything is fine, Marlene."

"Yeah, Sirius, okay," Marlene whispers.

Sighing, Sirius moves towards the door exiting the stairwell, grabbing the handle and pushing and—

Oh, for fuck's sake.

There are a lot of things Marlene and Sirius can fight—and will, with ease—but when they step out of the stairwell and into the immediate path of about nine different guns, *all* trained on them, there's really no fighting to be done. One wrong move from either of them gets them both shot, and they know it. Sirius is tempted to swing his gun up anyway, but he doesn't. He

fights the impulse to fight as the group of Aurors draw closer, and right next to him, Marlene does the same.

"Guns down," one Auror says. "Nice and easy. No sudden moves." Sirius bites the inside of his cheek and lowers his gun slowly to the floor, and so does Marlene. The Auror steps up to Sirius and presses the gun to his head. "Alright, come with me. Opal, stay on McKinnon. She moves, you shoot. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," is the clipped response.

"These two are our tickets out, but I don't give a shit if they're alive or dead when we bring them to Master Riddle. I'm about to contact Guthrie, so stay sharp and keep McKinnon and Black on their knees here until we're cleared for travel. If they make any sudden moves, shoot them."

Sirius and Marlene are pushed right into the middle of the lobby and made to kneel with their hands behind their heads. Too many guns are trained right on them, and sure, they could fight the Aurors off if they could catch them off guard, except Sirius has no fucking clue how they would manage to do that.

When he meets Marlene's furious gaze, Sirius realizes Marlene is as equally clueless as him.

In other words, they're fucked.

~•~

When they reach the building, it's supposed to be a fight.

It's not.

Lily reads clear signs that there *was* a fight, because Dorcas doesn't bother going through the garage and sneaking through stairwells. No, she's rushing right in. Lily gets it; she's rushing as well, for Remus, for Sirius, for Marlene, for all their friends and the people they care about.

It feels silly taking a lift right now. Too slow. A long moment of waiting, Dorcas and Lily standing shoulder-to-shoulder, guns in hand. They look at each other, the same worry on their faces, the same determination in their eyes.

Lily chants to herself over and over that Remus is okay. She reminds herself of Sybill's rule for threes. Lily has been sure that she lost Remus three times; it won't happen again. Can't happen again. He's out there. He's okay. She's sure of it.

But she doesn't know, does she? Not *really.*

It's the not knowing that makes you ache.

She would know better than anyone.

There is something of a fight in the gamemaker room, where most of the Aurors seem to be, which makes sense. If this is where they're controlling the traps from, then of course Riddle would defend it. People are here, though. Most of them are dead, and some aren't. Some people aren't here, people that Lily was really hoping to find.

Not Remus, Rodolphus, and Emmeline. Not Marlene and Sirius. No, it's James, who is holding someone in place, and it's Alice, who is beating the ever-loving shit out of them, and it's Pandora, who is standing at the main control board while she watches, her jaw set and hands balled into tiny fists.

"Tell us the fucking *password!"* Alice snarls, and it's so vicious that even James flinches a little when they lash out and hit the person he's holding up. The person who can barely hold their own head up. Bleeding. Beaten. Resisting.

It blurs, and it blurs, and it blurs.

"What's going on?" Dorcas declares, marching forward as Lily does the same, her stomach twisting.

James looks so relieved to see her. "We're trying to destroy the things Riddle designed. Dorcas, it's all around his castle, the full perimeter. No one can get to him, and so many people are still out there. We have to *stop it,* but—but—"

"But this little *pissant* won't give us the fucking password!" Alice bursts out, shaking out their bruised hand.

"Lily, come here," Dorcas says, and so Lily does. Dorcas crouches down in front of them, waving Lily down with her, and so Lily goes. Dorcas reaches out gently and lifts their head up to gaze at them. "Do you know who I am?"

"Dorcas Meadowes," is the raspy reply. "We went to school together. We were in the same class when we were seven."

There's a pause. Dorcas' eyebrows wrinkles together, and then she murmurs, "Casselberry. Sundry Casselberry. I remember."

"You wanted to be a stylist even then, and I wanted to be a gamemaker." Sundry gives a weary chuckle, blood trickling down the side of their face. "Be careful what you wish for, right?"

"Some dreams *do* come true," Dorcas replies wryly, offering Sundry a sad smile. "Listen, Sundry, this is my friend, Lily. She's a medic. She can patch you up."

Sundry's eyes fill with tears. "Really? You—you're not going to kill me?"

"No, of course not," Dorcas says softly. "My friends—ah, they can be a little…dangerous when they're focused on a goal, but I won't let them hurt you."

"Thank you," Sundry chokes out. "Thank you, Dorcas. Th—"

"All you have to do," Dorcas continues, "is tell us the password. Do that, Sundry, and everything will be okay."

"I—" Sundry whimpers, their face crumbling. "I *can't.* Dorcas, Master Riddle has my family for collateral. To make sure the traps stay up. If they come down, he'll kill them. I *can't."*

"Fucking hell," James mutters, face twisted in a grimace, and Lily feels as sick as he looks.

Dorcas looks at Sundry for a long moment, her expression completely neutral, and then she sighs. "The thing is, Sundry, my girlfriend is out there. The woman I love. She's in danger, and I refuse to be too late this time. So, I'm going to need that password from you. Now."

"Dorcas, *please,"* Sundry gasps out, tears flowing.

"There's two ways this can go," Dorcas murmurs, her voice so soft, so sweet as she delivers her threats. "One, I can have my friend here fix you all up, just so I can beat you down again, over and over, and I promise you I'm not as gentle as my other friend is." She inclines her head towards Alice. "Lily is trained to keep people alive, and so we'll have a little war of our own, where I do my absolute best to kill you and she doesn't let me. Round and round we'll go, and take it from me, we can go for many rounds. We can go a long fucking time, Sundry."

Lily has to admit, it's true. Or the euphemism is, at least. Poor Sundry might not last as long as Dorcas thinks. Lily can tell just by how they're breathing that they likely have a broken rib, possibly worse internal injuries from Alice, and Dorcas has absolutely no stop-gap when it comes to saving Marlene.

"Or, two," Dorcas continues quietly, "you can give us the password and help us get into the castle to save your family. Sundry, we can save your family. Don't you want to?"

"And if you *can't?"* Sundry asks desperately. "Master Riddle said if those traps come down, the *moment* that they do, my whole family is dead. My mum. Do you remember her? You laughed at me for making macaroni art for her when we had the art project to make something for our heroes. All the other kids did Victors or Master Riddle, but my mum was my hero. She always was. She still is. She's my whole *world,* Dorcas. I can't risk her. Please."

"What's her name?" Dorcas asks, reaching out to take Sundry's hand, sympathy painted across her features.

"Olive," Sundry says. "Her name is Olive."

There's something devastating about that, Lily thinks. The way the name is a symbol of peace, given in an olive branch, and how Dorcas ruthlessly snaps it.

"Pandora," Dorcas calls, pulling back, "try Olive."

"No!" Sundry bursts out, immediately lashing out in a panic, screaming and sobbing and making it clear that Dorcas got the password out of them anyway. "No! No, please!"

"That's it!" Pandora shouts.

Sundry fights. They fight so hard, and they don't get very far at all. Alice knocks them out, leaving them to slump in James' grip. He looks pained when he eases Sundry down, and Lily reaches out to touch his shoulder. They stay there for a moment, just them. Alice, Dorcas, and Pandora have already moved on, but Lily and James stay right there.

Which is why they're still there when a radio makes a noise of static from one of the dead bodies close by, a voice breaking through to say, "Come in, Guthrie. Unit one-two-five

requesting clear passage through 45-12. We got hung up during the retreat order, but we have two hostages Master Riddle wants. Do we have clearance to travel?"

James and Lily share a look, then swivel their heads to look between Dorcas, Alice, and Pandora. For a long moment, no one says a word. Tense silence echoes around them all.

"Pandora," Dorcas says very carefully, "hold off for a second."

"Dorcas, people are out there," Pandora whispers, looking at her with a frown. "The longer I hold off, the more people that could be dying. *Are* dying."

"Just—" Dorcas swallows, and they all look at her. Each of them, looking to her for the decision. She looks so stiff that it's almost like she could snap in half at any second. "We don't know who—just, if we—if we clear the way, and that's… It could be Marlene. Sirius. Anyone. If they get taken—"

"Guthrie, come in," interrupts the persistent voice. "Did you hear me? We have McKinnon and the eldest Black. Do we have clearance to travel?"

No one breathes for a moment.

After a beat, James whips around to move towards the radio, snatching it up and ignoring it when Dorcas hisses, "James, what the hell are you—"

James clears his throat and holds up a hand, making Dorcas fall silent, then clicks the radio and calmly says, "This is Murdock, stationed with Casselberry under Guthrie. They're currently handling a situation. What's your position?"

There's a long pause.

Then, "The Dillmar Suites, located in the lobby. We have the hostages surrounded and ready for transport as soon as we have the clearance."

"Secured?" James asks. "Are they bound?"

"Held at gunpoint," is the response.

"I see." James pauses, then glances around at everyone before setting his shoulders and clicking the radio again. "Leave one person each on the hostages while the rest of you check all windows and locks in your immediate vicinity."

"Sir?"

"Guthrie's orders. Casselberry can give clearance as soon as you've fulfilled the task."

"...Yes, sir."

The radio clicks.

Everyone stares at James.

"Er," James says awkwardly, "I…may have picked up a few things here or there while I was in Riddle's castle. From my understanding, Murdock is a high-ranking Auror, so…I just sort of went with it. All Sirius and Marlene need is the right opportunity, yeah? They can either get away, or—"

The radio clicks again, and then there's the static-clad sound of gunshots and screaming as someone shouts, "Come in, unit one-two-five compromised and requesting immediate backup! Hostages are volatile and attacking! We need—"

There's a gurgle, and the radio clicks again. Everyone waits with a bated breath, and Lily shifts from foot-to-foot restlessly. James is right; Marlene and Sirius can easily handle this as long as they have the chance to. Lily is pretty sure they're two of the most dangerous people in this world, but that doesn't stop her from worrying. She cares about them so much; she *loves* them so fucking much. She's not alone in that, because Alice and Pandora are so tense, holding their breath, while Dorcas and James both hang in the balance of desperate hope.

Once more, the radio clicks, and Sirius says, "James, have I told you lately how much I love you?"

James chokes out a harsh laugh and hangs his head forward, all of the tension melting out of him at once. Dorcas blows out a deep breath as she turns away, shaking hands coming up to cup the back of her neck. Alice and Pandora groan in relief at the same time, and Lily laughs breathlessly, eyes stinging.

"Never hurts to hear it, Sirius. *Never,"* James rasps, blinking hard as he gazes at the radio. "I love you, too. You're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm doing okay. You?"

"Better now that I know you are. Marlene?"

"She's in the middle of—" There's a loud yelp and muffled crunch. Sirius chuckles. "Nevermind, she's done. Ah, yeah, she's okay. Heading this way now. Say hi."

"Hey, James," Marlene greets a moment later. "Is Dorcas—"

"Marlene," Dorcas breathes out, practically materializing out of thin air by James' elbow to stare at the radio with wide eyes, hands still trembling. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Marlene assures her. "I take it you made it where we were trying to go and found James along the way?"

"Actually, they were here when we got here," Lily cuts in.

"Lily," Sirius murmurs, "did you—is Remus—"

"No," Lily replies softly, her chest aching, which she ignores, because Remus is fine. He is. He has to be. "He's not here, but he's—we'll find him, Sirius. Okay? We *will."*

Sirius makes a noise like a whimper, but all he says is, "Yeah, I know we will."

"What about Emmeline?" Marlene asks. "Rodolphus?"

"Emmeline was with you?" Alice demands, pushing forward to stare eagerly at the radio.

"And Rodolphus?" Pandora adds, not moving away from the control board, but she looks hopeful.

Marlene heaves a sigh. "They were with us, but we got separated from each other."

"James, have you seen Regulus?" Sirius asks, his voice strained with rising stress that makes Lily's heart clench.

James swallows. "Yeah, we were with him. It was me, Pandora, Alice, and Barty with Regulus. Barty got *really* hurt; Sirius, it was really fucking bad. Regulus split up from us to carry him off and try to help him. I don't—we were being chased by this beast…thing, so we couldn't—I couldn't—"

"But he was alive?" Sirius demands. "When you saw him, he was alive, right?"

"Yes," James confirms immediately.

Lily sets her shoulders. "Exactly. Everyone we've lost—we all saw them alive when we lost them, so until we know for sure, that's what we go on. They're out there, and they're alive, as far as we know. That's true until we know differently, okay?"

"I'm good with that," Marlene agrees, "but the sooner we find everyone, the better I'll feel. It's not safe for Sirius and I to move through this section, but—"

"No, hey, we're handling that now," Dorcas interrupts, nodding at Pandora, who immediately begins working over the control board. "We're about to dismantle all the traps and head out. I know your current position, and if you backtrack to where Lily and I lost you and go four blocks north, the rest of us can meet you and take a straight shot to the castle."

"We can do that," Marlene says. "We can't take the radio, though. It's about to die, I think. Will you be able to find us?"

"Yeah, I know exactly where to go," Dorcas vows. "You two go ahead and wait for us there. It'll be twenty minutes, at most."

"Alright, we're leaving now," Marlene declares. Her voice is light and adoring when she adds, "Don't be late."

"Nothing is going to stop me from getting to you, Marlene," Dorcas replies fondly. "I'll end the fucking war if that's what it takes to make it to you."

Marlene laughs, sounding breathless. "I know you would, you fucking lunatic. I—oh, fucking hell, I love you."

Dorcas grins. "I love you, too."

"Be safe," Sirius calls out. "We'll be waiting!"

Lily, James, Pandora, and Alice call out goodbyes and well wishes, each of them riding the high of some people they love being safe. Then, for the final time, the radio clicks. It's timed perfectly, because right after, Pandora gasps in delight.

"We can leave!" Pandora announces excitedly, clicking one last button and watching in satisfaction as the red circles on the map surrounding Riddle's castle blink out all at once. "That's it. All designs destroyed. Time to go."

Alice and Dorcas immediately head for the door, Pandora close behind, but James stops and catches Lily's arm, looking at her with big, pleading eyes. He looks away, and Lily follows his gaze to Sundry's slumped form.

"Lily," James whispers, "we can't just leave them."

"Hey, come on!" Dorcas calls, holding the door open as Alice and Pandora rush out of it.

Lily blows out a deep breath. "Go on, we're right behind you. We'll catch up!"

Dorcas gives them a curt nod, then turns and runs, the door closing behind her. Lily and James make it quick, moving over to crouch down by Sundry, James working as Lily's eager assistant as she patches Sundry up as best as she can, at least to be sure they'll live. Frankly, Lily is grateful James insisted on this; it wouldn't have sat right, after everything.

It blurs, and it blurs, and it blurs.

Once Sundry is stable, James and Lily have to go. They take the lift, and the ride down is quiet. Lily gazes at her shoes, at the blood splattered on them, and tries to remind herself that she's sure Remus is okay. He is.

The best and worst things in threes, right?

As they clamber out of the lift and enter the lobby, James sucks in a sharp breath and nearly trips as he yells in alarm. Lily's head snaps up to see why, and she's immediately gripped with panic to see Pandora, Alice, and Dorcas forced into the back of a van, their heads covered in brown sacks.

In an instant, Lily and James are surging forward and tearing across the lobby. They don't even make it halfway before the van drives off. By the time they burst out the doors, the van is all the way up the street and taking a corner.

"Fuck!" James bursts out, hands in his hair, utter despair etched into his features. He groans and drags his hands over his face, words choked and muffled into his palms. "Save one and lose three. Save eleven and lose one. Push the kid, he dies. Hold the hatchet, you have to swing it. Try to do the right thing, something goes wrong. Why? *Why?* Why is it like this? It's always fucking like this. Why does it have to be like this?"

Lily stands there, feeling as lost as he does. Stunned. Stuck. Hopeless. Hapless. She doesn't have the answers. Why is it like this? She doesn't know. Maybe no one knows. That's the worst part—the not knowing. It comes from all sides.

It blurs, and it blurs, and it blurs.

~•~

Regulus wasn't aware that he could panic more than he already is, but then shadows fall over the wall he has Barty leaned up against, and no, no, no—now is *not* the time to have something to fight. Barty is bleeding out. His arm is gone. He's in shock and slurring out requests for his mother.

The moment Regulus whirls around, prepared to kill whoever or whatever is here, a woman —clearly a Hallow—holds her hands up and states, "It's okay, we're going to help. Let us help. We're with you. Hallow is hollow."

That throws Regulus off, admittedly.

"What?" he croaks.

No one answers him, but two people rush forward to immediately start working over Barty, digging in packs and getting right to it. He hovers next to them, on edge, but it seems like they're really helping him.

"Not all Hallows agree with their Master," says the woman. She steps forward and smiles. "I'm Welda."

Regulus stares at her. It takes him a second, but the memory comes to him like it's from another lifetime. Him in the bath for the first time after his first arena, and Remus telling him useless Hallow gossip. Welda. Surely not the same one.

"You wouldn't happen to have a best friend named Kindon who kissed your wife, would you?" Regulus asks.

"Kinsom," corrects a man down at Barty's side, "and I was *drunk,* in my defense. Will I ever live that down?"

"No," Welda says flatly. "Never."

"I'm Aslana," says a different woman, lifting her head to smile at Regulus. "Welda's ex-wife, and now Kinsom's wife, and—if I have my way—a wife to both of them when this is all over."

"As you can see," Kinsom chirps, "we've all put aside our differences to help the war efforts."

"On the side of the resistance, to be clear," Aslana says hastily, then goes right back to working on Barty.

All Regulus can think, at this moment, is that he can't wait to tell Remus about this. It's a delirious thought, because he's mostly just blank with shock that any of this is happening right now. Hallows are helping. He knew—he *did* know that there were some Hallows involved in all this, working against Riddle, but to actually *see* it is something else.

"We've been going around and getting injured people to safety, Hallows and those in the resistance alike," Welda explains, likely seeing Regulus' disbelief. "Master Riddle had a whole section of the Hallow surrounding his castle evacuated, but a lot of Hallow protesters stayed. We had no way of knowing what traps he had set up, but we've been preparing safehouses all over. We'll take your friend there. Barty, right? A known anarchist who broke into the arena. We admire him a lot."

"He's not going to make it if we don't get him proper medical attention," Kinsom adds, swiftly hopping to his feet and helping Aslana lift Barty up. "We need to go *now."*

"Come on," Welda says. "We're not too far."

Regulus swallows, gaze darting between Barty's slumped body and the other end of the street. Barty is passed out now, unable to defend himself, but James… Regulus needs to get to James. To leave Barty with strangers, with Hallows no less, isn't really something Regulus wants to do, though.

It requires a great deal of trust—not with his life, but with the life of someone he can't bear to lose. Barty is too consistent to die; the world wouldn't make sense if Barty died. Regulus is somehow sure that, in any world, Barty outlives him.

This one, too.

Please, this one, too.

"I can't go with you," Regulus croaks. "James is still out there."

"Ah," Aslana says gently. "Yes, of course you need to go find your fiancé. We can take care of your friend."

Regulus decides he likes her. "Thank you. If anything happens to him—and I mean *anything* —"

"Nothing is going to happen," Welda assures him, which is the last thing spoken five seconds before a van screeches to a halt on the street and Aurors come out guns blazing.

There's no time. No warning. Nothing. Welda goes down, and so does Kinsom, and so does Aslana. Dead, just like that. Just that fast. Barty is hit, too, and Regulus crawls desperately to try and check if he's alive. He doesn't manage it before the Aurors rush him, yanking him away from Barty while he lashes out, kicking and fighting and snarling.

An Auror hauls Barty up, shoving a brown sack over his head, and it's the last thing Regulus sees before he gets the same treatment. They toss him in the back of the van and tie him up, though they don't seem to feel the need to tie Barty up as well, leaving him passed out as the van drives away. The dead bodies of the Hallows that tried to help them remain behind.

The sack makes Regulus feel stuffy, and breathing is already difficult when he's panicking the way he is. He's leaned over on his side, his hands bound behind his back, and he can feel where Barty's legs are pressed into his. Trembling all over, Regulus rocks and scoots closer, heart pounding.

"Barty?" Regulus croaks. He isn't sure why he tries; he knows for a fact that Barty is knocked out. And yet, for some reason, Regulus tries anyway. "Barty?"

Regulus' voice cracks, because Barty always answers him. It's one of those consistent things about him. He may not always have the answers, but he understands the comfort Regulus takes from simply having a response, even if it's not an answer Regulus needs. Right now, Barty can't respond.

Regulus closes his eyes and tries to calm his breathing, shifting around until the side of his head finds Barty's chest. He's on the side where Barty doesn't have his arm, and he's very careful when curling up next to him, fighting the bile that rises in his throat at the smell of torn flesh and the metallic, acidic scent of blood and snapped bone. Regulus needs to rub more of the balm Asher made on his nose, except he can't reach it. All he can do is lay here.

So, Regulus lays there, jostling with the van, resting his head on Barty's chest and straining his ears to hear his heartbeat, pressing down to try and feel it through the fabric around his head. He can't say which one feels more real to him, but he follows Barty's heartbeat either way, knowing it's slowing and refusing to think about what that means.

What Regulus does think about is all those nights he gave himself affirmations to the steady tempo of Barty's beating heart. With every thump, he reminded himself of his promise. The one to keep going, the one that kept him going, the one that cracked him open and let him bloom like a flower as he realized the value of his own life, and how he deserves to live. He wouldn't say these things became reliant on Barty's heartbeat, but he would say that the routine of it comforted him enough that he feels like something inside him snaps in half when that familiar heartbeat stops.

Barty's consistency breaks, and the world doesn't make much sense like this, and the world keeps turning anyway. The van keeps going, taking Regulus along with it. The war keeps waging, and Barty doesn't make it through.

Instead, because he's left untreated, Barty goes into shock and dies in the back of that van with Regulus right there beside him, curled up against his corpse.

Chapter End Notes

IN-DEPTH/SPOILERY WARNINGS:

-there is a moment in this chapter where dorcas points at a group of creatures that look like children and shoots them. they're meant to look like children, but they are not children. they're deadly creatures.

-at one point in this chapter, there is a beast that eats the gun barty is shooting at it with, as well as his whole arm, and it's mentioned that you can see the arm between the

creature's teeth on one of its mouths. its very grotesque.

-the death: in this chapter, death is mentioned a lot, and a lot of people do die, most we don't know very well or care about. there's a few hallow protesters helping that are explicitly murdered. rita skeeter is killed as well, but no one is really going to be fussed about that. the main death is barty; after losing his arm and possibly being shot, he's left untreated and goes into shock and dies. regulus is right there with him when he does.

for everyone else...

well. let's get into it ig.

first i want to say that this is just the first half of the war, because the next chapter picks up right where we left off in this one, and it's even rougher than this one is. this one just deals with heavy themes, mostly, and barty dying is the roughest part, i think.

so, before i wrote these chapters, i had a clear vision of how i thought it would go, and then. it went a little differently in certain places, but some things stayed the same. all questions you likely have from this chapter are answered in the next one.

to give a list of the people we know for sure that riddle had taken, you've got:

fleamont
minerva
aberforth
alecto
narcissa
pandora
dorcas
alice
regulus
barty (deceased)

as of right now, no one knows where remus, rodolphus, and emmeline are. lily and james are together. marlene and sirius are together. effie was last seen with poppy. all traps/designs have been destroyed and the path to the castle is clear.

for those of you who need the reassurance, remus (as well as emmeline and rodolphus) was not swallowed up by the "tar shit" — which obviously remus wouldn't be, but still.

god, there's a lot to cover, and not a lot of time. im running a bit late today, and this is basically just part one for the war, so there's some things i cant say.

first, aberforth and albus are as strained as ever. we find out exactly how ariana died, which is just. awful. anyone would be fucked up by that, so like, albus and aberforth being as traumatized as they are makes sense.

then another severus pov. his povs during the war are crucial, honestly, because we are essentially seeing the other side through his eyes.

the rita death! pandora my beloved <3 if you'd believe it, ritas death—originally—was going to go to regulus, but it felt right to have pandora do it, because she's essentially the antithesis to rita and everything rita stands for. pandora insisted, so i let her do her thing. good for her, honestly 😌

then we see dorcas once again going to desperate lengths for marlene, who has severe trauma around children dying/being responsible for their death. like, to her, they were all just vanity and hodge. she literally COULDN'T do it and likely would have died if dorcas hadn't been there to do it for her. and again, its a really fucked up situation and just. so cruel. but it's absolutely something riddle would do, at the same time.

then we find out fleamont was taken, and euphemia isn't handling that well at all, but i did enjoy getting to add in the basilisk! that was fun <3

then we get barty getting injured and regulus freaking the hell out, and also james freaking the hell out, and then marlene and sirius getting separated from lily and dorcas and caught by aurors. and then we meet sundry!!! sorry but i got unreasonably attached to them, just because of how much nuance they added to this, because they're essentially being forced to be a gamemaker due to riddle threatening their family, and we have the characters we know and love threatening them too. it's a really fucked up scenario and like. because we know dorcas and alice and all their history, we understand why they're so violent and angry, but seeing what they do is almost...disturbing. like, dorcas having no regard for sundry and their family, despite sundry trying to appeal to dorcas through memories and this connection to their mother they have—and dorcas just. Doesn't Care.

and then, finally, regulus lying with barty when he dies. the worst part is that there was help there to try and save him, and maybe could have if they hadn't been killed. that's a rough way to end the chapter, im sorry :(

due to the warnings, i can't do an honorable mention, so ill wrap this up here.

The Great War

Chapter Notes

so, again, reiterating that this chapter is very, VERY heavy—even heavier than the last one—so please mind the warnings and take care of yourselves.

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death/murder/torture/violence
-references to past child death
-graphic depictions of violence
-guns/gun violence
-depictions/descriptions of blood
-depictions/descriptions of severe injuries/wounds
-depictions of dissociative amnesia
-possible and probable medical inaccuracies (sorry)
-depictions of war/warzone-typical situations
-depictions of grief/fear/panic
-depictions of torture (not incredibly detailed, but it is stated what happens, and it's grotesque/disturbing, though i doubt anyone will care who it happens to)
-murder
-death
EDIT, ADDED WARNING: bomb/bomb violence/bomb-related deaths

to be clear, this chapter is very rough and quite fucked up in some parts, so please please please take care of yourselves. i will be putting spoilery warnings in the end notes to those who need them, containing brief summaries of certain heavier scenes, as well as a list of who dies this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut, his whole body trembling from the exertion of hanging onto the undercarriage of the van. He's essentially planking beneath it, upside down, and has been for a while now. It's fucking excruciating, every muscle in his body aching, screaming in protest, but he has felt worse and refuses to let go.

So, yet another split second decision has ended with him here. It was one he didn't really have time to think about. He found himself separated from Sirius and Marlene, running away from a blob of oozing black that was swallowing people whole. Emmeline and Rodolphus were with him.

And then they weren't.

Before he knew what happened, a van had followed them into an alley, and while Remus got around the corner in time, the other two did not. So, he was forced to stand there and listen as Emmeline and Rodolphus put up a fight, and when he dared to peek around, he saw them with brown sacks over their heads and dragged into the back of the van.

Remus had maybe a ten second window to decide what he would do. Ten seconds, and in five, he had already flung himself to the ground by the van and rolled underneath it. Ten seconds, and in eight, he had already lifted himself off the ground to cling underneath the van. Ten seconds, and by the end of them, Remus was hanging on for dear life as the road whipped underneath him, taking him away.

Emmeline is a friend. So is Rodolphus. Furthermore, he lost Sirius somewhere along the way, and on the off chance that he was caught, Remus is going to get him back. Simple as that.

The van, at some point, comes to a stop. Remus still doesn't let go, his breath heaving out through clenched teeth as he tries to strain his ears to listen. There are a couple of slammed doors, the sound of boots, distant voices.

"How many do we got?"

"Twelve, but one is dead."

"Do we have to go out *again?"*

"Unless Master Riddle gives orders otherwise, yes. We'll update Mr. Snape, see what he wants us to do, but as far as I know, Master Riddle probably wants more."

"I don't know. Did you see the big fucking snake turn to ash? You know what that means, right? The first lines of defense are down, and the last one is…us. Shouldn't we stay here?"

There's a long beat of silence. Remus holds his breath and slowly, oh so slowly, lowers himself to the ground. It's an immediate relief, and he lets his head rest back against the ground for a moment, sipping in air. His body still trembles, and he takes just a second. He needs just a second.

The voices start back up in a low murmur, muttering about checking in, discussing what to do with the dead body, to which someone says to leave it there. It's said so carelessly. Someone else says that there's someone alive in there with the body, and the next person says that's not their problem; all those captured will be dead bodies, soon enough.

Remus wants to fucking *murder.*

However, the voices fade away, and Remus cautiously scoots towards the edge of the van, peering out. He can't see anyone, so he rolls out swiftly and crouches by the back tire. No one starts yelling or anything, which is enough of a good sign for him to creep forward and peer around the back of the van.

Nothing. The Aurors have left. Remus immediately straightens up and whips around to snatch at the back of the doors on the van. They open with an uncomfortably loud clang, revealing Emmeline and Rodolphus bound with their heads covered. Emmeline is on her front, making muffled noises of fury, yanking at her restraints. Rodolphus is in much the same predicament, except he's on his side.

"Hey, hey, shh, it's me," Remus says rapidly, trying to reach past their flailing. "It's me, it's Remus, I'm going to help you."

Emmeline goes still, and so does Rodolphus, both of them calming in an instant to hear the voice of someone they trust. It's such a deep, unshakable trust now for so many of them, being in war together, trying to survive together. It's not even something they have to question, or doubt. War is a hideous thing, but the camaraderie it creates can be beautiful.

Remus puts his knee on the ledge of the open back of the van, leaning forward, genuinely about to scramble inside and untie them as quickly as possible when something hard jams him in his back, right between his shoulder blades. His eyes sink shut as he freezes. He knows what that is.

He's been on the other end of a gun before.

Fuck. *Fuck.* He missed one. Somehow, somewhere, he missed one. He should have checked more thoroughly, should have waited longer, should have moved faster—but he's not very good at doing what he should, is he?

"Turn around slowly. Try anything, and I pull this trigger," is the warning Remus gets. At the sound of the new voice, not from a friend, Emmeline and Rodolphus get worked up again, and Remus grinds his teeth in frustration at not being able to save them—or anyone else—as he turns around very carefully. He refuses to die like this. Not this. Lily would be so upset. Sirius—fuck, Remus doesn't even want to think about it. The Auror behind him peers at him, then squints. "Wait… I know you. Yeah, I know you. You're one of those servants that got away! They had broadcasts about all of you, and Master Riddle has all of you on his list. Hey, looks like it's your lucky day."

And then, with that, the Auror whacks Remus in the face with his gun, and everything goes black.

~•~

Sirius fiddles lazily with his gun as he and Marlene move carelessly through the streets now that they're empty and the traps have been dismantled. They're both still riding the high of adrenaline post-fight with the Aurors who, from what Sirius overheard them complaining about, got caught in the red zones during the retreat when the traps were triggered to start. There are apparently other teams of Aurors out and about, but they have vans to travel in, armored and fast, as well as mini-maps prepared for them to avoid whatever beasts and creatures were unleashed in the sections. This particular unit was just very unlucky in the grand scheme of things, especially by the time Sirius and Marlene got through with them.

"It's a rush, isn't it?" Marlene asks, her eyes bright. "Fighting, I mean. I know we're not supposed to like it, but—"

"I don't," Sirius says, and he doesn't know if that's a lie or not. He doubts he'll ever know. "Or maybe I do. I…can't tell anymore. I just—I wish I didn't *have to* fight, you know?"

"Not really," Marlene admits bluntly. She grimaces a bit and rolls her shoulders. "I don't really—I mean, I can't help but appreciate having the excuse. I want—I *do* want to meet the person I'll be on the other side of war, though. I want to accept her the way I accepted who I am on *this* side of it, but the point is that I did accept it. I'm at peace with who I am like this."

"How?" Sirius asks. "How do you accept who you are?"

"My mum used to say acceptance is just evolution," Marlene says softly. "When you accept yourself for who you are, you open yourself up to who you will be. We can't find peace with ourselves if we can't accept that we evolve, you know? Think about yourself a year ago, think about yourself now, and imagine yourself a year from now—they're all different, right? But they're all still you. How can you not accept that? It's just an objective fact, and isn't it a comforting one?"

"Maybe I just struggle to accept the things I've done."

"Well, we all do. If it helps, all you've ever done for me is look out for me. That's something easy to accept, right?"

Sirius cracks a smile. "One of the easiest, yeah."

"Maybe all the rest will get easier once the war is over," Marlene muses. "Whenever Dorcas gets around to ending it."

"Oh, *Dorcas* is the one ending it, is she?" Sirius teases.

"Of course," Marlene says with a note of pride in her voice. "She started the war for me, and she'll end it for me, too."

"Well, don't you sound absolutely smitten."

"It's *Dorcas.* How can I not be?"

"She's good for you," Sirius murmurs, his face softening as Marlene breaks out into a helpless smile. Even here, even in the midst of all this, even after everything they've all seen and suffered today—Marlene can't stop herself from smiling about Dorcas. "You're good for her, too, you know."

Marlene bites her lip, then looks around, then shuffles farther to the side, away from him, with a glint in her eyes. "Do you want to know a secret?"

"Absolutely I do," Sirius says immediately.

"I, um. I have a plan. I mean—okay, it's a little hard to top Dorcas literally starting a war for me, and ending it, no doubt, *but* we had this whole talk about…what comes after the war, and how neither of us knows what the fuck to do, so we'll just figure it out together, and I—" Marlene stops, then blows out a breath and holds up her hand. Her eyes are bright as she wiggles her thumb at him. "You see the ring?"

"Yeah."

"I'm going to…you know."

Sirius stares at her, then gasps rather dramatically, hand flying to his chest. *"Marlene."*

Marlene is grinning as they stroll along.

"Really!?" Sirius bursts out, utterly delighted. "You're going to propose?"

"Yeah, I think so. I mean, maybe like…a few months after everything, like when things have calmed down and we've all had time to adjust, but—" Marlene clears her throat and nods, looking more radiant than Sirius has ever seen her. "Yeah, I want to. I want—I mean, I want to go all out. Do something really flashy and over-the-top for her. She pretends like she doesn't like it, but she *loves* that shit."

Sirius snorts. "Hallows. They can't help it. They love their luxury."

"Plus, she loves when things are bold. That's her tagline. She designs in bold, she says," Marlene explains fondly. "In any case, I think it's… I mean, it'll be good for after the war, you know? Because we… Sirius, we've given so much of ourselves to the war, and when it's over, I want us to give all of that to each other. And, like I said, I want to meet the people we'll be. Is that—do you think that's stupid?"

"No," Sirius says softly, "I think that's lovely."

"Do you think she'll say yes?" Marlene asks nervously, which Sirius thinks *is* rather stupid of her. She's always a bit stupid about Dorcas, though. It's adorable. "I just mean—"

Marlene never gets to finish, because she's interrupted.

A click.

That's all the warning they get. A click, and one second, and then Marlene goes flying through the air as the landmine she stepped on explodes. It's too instantaneous for there to have been any hope of stopping it from happening; in war, there's very little warning for much at all.

The traps were dismantled. The landmines were not. Neither of them thought about it, because why would they when they wanted to get to those they love? Why would they when Dorcas said they'd be safe to travel this way? Why would they when they couldn't even imagine that this would happen?

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Sirius feels the ground shake, and he gets thrown back as well, leaving him a crumpled heap on the ground. His ears ring, dirt in his eyes, kicked-up gravel torn into his skin, his breath thin in his throat. He tries to get his bearings, but he's disoriented, the whole world tilting around him and his head spinning. He can't think, can't focus, can't function.

Through the swirling dust he can see from the ground, a mangled form is across from him. There's—flesh. Body parts. Blood. Something—it's—it doesn't look quite human, and all Sirius can think, in his daze, is that it looks like grape jelly. A whole lot of fucking grape jelly with skin slapped on the outside of it, barely held together. The jelly is charred.

It takes Sirius an unbearably long time to realize that it's Marlene.

Sirius can't hear anything past the shrill ringing in his ears, and he still feels like the whole world is shaking, but he thinks it's just him now. It feels like fighting against a current to crawl across the ground, crying out at the searing pulse of pain through his whole body. He feels like—he thinks he's been ripped in half. That's how it feels.

"Mar—Marlene," Sirius chokes out, fingers fumbling over the ground, nails split and bleeding as he drags himself to her. Or what's left of her; the shrapnel has torn her apart. When he can hear, finally, the first sound that reaches his ears is the harsh wheeze of her breath, in and out. It's haunting. It's a noise he'll never forget. "Marlene—"

"Don't think—" Marlene gurgles, the mangled remains of her body jerking with residual muscle spasms. "Don't think I'm surviving this one. How fucked up is that, huh?"

"Mar—" Sirius groans and flops over on his side, squeezing his eyes shut and gritting his teeth through pushing himself up on his knees—or trying to. His arms buckle, and he

crumbles to the ground again, face-first. A whimper escapes him, and he raises his head desperately to peer at Marlene from this angle. Her face—oh, fuck, she's—he can see bone—

"This is it, isn't it? This is it. This is unfair. I wanted to survive this time. I wanted to meet the new me. I wanted—" Marlene chokes off. "It's war, I'm war, and the war dies with me."

"I'm—I'm trying to get to you," Sirius gasps out, trying with all the strength he has in him to get up again, his arms shaking from the effort and pure fire splitting him in half. He tries to lock his scream behind his teeth and finds that he can, just shouting in equal parts frustration and determination, despite his own pain. Somehow, through sheer force of will, he does manage to get his knees up under him, which is when he finds a piece of shrapnel lodged down in his pelvis, piercing him deep and making moving difficult. Wisely, he doesn't pull it out. "Okay. Okay, Marlene, I'm going to help you. I'm—"

"My ring," Marlene rattles out. "T-Take my ring."

"Ring—ring—ring—ring—ring—" Sirius chants it like a skipping record through chattering teeth, trying desperately to do whatever she needs him to. He's helping her. He has to help her. It's a struggle to find the ring in all the mess, and it's a miracle it's still there at all; three out of five fingers on that hand have been blown off. One isn't the thumb, and his hands shake as he removes the ring. "Got it. Marlene, I've got it."

"Dorcas," Marlene says, gaze unfocused. "Get it to Dorcas."

"Okay. Okay, I'm going to help you, okay?" Sirius asks, and has no idea how to, or where to start. Everything hurts. It all hurts.

"Dorcas," Marlene gurgles, and again, "Dorcas," and her final word, her final thought, a name, "Dorcas."

"Marlene," Sirius sobs, his vision blurring, everything aching and splitting him apart, and she's lying there in pieces, dead, and he can't—he blinks—he blinks—

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"They should *be* here, Lily," James insists, a horrible sinking feeling in his gut making him feel—wrong. He feels really wrong, a terrible prickling sensation up his spine screaming at him that something is wrong. It's all wrong, wrong, wrong.

War is wrong, just in general—James knows that for sure by now—but this is something else. This is—it's *him.* It's deep in the pit of his gut, all the many threads within him that tie him to countless people he loves being plucked and played with like a game, ruthless fingers of fate making songs out of the strings of his love, and he *knows* something is wrong, or something is going to go wrong. He doesn't know how he knows; don't ask him how he knows, but he can feel it.

To Lily's credit, she doesn't protest. She nods sharply. "Okay, so we'll go find them. Four blocks back, right? Let's go."

So, they go. James is so fucking eager to go. He wants to find Sirius, and Marlene, and Regulus, and Remus, and his mum and dad, and Dorcas, and Pandora, and Alice, and—and—

He wants to find everyone, all of them, alive and safe. He wants the war to be over, and at this point, he doesn't even care which side ends it. There are no winners in war, only those who lose, and in the midst of war, he finds that he wants nothing more than to dive into the current of time and go back to before it truly began. Take him back. Oh, please take him back to a time before he knew what it was to lose.

James can't turn back time, and here he is, firmly planted in this moment of doing his best to keep his pace with Lily. His leg aches awfully, and if it wasn't for his brace, he knows he wouldn't be able to keep going. He's thankful for it, in that case, but he wishes he could rest. He wishes they all could.

Two blocks back. That's where they find Sirius. The sight of him rips a horrible noise right out of James' mouth.

He's on his feet, but he's limping and hunched forward, one hand clenched in a fist down by his side, the other cupping the front of his hip where a piece of shrapnel sticks out, blood staining his fingers. His face is cut up, bleeding, and so are his arms. His expression is blank, and he's entirely alone.

"Sirius!" James shouts, and he immediately begins to run, right along with Lily. They close most of the distance to meet him, and Sirius doesn't stop when they make it there.

"Dorcas," Sirius says, his voice hoarse, but no emotion in it at all. "I have to get it to Dorcas."

"Sirius, Sirius, stop," Lily croaks. "You have to stop and let me help you. Sirius!"

"Dorcas," Sirius repeats. "I have to get it to Dorcas."

"James, help me stop him and—"

"Dorcas. I have to get it to Dorcas."

"Sirius, please stop—"

"Okay, okay, ease him down now, just like that."

"It's okay. You're okay. Lily will help you. Just—"

"Dorcas. I have to get it to Dorcas."

"Is he going to be okay? Can you—"

"He didn't take it out. That's good, James. I have my medic pack, so I should be able to clean and cauterize—"

"Sirius, stop trying to get up. Lily is about to—"

"Dorcas. I have to—"

"James, hold him down."

"Dorcas—"

It's a mess. From start to finish, it's a fucking mess. Sirius won't stop trying to go, won't listen to them, and James has to hold him down through all of it. James has to hold his best friend down while Lily checks the severity of the wound, then takes care of it as a medic in the middle of war would. There's no sterile environment here, and while she has supplies, this isn't something she can do neatly. It's about saving his life and making sure he can survive until they can all reach a point where he can get checked over properly. This means James has to hold Sirius down while he tries to get up—he's so strong, even injured as he is, so this is no easy feat—and James has to hold Sirius down when he cries out in pain and chants Dorcas' name over and over as Lily removes the shrapnel, stops the bleeding, and seals the wound by burning it closed.

By the end, Sirius is shivering in James' grip, gasping out Dorcas' name, his eyes glazed and his face dripping in sweat. Lily moves all around him to clean up where he was cut and scraped on his arms and face, using salve from her supplies. Through the whole thing, James cries more than Sirius does.

"Sirius," Lily whispers, one hand cradling his jaw as James shakily pushes sweaty clumps of his hair back. "Hey, look at me, it's okay. We'll find Dorcas, okay? Sirius?"

"Dorcas," Sirius says. "I have to get it to Dorcas."

"Get what to Dorcas?" James asks.

Sirius is silent for a long moment, and then he blinks and holds out his closed fist. Slowly, he unfurls his fingers to reveal a ring in his palm. "Dorcas. I have to get it to Dorcas."

Lily inhales sharply, her eyes widening before they fly up to look at Sirius, a film of tears forming already. She makes a small noise, a whimper, and James feels himself go slack in pure shock. That ring. He knows that ring. They all do.

"Sirius," Lily chokes out, "where's Marlene? Where is she?"

"Marlene," Sirius mumbles, eyebrows tugging together as he flicks his gaze down to the ring. He looks at it for a beat, then looks back up and blankly announces, "Marlene is dead."

James' heart flinches in his chest, a lump forming in his throat as choked whine escapes him. On the other side of him, Lily folds forward with a guttural sob, whimpering, "No, she's not. She's not, Sirius. She can't be, she can't; I saved her, okay? I made sure she—I—no, please, *please—"*

Sirius closes his fist, keeping the ring safe inside. He ignores their tears and says, "Dorcas. I have to get it to Dorcas."

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Severus looks away as Riddle shoots the Casselberrys.

All six of them. Mother, Father, four out of five of their children, ranging from ages twenty to thirty. Six bullets.

Twelve remain in the clip.

"Clean this up," Riddle orders, and servants immediately move forward to start gathering the bodies. Riddle turns to Severus, who meets his gaze steadily. "Have we gotten them all?"

"No, sir," Severus replies.

"Do you have Aberforth Dumbledore?"

"Yes, sir."

Riddle sighs and turns to his desk, pressing a button. "I need the broadcast team to come set up. Now." *Yes, sir* is the instant response, and then Riddle faces Severus. "Get Dumbledore and the rest that you do have. It's time to end the war."

Severus inclines his head. "Yes, sir."

With that, Severus turns to leave the room and get to work.

It takes a while. First, Severus has to go to the courtyard out back to reach the vans. There are five with varying groups of those that were caught, all cuffed and gagged with bags over their heads. None of them offer him a welcoming reception.

Second, Severus has to round up those he's taking to Riddle, ignoring their panic and fury when he does, ignoring their muffled shouting as he chains them all together.

Third, Severus has to lead them all back through the castle. He shoves them along when they try to stop. He puts guns to their heads when they move too much. He marches them on and on, passing Aurors in a state of panic as the news spreads that the traps came down and people are closing in. He understands their fear; many Aurors are already at the perimeter

outside the castle to hold it, but they won't be able to hold it for very long. They're still severely outnumbered. Even those in the castle are more outnumbered than they realize.

Fourth, Severus leads everyone into Riddle's office. It's clean now, the Casselberrys removed, only their blood staining the carpet. The broadcast team is almost set up; Riddle is sitting at his desk, the picture of calm, facing the camera. He doesn't even look as Severus comes into the room. There's a jar with a Horcrux Hornet in it that begins to fly at the glass when they enter, glowing green.

"Line them up," Riddle orders coldly. "Dumbledore last."

Fifth, Severus lines them up. They shriek through their gags, struggling, but he kicks the back of their legs and puts them on their knees. Keeps them there. Keeps them quiet.

Sixth, Severus watches the broadcast begin.

Riddle looks right into the camera and says, "I'm addressing the man who leads the resistance. Albus Dumbledore, I'm speaking directly to you. I want you to know that you cannot win this war, no matter what you do, but I will be giving you the opportunity to surrender so that you may save lives. Will you take that chance, or will you force your own people to sacrifice for a war you can't even win?"

Severus steps out of the way when Riddle stands up. He moves off to the side, and Riddle calmly walks across the room to take his place; the camera follows him the whole way. Riddle stops behind the first person kneeling on the end. He takes out his gun and puts it to the back of their head.

"Which one is this?" Riddle asks, looking at Severus.

"Pandora," Severus answers.

"Ah, yes. Pandora, district six's handler. A Hallow who turned on her own people, her own home, her own Master. Someone you recruited, Albus. You could surrender on her behalf, to save her now." Riddle cocks his head as she sobs and shakes her head, trying to shift out of the way of the gun, but she can't move. "But you won't."

Riddle pulls the trigger, and the body falls.

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Horace knew the moment the broadcast started that things were about to go very, very wrong. When he thought of the war—when he realized there would be a war—he never imagined this. The sheer *dread* of it all.

He thought it would be worse to be there, in it, and he is still sure that it is—but his belief that it would be easier staying behind was a foolish one. He has friends out there. Those from the Phoenix *and* Hallows. Tom is a corrupt evil in human form, and Horace is ashamed of how he was once charmed by the man, especially now that he sees him as he really is, and what he's truly capable of, and just how far he will go.

It shouldn't be this way, but there's something so much more barbaric about watching people be lined up and shot than seeing them in the hunger games. It's chilling in a way the games never seemed to be—at least to Hallows. Horace has also never seen Tom kill before. No Hallow has.

He's merciless. Pitiless. Cold. Unflinching and uncaring. It turns Horace's stomach. He knew Pandora. Spoke to her from time to time. She was one of the few who arrived after all that went down during the Quarterly Memorial that didn't automatically hate him; not that he can blame the rest for how they feel about him. He knew to stay out of their way, and has, but Pandora… He liked her. She was a kind soul.

"Albus, you can interrupt the broadcast at any time," Filius says, his voice strained as he shares a look with Horace.

Albus is pacing.

Horace is watching him pace, feeling useless. He stayed back to help, and has been in any way he can, but Albus had him summoned the moment they learned of the traps Tom had set up, wanting more information. The traps have since been dismantled and victory is so closely in reach, but Tom won't leave it there. Won't go gracefully. Won't surrender either.

Albus isn't surrendering. Horace isn't so sure that he should. They have a sure win, regardless of what Tom said. The issue is that Tom is now smearing Albus in the homestretch and killing people that could easily, oh so easily, entice those out there fighting to surrender for. Horace would need more than just two hands, many more, to count the amount of people who would have gladly put their guns down for Pandora alone.

"Albus," Filius calls sharply.

"This will cripple some," Albus announces abruptly, swiveling to face them, "and it will invigorate others."

Horace jolts. "You—wish to use them as martyrs?"

"No, I don't wish to," Albus retorts. "I would very much prefer that this didn't happen at all. But I can't call for a surrender. We are too close to stop now."

"You're going to let him kill those people?" Filius asks in shock. "Albus, you can stop this —"

"Stop it?" Albus snaps, and then his eyes drift shut. He slowly exhales. "Filius, though I have shaped myself into a scapegoat everyone has needed, I am not to blame for this. The only difference between those people dying at the end of Riddle's gun and dying in a fight to reach the castle is that he has announced that I have the choice to stop it. I've always had the choice to stop it, even before it began."

"You choose not to," Horace says softly, "because someone has to choose. Because that's the choice that needs to be made."

Albus opens his eyes and nods, looking at Horace and looking almost—grateful. "Yes, it does. Countless people have died already in the name of winning this war, and to throw that away would be to dishonor them. Everyone involved knew the risks. As hideous of a truth as it is, the truth remains that I cannot put the few above the many."

"So you choose martyrdom," Filius says.

"I choose the greater good," Albus corrects, then turns and begins pacing once more.

Horace darts his gaze to the screen to see Tom step up behind the next person, then glances back at Albus, who is pacing and not watching. It's curious, isn't it? How great can that good be when Albus cannot even bear to look at it?

And he doesn't look at it. He doesn't watch as Tom shoots the next person. Fleamont. Doesn't look as Riddle shoots the next. Alice. Or the next. Emmeline. Or those following.

Rodolphus.

Narcissa.

Alecto.

Minerva. Oh, that one—well, that one hurts. Horace rather likes Minerva; he admires her a great deal, and watching a gun be put to her head, and what Tom says…

"Oh, this one—I feel this one is deserved the most. A Hallow traitor, but not only just. She personally betrayed her Master; defiled the very system upon which the sanctity of her life of comfort was built. She had everything, only to toss it all away. Did you appreciate the power it must have given you to have her loyalty, Albus? Did you not come to care for her, or was it

only what she could do for you? All she did for you, and you refuse to save her? It's fitting, isn't it? She betrayed her home, her people, and her Master for you; now, you betray her."

Albus doesn't watch Tom pull the trigger. He doesn't watch the head covered in a brown sack snap forward before the body falls. He flinches, but he doesn't watch. Tom moves to the next, and so it continues.

That boy, Remus. The one who saved *everyone.* The one who single-handedly made winning this war possible in the first place, and Albus does not stop him from dying. Albus doesn't watch him die either. When the gun goes off, he pivots on the spot and begins pacing in the opposite direction.

Dorcas next. Yes, Ms. Meadowes. Oh, Horace is genuinely terrified of her, but he doesn't take any pleasure in watching her die. He helped her once, and felt good about it; regardless of how she terrifies him, she's a good person, he thinks. Good in the way Horace never was, not instinctively. He had to learn to be, but her… She's made of it, somehow. It's a tragedy to watch that be removed from the world.

The next one—

"This one?" Tom asks.

"Regulus," says Severus, a voice Horace would recognize with ease. Head Auror. One of Tom's closest consultants. Horace always liked him as well.

Tom looks up, and—for the first time that Horace has ever seen—he seems pleased. "Oh, Regulus Black, is it?"

"Yes, sir," Severus says.

"If I were to list his crimes, I fear we'd be stuck here all day. The first fool to defy with a message people decided to take up as a chant. Hallow is hollow. I wonder how hollow his

fiancé will feel when he's dead. Or his brother." Tom looks at the camera. "I'll be honest, Albus, I don't *want* you to surrender for this one. I will take great pleasure in killing him. But I have to ask, a boy like him doing all that he has done for you and your war efforts—doesn't he matter to you? Did you not become attached to him and his love story as the rest of the world did? Or, are you perhaps relishing in this moment for the ways in which you believe his death could spur on your victory?"

Tom gives Albus considerably longer to interrupt this time, but he doesn't. In a kinder world, Horace would think Albus evil for it, but it's not a kinder world. It's a very cruel one, and a victory and victim go hand-in-hand; the root word *vict* means conquer, and there is victory for a conqueror in making a victim. A conqueror stands today with ten victims at his feet, asking an approaching conqueror to throw away his victory in the name of victims he knew better than to care about.

"Let us relish together, Albus, in the very same thing," Tom says, then pulls the trigger. The body falls. He steps to the next. "Now, this is where things get very interesting. All those people you let die, and Aberforth, your brother, kneels before me now. Here's a question. When it's someone you love on the line, will you surrender, or can you make the sacrifice you just forced everyone else to make?"

Horace is pretty sure he's never seen a man as old as Albus move as fast as he does when it's announced that it's his brother on the other end of a gun. Honestly, he had no idea that Albus could move that fast at all. It seems like he blinks, and then Albus is in front of the camera.

"Put me through," Albus croaks. "Now."

Filius frowns. "Albus, you said—"

"I don't care what I said!" Albus shouts. *"Put me through!"*

Oh, you fool, Horace thinks, biting the inside of his cheek, because that's what Albus is, just like everyone else. This is what Tom does. He manipulates people into his fools, using their fear for their loved ones against them, and though Albus may seem a man with no weaknesses, there's no such thing as that at all. Everyone has a weakness, and Tom clearly just found his. Horace sighs and thinks, *you fool, he got you, too.*

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Severus honestly isn't expecting Albus to interrupt the broadcast. That, he didn't anticipate. He has known Albus for many years, and the one thing that has always mattered to him above all was this war. He didn't even know Albus *had* a brother until Potter revealed it to Riddle—and so, naturally, Severus simply believed that Albus didn't care for him.

After all, Severus knows what it is to have family you don't actually care for. His father is his father, and yet, when it came time to bury him, he felt absolutely nothing. He wasn't even as satisfied as he hoped to be. Just—nothing. He felt nothing at all and presumed that Albus felt similarly about his brother.

He presumed incorrectly, as it turns out.

"Don't do that, Tom," Albus says, his voice ringing out. On a monitor off to the side, the image of Albus blinks on, but only Severus and Riddle can see him. This broadcast—it's live, playing out on all screens and projectors in the districts, on all screens and projectors in the Hallow, including the one Riddle has in front of his castle, blown up large and visible to all that approach. There is not a soul who hasn't seen Riddle kill these eleven people—and now there's not a soul who hasn't heard Albus interrupt to save his brother. They can't see him, as Riddle and Severus can, but his audio comes through clearly.

"Ah, Albus," Riddle greets. "It's been some time. The last time we spoke, you weren't yet a Victor."

"And you weren't yet a Master," Albus replies shortly.

"It seems time has treated one of us better than the other." Riddle focuses on Albus on the monitor, but Albus' gaze is locked on Riddle's gun. "Will you save him, Albus? For your brother, will you surrender?"

"Yes," Albus says immediately. "Don't harm him."

Riddle looks faintly amused, icy about it. "So, you admit it? This war you started, this war you wanted, means nothing? The very people you've ordered to toss aside their lives for a war you deemed necessary—they mean nothing to you? You could have surrendered before now, but you didn't."

"Put the gun down, Tom." Albus doesn't look away from it, his voice startlingly steady. "Let Aberforth go. You can have the war, but him—give him to me."

"You have people fighting and dying under your command, and none of them matter to you," Riddle muses, "so I have to ask, why should they fight and die at all?"

"Give him to me," Albus whispers. "You win, Tom. Very well, you win, just release him—just give him to—"

"They don't fight for you any more than you fought for any of them today, just now," Riddle cuts in. "You can't command people to surrender who aren't fighting for you to begin with, and just as you let everyone else die to keep fighting, they're going to keep fighting and let your brother die."

"Don't,"Albus starts, then chokes off the moment Riddle pulls the trigger and the body falls. Almost instantly, Albus is out of his chair, darting out of sight on the screen.

Riddle impassively lowers his gun and turns away from the camera to face Severus. "Trigger the explosives set around the perimeter and wipe all the opposition out. I want Albus to find his brother just as he did his sister—in ashes. Gather those on the board to meet me at the heli-carrier, and we'll go."

"I can't do that, sir," Severus murmurs, meeting his eyes.

"What?" Riddle asks flatly. "Why?"

Severus inclines his head to the dead bodies. "Because you just shot all the Hallow government officials on the board."

"No, I—" Riddle stops, then swivels his head to stare at the bodies he never even really looked at. They were already dead to him before he ever pulled the trigger. He didn't even look under the sacks to see the people he would be killing, didn't look for any notable features, because he doesn't *care.* He has never, ever cared—and Severus knew that. He used that.

"Master Riddle," Severus says silkily, "you just murdered your own people, the very people who help enforce your laws, on live broadcast for the whole world to see. How foolish."

Riddle stares at him. His eyes are blank. His expression is cold.

After a long beat, Riddle shifts to reach down and snatch up the body he just put a bullet in, yanking the brown sack off to reveal the eldest—the one closest resembling Aberforth Dumbledore—but it isn't Aberforth at all. It isn't any that Riddle thought he just killed. No, those that can fight are fighting to get here, to get to Riddle.

After all, who knows better than Severus that the best way to reach a heart impenetrable from the outside is to go from within?

Right on time, like clockwork, the door proceeds to burst open, Dorcas Meadowes marching in with Remus Lupin and Regulus Black following right behind. With the barrier broken, the distant sounds of gunshots and screaming from within the castle finally reaches them—and the war is here. The war has found Riddle before he could flee, and he has no one to blame but himself.

All this time, one thing has remained consistent about Tom Riddle; he orchestrates his own downfall, simply because he doesn't understand fear . As fascinated with it as he is, and he never quite grasps the concept that people face fear daily, and overcome it daily. With every breath.

Fear doesn't make people quit. It helps them survive.

"You," Riddle states, looking right at Severus, who inclines his head in confirmation. Riddle's nostrils flare, and he swings his gun up with no hesitation, pointing it at Severus, who doesn't even flinch, and then he pulls the trigger.

The gun clicks.

Severus glances at the dead bodies on the floor, all twelve. He looks back at Riddle, who wasted all his shots on the wrong people, and he says, "You forgot to count your bullets."

Riddle's eyes are blazing, jaw clenched. He doesn't look afraid, but he never does. Here and now, he only looks angry. Furious in his own defeat. The biggest fool in the room, always.

"Before they kill you, I want you to know something," Severus says, stepping back as the other three pass him. Riddle is still looking right at him, not moving, and Severus holds his gaze. "My mother's name was Eileen."

With that and nothing else, Severus turns on his heel and leaves the fool to his fate.

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Echoes of people's screams haunt the grounds of this castle, and Euphemia expects they will for a long time. The sound is utterly horrific, but so are the sounds of war, so are the sounds of cannons going off in the arena, signaling death, and death, and more death. Euphemia has certainly heard more horrific things, and it doesn't slow her down a bit.

Nothing can slow her down. She would have fought her way through an entire army by herself if she had to, but she didn't have to. By the time she reached the castle, as soon as the traps stopped being an issue, there was already a fight as the broadcast began. Riddle there on the screen, shooting people. It only invigorated the people in the resistance to fight harder, and so Euphemia did not have to fight through an entire army by herself. She had more than enough help.

She was running the moment she realized Fleamont was alive. Because it wasn't Fleamont who was shot, she found her way back to her feet after she collapsed when she believed he had been, and now that's where she's going.

Euphemia is going to find her husband.

The war outside the castle is thin now, and weak. It's over already, really, despite those who fight. Riddle has lost.

Riddle lost the moment those doors burst open and two of Euphemia's someday son-in-laws moved into the room with Dorcas Meadowes one step ahead of them. He lost the moment he put his gun to the heads of his own people and pulled the trigger. He lost the moment he believed he had won, when there were people still coming for him that wouldn't give up on making sure he'd lose. He was always going to lose; he just wanted to make sure that everyone else did, too.

They all have now. Friends gone. Lovers gone. Family gone. No one has won, but those who remain aren't fighting to win; they're fighting for a chance, and she wholeheartedly believes everyone alive is going to get it.

Euphemia kills the Aurors she comes across as she navigates the castle, and she follows the sound of gunshots and grunts to where the main fight seems to be.

It's taking place in a courtyard. Minerva, Rodolphus, Alice, Aberforth, Emmeline, Alecto, Narcissa, and Pandora are fighting; they're all also winning, visibly, because they overpower the Aurors that remain. Most Aurors are already dead.

"Minerva!" Euphemia shrieks. "Where's Fleamont?!"

"I don't know!" Minerva shouts back, grunting as she slams her hand into an Auror's face.

Euphemia begins her frantic search, shoving aside anyone who gets in her way. There are vans, most of them empty, but she sees a slumped form in the back of one. Desperately, she crawls into the back of it and then jolts when she removes a sack over the head to reveal Barty's slack face.

Shakily, Euphemia reaches out and looks for a pulse. She isn't sure why. She knows she won't find one, and she doesn't. He's dead. All she can think about is that moment, after he'd killed his father, that he'd been on his knees with a gun to his head; she and Fleamont saved him. They saved him. Why?

Because he lived in their district. Because he was a human being. Because he was Regulus'.

Oh, Regulus.

Euphemia's eyes sting, and she slowly, gently, reaches up to close Barty's eyes. His mother is dead, has been for some time now, but Euphemia thinks she would have appreciated that someone offered tenderness to her son, even in death, so she brushes his hair back and leans down to press a soft kiss to his forehead. When she pulls away, she makes sure none of her tears drop down onto him.

"I'm so sorry," Euphemia whispers, her face screwing up. She squeezes her eyes shut and turns her head away, then slips back out of the van. There's nothing she can do for him now, and she needs to find Fleamont.

It doesn't take very long.

She comes to a screeching halt when she sees the legs sticking out around the other side of the van. From this angle, she can only see the legs, but she knows those legs.

Breath punching out of her, Euphemia whips around the edge of the van and then stops again. Because yes, that's Fleamont. That's him. She'd know him anywhere, through anything, even resting on the ground against the side of the van with blood pouring through the fingers he has pressed to his chest.

"Fleamont," Euphemia croaks, and he raises his head, and he looks at her, and he smiles.

"There's my girl," Fleamont mumbles, eyes lighting up.

Euphemia is at his side in seconds, knees dropping down in the puddle of blood around him. There's a lot of blood. He's lost a lot of blood. It's too much blood. It's—

"Help! *Help!"* Euphemia calls out desperately. "I need a medic! Someone find me a medic!"

"Honey," Fleamont says gently, and he pulls his hand away to reveal not just one gunshot, but multiple. Many. A wide spray from a burst round. His chest is littered with them.

"Okay, okay, keep pressure," Euphemia chokes out, leaning forward with shaking hands to push them against his chest, except more blood just bubbles up, and Fleamont cries out. She snatches her hands back instinctively, palms covered in his blood, then whimpers and puts them right back. "I know, I'm sorry, but we have to stop the bleeding. We—"

"Stop, stop, it hurts," Fleamont croaks, weakly tugging at her wrists with a whine, and the pressure slackens. Euphemia trembles, her vision blurring. "They're not going to be able to help me. It's too extensive, and you know that."

"No," Euphemia says, her voice cracking. "Don't you dare—"

"It's okay," Fleamont replies, his breath rattling in his chest, and he gives her a pained smile. "It's really okay. It's almost over. Tell me—James and Sirius? Have you seen them?"

"No."

"Then you find them. When this is all over, you find them, and you tell them I love them, okay? All of them."

And Euphemia cries, because it's not *fair*. Because Fleamont never went into the arena, and he was supposed to be safe. Because Fleamont is her husband, the love of her life, and the father to her children. Because he was shot, and then he wasn't, and now he is anyway.

"Flea, please," Euphemia whimpers, resting her hands slick with blood against Fleamont's shoulders gingerly. His gaze is becoming unfocused, his breath catching in his chest. "I can't do this without you. I can't—"

"You can, or I wouldn't go," Fleamont rasps, trying to raise his hand and touch her face, except he's too weak. She catches his fingers, feeling the glide of blood on their hands, and she tips her face into his palm. "I wouldn't be able to leave you in a world that's not better than this, so there's a better world on the way, I just know it. You're going to do just fine; you and our boys. Take care of them, and let them take care of you."

"It won't be a better world without you," Euphemia protests.

Fleamont makes a soft, weary sort of noise. "Oh, I'll still be around. I'll be with all of you every step of the way, and some day in the very distant future, you'll all come see me again, and I'll tell each of you how proud I was the whole time."

Euphemia feels a noise crawl out of her throat, harsh and gutted like her chest is littered with the same bullets as his. She can feel it burning, the invasion of something she wants to dig her nails in and claw out, one-by-one. It hurts. In all her life, of all the pain she has suffered, nothing has ever hurt the way this does. It's been seconds. Only seconds have passed.

"I'll be there," Fleamont whispers. "I can't wait to see our boys get married. Can't wait to meet our grandchildren. Can't wait to watch you live in a better world. You'll live, honey, and you'll know so much love, because so many people love you. And I love you, wherever I am. I'm sorry you won't be able to see me, but I'll be right there, okay?"

Euphemia sniffs hard, exhaling shakily and shifting to cradle his jaw, holding his head up, because he can't anymore. She leans in and kisses him, gentle, steady. When she pulls away, his mouth curves at the corners, and she gently lets his head rest against her shoulder. She closes her eyes and holds him.

"Okay," Euphemia croaks. "You'll be with us. You're my rock, Flea. You'll always be that. I love you. I love you so much."

Fleamont doesn't respond. She listens to him breathe, and it sounds like he's drowning. For him, it probably feels as if it takes forever for him to stop. For her, since she found him here, it takes a total of fifty-five seconds.

That's all she gets. Fifty-five seconds, and fifty-five years of living in the world at the same time as him, and then he's gone. He dies there, in her arms, with a smile on his face.

That's the last time Euphemia sees him alive, with that smile, but she'll feel Fleamont with her for many years to come.

~•~

Remus isn't sure anything is as satisfying as forcefully shoving Riddle into a chair and holding him there, hearing the grunt that escapes him and feeling him strain against Remus' grip, except Remus is stronger. Remus is much stronger, and so is Regulus, who is helping Remus hold Riddle in place.

"Turn off that camera," Dorcas orders as she faces the person behind the camera, who looks fucking *terrified.* "If you want to live, you'll do as I say and get out. Now."

In seconds, there's the flurry of someone running across the room, the door opening and closing, and then Dorcas hums. Remus swivels his head to see that the camera is off. Slowly, Dorcas moves to walk around the desk. She reaches out and taps the jar there that holds the Horcrux Hornet; it's motionless in the jar now. No one in this room is afraid.

"You know," Dorcas says softly, "you critiquing Albus Dumbledore's leadership is hypocrisy at its finest. At least, for him, a sacrifice is a sacrifice. For you, it's just slaughter."

"Your mistake is believing there's a difference," Riddle informs her, tracking her with his eyes as she stops and leans up against the edge of the desk. She picks up the jar and holds it up, turning it slowly between her fingers to look at the Horcrux Hornet from all sides.

"There is," Dorcas announces. "We're going to show you, because your death won't be a sacrifice. It'll be slaughter for the sake of slaughter, and you will know the difference then. You'll die pointlessly, and your death will mean nothing, and just like so many others who have died because of you and the system you uphold, you will plead for mercy to people who won't give it and won't listen and won't stop."

"I'm not going to do that," Riddle retorts.

"Yes, you will," Regulus informs him, sounding absolutely fucking *certain.* Remus doesn't even see him grab it, but there's suddenly a dagger tucked against Riddle's cheek, the very sharp point pressing ever so slightly against Riddle's right bottom eyelid, making him hold very still.

Riddle holds Regulus' gaze. "Do you think I'm afraid of you? I'm not afraid of anything."

"You've never had reason to be, have you?" Remus asks, dipping down to come within range, humming when Riddle's gaze flicks to him. "They say you can't experience fear, but I don't believe that. Do you know what motivates fear the most? Pain. You've gone a long time never knowing pain, and so you don't know what fear is. That's okay, it's never too late to learn, and we are more than willing to teach you."

"What can *you* do to me?" Riddle hisses, sneering at him.

"Oh, well, I have plenty of inspiration," Remus replies wryly, tilting his head a little. "You can't torture servants for years and not expect them to pick up a few things."

"It's nothing less than you deserved," Riddle declares, no remorse in his gaze whatsoever, and it's a good thing Remus' sense of peace doesn't rely on that, because he won't get it. He'll never get it, and honestly, he doesn't want it. "You're a criminal, an escaped convict, utterly *worthless—"*

Regulus tilts the dagger closer in threat, snapping, "If you have an ounce of self-preservation, you'll stop talking. If you don't, I'll cut your fucking tongue out."

It's a warning. Regulus always follows through, and Riddle is apparently smarter than everyone else who made Regulus prove it, because—for now—Riddle falls silent.

Dorcas clicks her tongue and unscrews the lid on the jar, reaching in to scoop up the Horcrux Hornet, still not flying. Riddle still isn't afraid.

Carelessly, Dorcas drops the jar to the floor and pushes away from the desk, moving over with the Horcrux Hornet resting calmly in her palm. She reaches down and turns Riddle's hand over, and then she eases the Horcrux Hornet into his palm, letting it rest there. She leans forward to hover her face right over Riddle's, staring him down, boldly.

"For every person you've made suffer, you will suffer. For every person you made afraid, you will be afraid. For every person you caused to die, you will die. We are going to keep going until that Horcrux Hornet flies, until you know what true fear is, and then we will keep going until you're dead," Dorcas announces softly, like a promise. "You'll be the last Master, and at the end, you'll be entirely powerless."

The wings on the Horcrux Hornet flutter.

Remus smiles, helplessly, and he's very aware it's not a nice smile at all. Maybe he should be ashamed of it. Maybe, someday, he will be. Today is not that day, though.

Calmly, Remus reaches over and holds his hand out. Regulus passes him the dagger without a word. In this game of pain, perhaps it's fitting that Remus takes his turn first.

After all, no one quite knows pain like he does.

But Riddle's about to.

~•~

When it's Regulus' turn to make Riddle scream, the first one he drags out of him is for Barty.

Barty, who could have lived. Should have. Would have, if the Hallows who tried to help him had been allowed to. Given the time to. No one can be consistent forever, but Barty was until he couldn't be anymore, and it wasn't his fault. He would have kept doing it, and Regulus knows that. Riddle is the reason Barty didn't get that chance, and for that, he screams.

Regulus feels numb. Trojan Horse, Trojan Horse, Trojan Horse. When it came to getting to Riddle, he was focused and out for blood, fighting with all his might to make it here, going with Remus and Dorcas the moment they broke away from the fight and Minerva shouted for them to end this.

But, now that he's here, Regulus doesn't really feel *here* at all. He doesn't need to be to do this.

For all those years Sirius was taken away from him, Regulus breaks Riddle's fingers. Ten years, ten fingers.

For what Riddle took from James, Regulus takes his eyes. This is a difficult task. Regulus has never removed someone's eyes before. It's messy, and it takes the combined efforts of Remus and Dorcas to keep Riddle from flopping right out of his chair.

The Horcrux Hornet flies around Riddle's head, the flutter of its wings drowned out by the steady stream of his screams. He feels pain, and he is afraid. Just like every other human.

Just like Regulus.

~•~

Dorcas delivers the killing blow. They've kept going, but there reaches a point where you've gone as far as you can, and then things have to come to an end.

Riddle is still alive, somehow, when Dorcas swipes for the Horcrux Hornet a few times, then eventually plucks it right out of the air. It doesn't sting her—she's not afraid—and, even if it did, it wouldn't matter. The wings continue to beat against her palm, trying to fly to Riddle, and she gives it what it wants.

Dorcas grips Riddle's jaw and stuffs the Horcrux Hornet in his mouth, then clamps her hand over the bottom half of his face, making him choke on it. He jerks, but he's hardly capable of much anymore. They took turns making him suffer. They took turns making him as hollow as they could get him.

When Riddle dies, it's under Dorcas' hand, suffocated by his own fear right there at his desk. It's fitting, Dorcas thinks. Behind his head on the wall is the Hallow symbol, and all they can hear is the echo of all the suffering inflicted at hands of what that symbol represents.

And then it's over. Just like that, it's over. That should mean something, right? That should mean everything, but does it?

Dorcas steps back and waits for things to feel better. Waits for the war to feel won. Waits, and waits, and waits.

Nothing feels different.

The world feels the exact same as it did when Riddle was in it.

The war is over, right?

Right?

Dorcas thinks the war won't feel over until everyone knows it, until they see the Master of the Hallow dead, until she sees all the fighting come to a stop.

So, Dorcas borrows Regulus' dagger.

A bit later, Dorcas nods gratefully as Remus and Regulus peel open the large doors at the front of the castle. They open with a groan, creaking as the world breaks through the cracks, coming into view. There's a ray of sunlight beaming across the front courtyard, making the glint of blood shimmer on broken, bullet-riddled cobblestone. It's quiet, people standing about as she exits, all eyes trained on her.

Slowly, Dorcas descends the stairs, gazing down across the crowd, not recognizing enemy from ally, unable to distinguish between friend or foe. It's just a wave of faces and the harsh stench of death. Dorcas feels so fucking hollow.

She's weary when she comes to a stop on the bottom step, every muscle in her body aching. What aches the most is her left hand down by her hip, fingers gripping the silk-soft strands of Tom Riddle's hair. She lifts his decapitated head so everyone can see it, so they can all see his empty eye sockets and the Horcrux Hornet resting on his tongue in his slack mouth, still open from his final, muffled scream.

"We have no Master," Dorcas announces. "The war is over."

No one claps. There are no cheers. This is not a victory. They are all here, in this moment, crowds of people who suffered war and can never be the person they were before it. There are no good people in war; there are only those who survive, and those who don't. The cost of surviving war is having to figure out how to, and Dorcas doesn't even know where to begin.

It comes to her all at once, like a lightning strike, something that makes her fingers go slack. Riddle's head hits the ground with an audible thump, and she doesn't care, because she does know where to start. Of course she does.

Why did she start the war in the first place? Why did she work so hard to end it? The same answer to both. Marlene.

Of course it's Marlene.

Marlene, who is waiting for her, and Dorcas needs to find her now and see her. Needs to let her know that, even though it doesn't feel like it yet, this war has come to an end. Dorcas did it for her. Maybe it'll feel finished when Dorcas can tell her.

So, Dorcas takes that final step down, only to come to a halt when the crowd breaks up, people pushing through. It takes her a second to really focus on who it is that approaches her; she knows them, all of them, but they're strangers to her for a moment where her mind is blank and unable to keep up. Just bodies. Just people. She can't filter who they are, not at first.

And then it comes through to her, trickling like a drip, drip, drip of understanding. Lily is the one that makes sense to her first, and then James, and then in between them—Sirius. His arms are over their shoulders, hobbling in between them, and he looks extremely worse for wear.

Why? He was fine, wasn't he?

They were fine, weren't they?

Sirius' gaze is fixed on her. Dorcas runs her gaze over them, looking from side-to-side, peering past their shoulders. Searching. She keeps searching.

Halfway to her, Sirius pushes away from James and Lily, taking the slow, halting journey the rest of the way to her all alone. It probably would be kind of her to meet him, but she feels like her feet are cemented to the ground. Her whole body feels heavy. She can't move. She wants to run, and she can't move.

"Dorcas," Sirius rasps as he comes to a halt in front of her.

"Where is she?" Dorcas whispers.

Sirius swallows. His face is covered in tiny abrasions, patches of red blotting through bruised skin from strain, eyes watery as he struggles to hold her gaze. He's shaking.

"Why isn't Marlene here, Sirius? What happened to her?" Dorcas asks, meaning for her voice to come out strong and steady, but it trembles and barely rises above the breeze. Inside the cage of her chest, something rattles, fighting desperately to get out. "Sirius, where is she?"

"There was—there was a landmine—"

Landmine.

A landmine.

A

land

mine.

A landmine a landmine a landmine a

"I'm so sorry, Dorcas," Sirius whispers, his voice cracking as the tears in his eyes spill over. He draws his hand back.

Dorcas stares at the ring. Her ring, the one she designed. Marlene's ring, the one Dorcas got onto her finger. Three times Dorcas got this ring on Marlene's finger, and that was supposed to be it. That *was* it. That was the best part. Only twice did Marlene give that ring back, two of the worst times in Dorcas' life, and here's the third to round it out.

The best and worst things come in threes.

They had their best.

Here's their worst.

The ring glints metallic and flecked with blood in the sunlight, and Dorcas stares at it blankly, feeling as if she's floating from somewhere above her own body. She watches herself, the way she staggers back and stumbles over the step before she drops down to sit on the stairs. She watches the Horcrux Hornet fly around her, sensing her fear but refusing to sting, knowing it would die if it did so. She watches the world flash by in a bland blur, like her life is being sped up in glimpses for her to see in broken, wilted snapshots of someone who fell in love with war and wasn't prepared when it ended.

She stares at the ring that they agreed Marlene would wear so that Dorcas knew, as long as she was wearing it, Marlene would return to her. A promise, one that Marlene did not break. Marlene isn't wearing it. She can't return to Dorcas, and Dorcas looks at the ring, and Dorcas feels it settle into her cold and brittle that again, as always, she was too late.

Don't be late, Marlene had said, and that's all Dorcas has ever managed to do. She ended the war to reach someone she didn't know she already lost. What was the point?

What was the point of any of it?

There are no good people in war, and now Dorcas thinks there are no good people out of it—certainly not her, because she would gladly go back into it just to have Marlene again.

All wars end. All of them, and this one has. The war is over, and here Dorcas is, in a world without the woman she loves, wanting nothing more than to start another one.

Chapter End Notes

SPOILERY WARNINGS:

-there is a scene where a character gets tortured, but you only know a few things that happen. you know fingers get broken, and eyes get removed, and there is a knife involved. after the character dies, their head is cut off.

-right at the beginning after the first pov where a character dies brutally. they are blown up after stepping on a landmine, and it's gorey, and quick. very sudden. very sickening.

-another character is shot multiple times and found bleeding out, then dies.

those are the only really gorey scenes i can think of that would need a brief summary. now ill list the characters that die in this chapter and what death above is theirs, if it applies!

the list of characters that die, in order:
marlene (landmine)
the casselberry family
monty (shot and bleeds out)
12 government officials from the hallow
tom riddle (tortured, killed, then decapitated)

okay! for everyone else...

from the top, ig. we start off with remus, who was not originally a prisoner of war...until he did essentially the same thing that ended with him being a prisoner in the first place. sigh, men will never learn... but! in his defense, he was trying to HELP.

and then we cut right to marlene and sirius... the fucking landmines. no one commented on the landmines and the insane thing is that i did so much research on them and how they work and just, like, actual situations in war etc etc and landmines are BRUTAL yall. the grape jelly comparison? yeah, that wasn't an exaggeration :/ very mentally scarred from that, just as an aside.

anyway, the fact that marlene died after saying she was going to propose to dorcas... dying with sirius... wanting to meet who she would be on the other side of the war and

not getting that chance... yall have no IDEA how much this hurt me to write and how long i have been missing marlene. rip marlene ill give you a happy ending in the next one 😔

and then james and lily running into sirius, who is injured and dissociating??? just that whole thing of him NEEDING to get that ring to dorcas and then lily and james finding out about marlene, DEVASTATING.

the severus scene into the slughorn scene... ohhhh i know some of yall were so mad at me 😭 DONT YELL AT ME I DIDNT KILL THEM DID I??? i, um. i just made you think i did. sorry? LISTEN. severus was on it, okay, he handled that shit. he had his Drop The Mic moment. not pictured: severus being kicked in the stomach by various people captured before he explained he was a spy for albus lmaooo. he WAS smart enough not to untie them until he explained, so there's that.

also, albus in this... the thing about albus is, we only see him through the lens of people who have issues with him, and slughorn. Doesn't. he has no resentment for him the way aberforth does, and hasn't been wronged by him as many of the others have, and so you see this duality of him, like, not necessarily in the wrong from his position of what he's working towards. not all to blame, necessarily. and then he tosses all that aside the moment he thinks his little brother is in danger. the last chapter aberforth said albus would never prioritize him over the war. he was wrong. say what you want albus, whether he's a good man or not, he is a good brother :(

the monty death... so guess what? you remember teds death all the way back in, like, chapter 42 or smthn? that was originally gonna be monty, but i rewrote it bc i just COULDN'T kill monty. i never thought id be able to, and then. well, here we are :/ that shit broke my heart, by the way. hardest death for me, hands down, i think because i tried really hard to NOT have him die in the beginning, and then he died anyway. he was my prim 😭

and then the tom riddle torture. listen. there was no way that man was making it out alive. he just Wasn't. and i knew the moment i decided that dorcas was going to kill him and regulus and remus were going to be there that he would be tormented beforehand. they are the three most unhinged characters.

something very impactful about dorcas being the one to announce the war is over, and THEN learn that it really is in every aspect. her last words to marlene were exchanged i love yous after she promised to end the war for her. the way she blamed herself. the way she denied it. the fact that the horcrux hornet sensed her fear. the ring. god, the RING. oh, im still so upset. their story is so tragic :(

id do honorable mentions, but i honestly don't think there are any. pandora lived! people thought she wouldn't, so...yay??? 😬 yall im sorry 😭😭😭

believe it or not, things will eventually get better, we just.. have to get there. there IS light at the end of the tunnel, i swear.

War Aftermath

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death/murder
-references to past injuries/wounds
-references to child abuse
-references to past war/warzones
-gun/gun violence (no one is injured)
-heavy depictions of grief
-mentions of blood (no one is bleeding)
-depictions of panic attacks
-brief insinuation/implication/assumption of someone wanting to commit suicide (no one does)

i think that's it! yes, it's another heavy/angsty one, but not gruesome like the last ones. just...sad, really. but there is hurt/comfort!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius stands at the highest point of the castle, up in an open tower that looks over all of the Hallow, a tower that might have been good for star-gazing on clear nights.

All it's good for now is watching the ash rise.

Years later, this is the memory that will always be the most vivid to Sirius. The soot of war's aftermath. Ash stirred in the wind, floating up, up, up—and then away. He thinks of the dream he had where he and Regulus would jump from the roof of their childhood home to fly to their stars, so real to him that it felt more like a memory than a dream at all, but it was never possible for it to be reality. Strange how reality and dreams blend together when life and death do. Some of those ashes on a journey to stars are from buildings that collapsed in the midst of war, and some are from people who did the same.

Some of those ashes could be Marlene.

Sirius exhales shakily and wrings his fingers together, rolling his knuckles against each other, hiding the way his hands still shake. They haven't stopped. He can't make them stop.

Down below, people look like ants in the distance, all rushing around like they've spilled out of a broken open anthill. They crawl about, spreading farther and farther, all those willing to keep going—or just those who can't bear to stop—delegated to post-war efforts. Cleanup crews. Groups who have to collect the dead. Teams sent out to search for those no one can find.

What comes after a war ends is almost as exhausting as the war itself. There are a lot of people who have tapped out, and there are plenty who have been ordered to tap out, after all they gave *in* the war. Sirius tapped out in the middle of war and didn't find his way back to himself until he was standing across from Dorcas with a ring burning into the skin of his palm, and he has no desire to tap back in, not anymore.

Everyone with minor injuries have been healed up now, with those with more extensive injuries shipped off to a Hallow hospital. Sirius has thankfully been cleared to heal on his own. They checked him over, gave him proper medical treatment, but he got off rather light from the landmine, compared to—

In any case, Sirius will have a new scar, while sitting down and standing up still hurts a bit, and he's a little slow-going at the moment, but he's okay. Physically, he's okay. That's it, though.

No one's okay now, not really.

The sound of the door creaking makes Sirius tense up, his head whipping around as his muscles bunch up under his skin in preparation, and they stay that way as he watches Regulus slip inside.

"How'd you know I'd be here?" Sirius asks, and Regulus jolts, his head snapping up, visibly startled.

Regulus exhales and says, "I didn't."

"Oh," Sirius murmurs, then swivels back around to lean on the rail again, peering out over everything. Regulus comes to join him, moving as silently as he always does, like his feet don't even touch the floor. When he stops next to Sirius, he makes a low noise of distaste as he checks the distance to the ground, frowning down over the rail before shuffling closer to Sirius like it's an instinct. It's sweet. It almost brings Sirius to tears.

"It's, um." Regulus halts, struggling with words as he often does and always has, except when he's being harsh. He sighs and gingerly leans against the rail, possibly just so they can press their arms together. It's a solid weight and warmth that Sirius wants to shy away from. "Just —it's a bit overwhelming. In there. With…everything. So, I—I wanted to—"

"Get away?"

"Yeah, guess so. You?"

Sirius blows out a deep breath, eyes sinking shut as he hangs his head forward. "Something like that."

Neither of them say anything for a while, just breathing next to one another. No one has really said anything of substance, because what is there to say? Riddle is dead. Barty is dead. Marlene is dead. Monty is dead. Rabastan, Sybill, Amos. Frank, Bellatrix, Augusta. Lily's family, Alice's family, even the families of those dead, like Barty and Marlene. Ted, Evan, Gideon, Fabian, friends, foes, strangers. Death, and more death, and more death. At some point, there's so much death that it seems impossible to properly mourn.

How do you mourn on such a mass scale? How do you mourn people you haven't really processed losing yet? How do you mourn those lost to a war you were always aware you could lose them to in the first place? How do you mourn?

People talk about how you're supposed to, but it rarely works that way, does it? Some people cried. Regulus did. As soon as he stumbled from the castle and right into James' arms, he broke down weeping right there where everyone and anyone could see him, muffling his sobs

into James' chest. James cried, too, when they all found Effie later, bloodstained and trembling through her own tears as she—when she said—

Where's Dad? James had asked, and Sirius felt that question lodged in his throat like a splinter.

And Effie said.

She said.

James cried, because of what she said. Begged her to be wrong. Pleaded with her to change her mind and take it all back and say that his dad was alive somewhere, waiting, but she couldn't, and he cried. Flinched back from his own mother when she reached for him, then curled into Regulus instead, and cried there, and cried, and cried.

Sirius didn't cry. Couldn't cry. He stopped crying when Dorcas picked herself up and walked away, pushed through the crowd and left the castle behind, left them all behind. Remus had cradled Sirius' face in his hands, and Sirius didn't cry.

He hasn't cried since. He wants to, sometimes, because that's what you're supposed to do, right? He thinks he should, but his eyes remain stubbornly dry.

"Sirius," Regulus says quietly.

"Yeah, Regulus?" Sirius asks, equally quiet as him.

"What do we do now?" Regulus leans into him harder, seeking something that Sirius can't even give him. Comfort, maybe. Or reassurance. Presence. Guidance.

It's like the aftermath of Sirius' first hunger games all over again, and he hates it, hates the way he can feel the weight of being needed bearing down on him, this building pressure that

feels like suffocation. He can't fucking breathe around it, how difficult it is to keep from digging his hands in the distance between them they worked so hard to close and ripping it right back open. Regulus makes his skin crawl, because Sirius can't take care of him. Sirius can't even take care of himself.

All he sees now when he looks at Regulus are the ways in which he failed him. He looks at Regulus and thinks of all that he has suffered, all that he has lost, and he thinks: *that was the kind of shit that was supposed to happen to me, not him.*

Never him. Sirius volunteered so it wouldn't be him, and here they are, knowing suffering and loss on a scale Sirius never wanted to be equal. Sirius' perpetual mirror, one he wants to apologize to, one he's so tired of looking at. It's not Regulus' fault, it's not, but Sirius is being crushed by it. He's being crushed by so many things. Everything.

Sirius swallows harshly and says, "I guess we'll go home soon. There will be—funerals."

"I have to—" Regulus halts, then clears his throat rather violently. "I'm the closest thing Barty had to family, out of everyone left, so I—I have to arrange it."

Sirius should offer to help.

He doesn't.

"After the funerals..." Regulus trails off. He breathes in, then he breathes out. Sirius can feel him pressed close, how stiff he is, like he's bracing for a hit. He knows. Why wouldn't he? He's used to this, isn't he? The worst part is, when he says what he does next, it's not even a question. "After that, you're leaving."

Sirius' eyes flutter shut, and he croaks, "Yeah, Reggie, I'm leaving again."

He can't do it. Can't, can't, can't. Doesn't know how. Maybe he never did. Maybe he never will. He just can't. The moment Marlene went to pieces, he did too. Regulus can't see that.

Sirius can't let him, can't bear to, can't pick the pieces up when his brother is in pieces right next to him. Marlene died, and it broke him. Barty died, and it broke Regulus. Monty died, and it broke their hearts. All they are now is scars split open and bleeding, and Sirius can't stitch either of them up. Can't put anyone's pieces back together.

There's a moment of stillness, neither of them breathing, and then Regulus' breath punches out of him. It's a little strangled in a way that sears the inside of Sirius' chest and makes him want to curl into himself until he disappears. He's sorry. He's so sorry. He can't stop being sorry.

A pressure, gentle, and Sirius' eyes snap open when he feels the weight on his shoulder, the tickle of soft hair against his neck and the bolt of his jaw. He slants his gaze to the side to find Regulus lying his head there, his face hiding away there, a tremble rippling through his whole body. He stays there for a long moment, and then he sniffs and pulls away.

"Okay," Regulus says, the word cracking in his throat.

"Okay?" Sirius repeats blankly.

Regulus nods. "Yeah, Sirius. Okay. Just—um, I'm assuming you'll be with Remus? Will you two be in district twelve?"

"We—haven't talked about it," Sirius admits, staring at the side of Regulus' face. "I imagine he'll want to go back and be with his dad for a while, so I thought that's where we'd go."

"Okay," Regulus repeats on an exhale. "Right. Okay, well, that's—that could be good for you, then."

"That's…it?" Sirius asks, still staring at him. "You're not—"

"Not what?" Regulus cuts in, turning to meet his eyes, his own startlingly soft. "Angry?"

"Are you?" Sirius whispers.

"No, Sirius," Regulus says softly. "I'm not angry anymore."

"You should be," Sirius chokes out. "You have to be. I think I want you to be. I'm abandoning you again, aren't I?"

"You never abandoned me. It was never your place to put me before you. All you did was what was best for you, what you needed, and I was wrong to ever blame you for that," Regulus murmurs.

"Regulus," Sirius rasps.

"I'm not a child, and you aren't my parent," Regulus states firmly, and it shouldn't feel so harsh, so ruthless, because it's the truth, but it hits Sirius hard anyway. "We're brothers, and we can't—we never really figured out how to walk away from that. You're—Sirius, you're—" He stops, drops his gaze, and starts again. "It's not on you to shape your life around what I want, or what you think I need. You—you *have* to do what's best for you, because what I really need is for you to be okay. That's it. So, if you have to go, then go. It's okay. It really is."

"You don't hate me for it?" Sirius asks weakly.

Regulus releases a hoarse laugh that hitches in his throat, and he says, "Sirius, I love you more than anything. You're the first person in this world I ever loved at all. Not Mother, not Father, not James; it was you. Did you know that? Because, for a while, I suppose I—I fooled myself into thinking it wasn't true, but the thing is, I've always loved you, and I always will. It doesn't matter where you are, where you need to be, even if where you need to be isn't with me. I'll just—love you anyway."

Sirius' eyes are stinging. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Regulus rasps. "That's all I did for those ten years, you know, and if it takes ten more before you're okay to come home, I'll love you through those, too. Me and you, remember? We agreed to that, didn't we? It's—it's still true no matter where we are or what we're doing, right?"

"Me and you, no matter what," Sirius agrees, and it comes out choked. He aches with it in the best and worst way possible at the same time, leaving him feeling broken open and bared to the whole Hallow that can't even see him. He reaches for the back of Regulus' neck, shaking him a little, making his head wobble and drawing a broken laugh out of him, always the mirror image of the things Sirius struggles to look at, and he tugs Regulus close anyway. "It's the same for me, you know."

"Is it?"

"When—when you were still so small, couldn't even walk yet, I remember—it's one of the few things I can remember, oddly enough, but I remember that I'd sneak out of my own bed just to sit beside yours and reach out so you could hold onto my finger while you slept. I thought—I don't know, I just—I liked how it felt, like I was making sure you felt safe by letting you know I was there. And I didn't really—I didn't have the words for it, what it felt like to do that every night, like a compulsion I couldn't beat and didn't even try to, because I liked it, and I felt so—I felt it, like it was my own heart in my chest, and I didn't even know what hearts were, but I knew that you were mine, and I knew that I loved you. I knew, then, that I always would. I know, now, that I always have. And I'll know, with my final breath, that I always did."

Regulus ducks his head forward, not even that much shorter or smaller than Sirius in the grand scheme of things, yet in Sirius' presence, he seems to shrink. He has hated that before, Sirius knows, but Sirius loves it. He can't help it. He used to carry Regulus around on his back, and he still would if Regulus would let him, but Regulus won't, and so he gets this instead.

He gets Regulus folding into him, head under his chin, small and deflated like he doesn't have to worry about a damn thing as long as Sirius is there to shield him. Sirius hasn't always been there to shield him, can't always be there to shield him, and so he takes every available opportunity offered to him to do so. He does it now, scrubbing his hand over Regulus' head and holding him, pressing his face into his hair.

And it's here, finally, that Sirius finds it in himself to cry.

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Lily blows out a deep breath as she watches Sundry hover around Kingsley, who she directed them to for any information on their family. The information wasn't good, as it turns out, and now Sundry just follows Kingsley around everywhere like they're waiting for better news.

Lily gets it, really. Kingsley is comforting in his steady calm, and after the war that took place, everyone aches for a sense of serenity. Sundry doesn't know that Kingsley is colder than he's ever been, stiffer, more withdrawn. More militaristic now than he was before Sybill died. He gives out orders and delegates and never misses a beat; he's already lost the one he couldn't bear to lose, and so all of this, now, is just a mission to him. He's always focused during a mission. Reliable. Lily can't blame Sundry for being drawn to that. Lily can blame herself for how that's become Kingsley's natural state.

Swallowing, Lily turns and continues on her self-imposed journey away from the castle. It's a long trek, where she's going, but it's her turn to make it.

The Hallow is a bustle of activity the day after the final battle. All Aurors that remain are now working on Dumbledore's orders, keeping the general public calm and out of the way while volunteers help clean up. Lily walks through streets that were littered with bodies only yesterday, streets that are empty now, all except for ash and bloodstains. The stench of death still lingers, thick enough to make anyone gag.

Lily has heard updates of the numbers, those steadily on the rise, but it's hard to have any concrete information either way. Of the armies sent in to fight in the Hallow, at least half died before they ever reached the castle. They have recovered a small fraction that were saved by Hallow sympathizers; that's where Kingsley was. He would have died had a group of Hallows siding with the resistance not saved his life.

There's also a whole fraction of people just—missing. Those in the section with the black tar set as a trap, which devoured people whole and never spit them back out again. People still

look, but they can't recover any bodies, so some people are just gone. Just like that. Never seen again.

Teams have gone out to collect weaponry, disarm explosives, and transport people to and from places they need to be. It's not quite rebuilding yet, because that takes time, and that takes having some sort of knowledge of what the fuck to do next. No one knows what to do next.

The whole world is in a state of disarray now, and Lily can't bring herself to care about the state of the world at all. She has helped as a medic when and where she can, but right this second, there's something she needs to do.

Dorcas is exactly where Lily expected to find her.

For a moment, Lily stops on the sidewalk, her throat feeling clogged as she gazes at where Dorcas is. Four blocks north of The Dillmar Suites, Dorcas is waiting.

Two blocks back, Marlene is dead. Or, well, that's where she died. They've collected her remains already. What remained of her, that is. The thought turns Lily's stomach; the thought of Marlene in pieces is so sickening that Lily can barely stand it, and that's the reality. That's the reality for Sirius, more so than anyone else, because he saw it. He hasn't been the same since.

Lily inhales, then she exhales. Dread makes her stiff as she moves forward, drawing closer to Dorcas, who has been in the same spot since Sirius returned Marlene's ring to her. She came here, and she won't move. Many people have tried, but Dorcas won't budge.

It's been over twenty-four hours.

A part of Lily has been too scared to try. Too scared to face it. Too scared to see what becomes of someone who has gone through what Dorcas has, because Dorcas started this war to save Marlene, and then the war killed Marlene anyway. All that she did to make sure Marlene would live, and all those she recruited to help—Lily included—and Marlene died *anyway.*

It's not fair. Life isn't, war isn't, love isn't. That's what Lily knows for sure now; nothing in this fucking world is *fair.* Everything else blurs, but that remains clear.

Dorcas is sitting on the curb, her head pointed towards the south, gaze fixated in that direction. Her expression is blank. She looks emptied out. Scraped raw. Hollow.

When Lily crouches down in front of her, Dorcas doesn't look at her, doesn't acknowledge her, doesn't even move. She just sits there. She's still covered in blood. She smells like death. Lily wants to bundle her up and take her to get clean, make her eat, make her sleep. Lily just wants to help.

"Dorcas," Lily says softly.

No reply. Nothing. It's as if Lily isn't even here.

Lily swallows and tries again. "Dorcas?"

Still nothing.

Exhaling, Lily shifts and glances towards the direction Dorcas is staring towards. For a pitiful moment, Lily is looking for Marlene, too. Wanting to see her so, so badly. Wanting to sit down and wait right beside Dorcas in solidarity, however long it takes, because Marlene deserved to walk out the other side of the war. She really did. She fought so fucking hard to get there and then didn't even make it.

Just not afraid to die, then?

No, I'm rather used to it, actually.

Maybe that was true. Maybe Marlene held hands with death so long she never worked out how to let go, or maybe she never could because death wasn't going to let her go. Lily snatched her away, once, and she was foolish enough to believe, or hope, that maybe death was done reaching.

Clearly, it wasn't.

"Dorcas," Lily tries yet again, this time reaching out to touch her arm, startled when Dorcas snatches away from her.

"Don't touch me," Dorcas grits out, never looking away from the open road, waiting for a silhouette that'll never come.

"Dorcas," Lily whispers.

"Don't even try it. Don't bother," Dorcas snaps, poison coating her words, harsh and ugly and furious with the world, along with everyone in it. "I'm not moving for anyone other than her. You're not her. You were never her. You'll never be her."

Lily sits on that for a second. It would probably hurt if any part of Lily wanted to be what Marlene was—and still is, and likely always will be—to Dorcas. No part of Lily wants that, now.

"She's not coming," Lily says softly, because that's what all this boils down to. No one can get Dorcas to move, because this is what it requires, and no one wants to be the one to say it. No one wants to be this cruel. "Dorcas, she's not coming."

"Maybe—" and Dorcas' voice cracks right in half, her bleary eyes blinking as she forms that weak noise into a low hiss of anger. "You don't—she could—maybe she was fine, maybe they found her, and maybe—"

"I'm sorry," Lily murmurs, curling her hands into fists so she won't reach out and touch her again.

"Don't be. There's no reason to be," Dorcas insists, wild-eyed as she stares and waits, stares and waits, stares and waits.

Lily takes a deep breath, feeling it skip and stutter inside her chest from how it hurts, bracing for the pain of what she has to say next. Not saying it isn't an option, because Dorcas can't sit here and waste away. Lily knows how much it hurts to not know, but for Dorcas, not knowing is the only hope she has; knowing is going to hurt so much more.

"Dorcas, she's—" Lily struggles with it for a moment, the words fighting against the lump in her throat. She takes a second, then swallows and exhales. "She's dead. She's confirmed dead. Someone will be notifying Cordelia today."

Dorcas' legs begin bouncing up and down. She shakes her head. "No. No, because—because we were—because she—"

"I'm sorry," Lily says again, knowing it's useless.

"It's *bullshit!"* Dorcas spits out, her head whipping around as she pins blazing eyes on Lily. "That's not true. It's *not* true. Fuck you, Lily. Fuck off. Go. Go away. Get away from me."

"You can't stay here," Lily whispers.

"She shouldn't be—she—" Dorcas is rattling, her legs jumping rapidly until she's practically rocking. Her face twists with pure fury. "It shouldn't be her. She shouldn't be dead. Anyone else. Everyone else, I don't care, but not her."

Lily knows it's the grief, she knows that, but there's something oddly terrifying about how Dorcas seems to mean it.

"You. Even you," Dorcas declares harshly, glaring at her. "I'd rather it be you. Instead of her, I'd rather you be dead."

"Okay," Lily replies quietly, gazing upon the most heartbreaking thing she's ever seen.

"Or Sirius," Dorcas continues. "He was there. Why couldn't it have been him?"

"I don't know," is all Lily says.

"Even me," Dorcas tells her, and this time, her voice comes out weak with a whimper. "I wish it had been me."

"She wouldn't." Lily gazes at her, heart panging when Dorcas' expression twitches like it's about to collapse. "Marlene *wouldn't* wish that, Dorcas, so you can't stay here. You can't sit here, neglect yourself, and wait to die. You have to get up."

"Well, she's not here to stop me, is she?" Dorcas snarls, swinging between anger and defeat in rotation.

"No, she's not," Lily agrees, "but I am."

"Like I said, you're not her," Dorcas informs her coldly, holding her gaze. "Leave me alone, or I'll kill you."

Lily sighs. "I'm not—"

Dorcas' hand snaps down to her hip to grab her gun, and she aims it a scant few inches to the right of Lily's head before promptly pulling the trigger. It happens in seconds.

A shriek rips free from Lily's mouth as she falls back, tumbling out into the empty road as her hands fly up to cover her head instinctively, whole body rattling as her heart shoots up into her throat, and she's there again, instantly, right in the middle of war she foolishly believed herself free from, sheer fear ricocheting through her like a bullet. Lily has no idea how long it takes for her to realize she's okay, not in the midst of a warzone, and entirely uninjured.

Not safe, though. Lily doesn't feel safe. She feels—scared. True fear unfurls within her as she lowers her arms, chest heaving, body trembling there on the ground. Dorcas watches her impassively, gun still in hand, and Lily stares at her with wide eyes before scrambling back, putting space between them.

"Leave," Dorcas orders.

So, utterly fucking terrified, Lily stumbles to her feet and does just that. When she leaves, she's running, because that's exactly what you do when you're in danger. She runs, and she doesn't slow down, and she doesn't stop.

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They send Minerva next. Days later, or hours, or years, or seconds. Dorcas doesn't know when. Doesn't care, either. She's not there, then she is, and Dorcas ignores her, too.

They don't get it, really. It's better if Dorcas stays here, better for everyone else, because she can't do much damage here. It's in everyone's best interest that she's not unleashed on the rest of the world. Her hands itch to burn the Hallow to the ground.

Minerva stands in front of her for a while, then slowly kneels down until they're right across from each other, eye-level. Dorcas doesn't look at her; she's still gazing towards the south. She knows it's pointless, deep down, because Marlene isn't coming. Can't come. Wouldn't make Dorcas wait if she could come, because unlike Dorcas, she was never too late. Dorcas knows; she just likes the comfort of pretending.

"So, what's the plan?" Minerva asks quietly. "Are you planning to just sit here?"

"Yep," Dorcas confirms defiantly.

"Until when?"

Dorcas doesn't deem that question worthy of a response. Until when? She doesn't know. Forever, maybe. Until she sinks into the earth and grows flowers through her cracked open ribcage in memorial of the woman who planted them there. Until Marlene comes walking down that road from the south, or until Dorcas dies, whichever comes first.

"Will you miss her funeral, then?" Minerva murmurs.

Again, Dorcas doesn't respond. To this, she has no idea how to respond. A funeral. The funeral. Marlene's funeral, because she's dead. She's not coming, because she's dead. She's dead, she's dead, she's dead, she's—

"Dumbledore is calling a meeting tomorrow," Minerva says into the silence. Dorcas blinks, her head swiveling, because this does pique her interest. "He wants to discuss how to memorialize those lost to the war, as well as talk about what next moves need to be made for the world as a whole."

Dumbledore, Dorcas thinks, like a harsh scrape on the inside of her skull, chipping bone. Dumbledore started this war because of love, and so did Dorcas. By the end, what do they have to show for it? That's the thing, they have to work for that, too. Leaders don't get to just *stop.* That's not how it works. The war is over, but the world carries on, and they're all trapped in it.

It infuriates Dorcas. Everything infuriates Dorcas. The people who carry on when Marlene doesn't. The warmth of the sun and the turn of the earth and the way people have already started to wash away the blood in the streets. Some of that blood must have been Marlene's. Dorcas wishes she had bathed in it; Dorcas wants to turn back time and drown in it.

"I'm not going to tell you that you can't stay here," Minerva murmurs, reaching around to pull a pack off her shoulders, sitting it down next to Dorcas. "Take more time if you need it. There's food in here, and water, and a blanket if you get cold. I will need to take your gun, though."

"You're not taking my gun," Dorcas snaps.

"I am, because not only are you a danger to others, you're a danger to yourself. I can't trust you not to turn it on yourself," is the calm, level response. Minerva waits, and when Dorcas doesn't reply, she nods sharply. "If you want the comfort of holding it, then give me your bullets. Don't make me take it from you, Dorcas. I don't want to have to do that."

"I'll shoot you before you get the chance," Dorcas says, and she means it. Her fingers itch to do it, in fact. "I should do it anyway. It's—this is your fault. You're the one who told Riddle what rule to use in the Quarterly Memorial, even if it was on Dumbledore's orders. Marlene would have never been in the arena a second time, if not for you. And—and maybe I could have kept her out of the war. Maybe I could have saved her from all of this. I could have protected her. I *did* protect her, until you ruined it. She's dead, and it's your fault."

"Shoot me, then," Minerva declares bluntly, reaching out to grab the hand Dorcas has wrapped around her gun. Minerva lifts it and forcefully pushes the gun against her own head, holding her gaze. "Go ahead. Shoot me."

Dorcas glares at her.

"Will that grant you peace, Dorcas?" Minerva asks, leaning into the gun, eyes fluttering closed. "Will it grant me peace? Will it honor Marlene? If that is what you need, then I'll be your willing target. Is that not a mother's love?"

"You're not my mother," Dorcas whispers, and then she pulls the trigger. As soon as she does, she flinches, but Minerva doesn't. She doesn't even flinch when the gun clicks.

No bullets.

The worst part is, Dorcas didn't know she ran out.

No, maybe the worst part is that Dorcas wishes she hadn't.

Minerva leans back and opens her eyes. For a long beat, they just stare at each other with the heavy knowledge of what just happened sitting between them. Dorcas tried to kill her. She tried to shoot her. She pulled the trigger.

"Hydrate, eat, stay warm," Minerva says softly, pushing to her feet and stepping back. She doesn't try to take the gun; she has no need to, now that she knows it's empty. Dorcas stares at her and wishes she'd had at least one more bullet. "I'll see to it that no one else comes to bother you. If you haven't returned by tomorrow, I'll bring you more supplies."

"You're *not* my mother," Dorcas spits out viciously.

"No, I'm not," Minerva agrees, "but I love you as a mother does. From what I know, a love such as that is unconditional. I'll love you through this, too. She's gone, Dorcas, but she did not take all the love for you in this world when she left it. I am still here. There are many people still here, and we will still be here when you're ready for us."

"Could take a while," Dorcas says harshly.

Minerva gazes at her with so much sympathy, and all she says is an unbearably gentle, "Then we'll wait."

With that, Minerva turns and sweeps off. Dorcas grinds her teeth and points her gun at Minerva's back, listening to the repeated *click, click, click* that comes from pulling the trigger. In the aftermath, once Minerva has left and Dorcas has stopped squeezing her finger, the world sounds very quiet.

Dorcas kicks aside the pack with a snarl and drops the gun with a clatter, glaring down at her shaking hands, staring only for a moment at the ring on her finger before quickly looking away. Refusing to look at it. Ignoring what it means.

Pretending.

Exhaling, Dorcas balls her hands into fists and turns her head to fix her itchy eyes towards the south.

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When James was young, he would crawl into bed between his parents just to fall asleep to the feeling of them breathing. It would probably embarrass others to admit this, but he's not ashamed about the fact that he'd do this all the way until he was sixteen, when he finally got too big for them all to fit comfortably for long periods of time, and before Sirius moved in, leaving James to find his way into his bed instead.

James can't remember a time he ever enjoyed sleeping alone. He can remember a time when his parents never made him. No matter what was going on, if James poked his head through the door of his parents' room, they'd lift up from their pillows, chuckle fondly, and make space between them that he would run forward to take up. Safe there between the wall of love and comfort they made for him on each side.

Maybe that's why James is so warm, because he's been soaking up the warmth from them nearly his whole life, full to the brim of all that they offered him, a combination of them both down to his very genetic makeup. They made him together, created him together, gave pieces of themselves to form him together; they gave him life, and now his dad is gone from it.

James doesn't really know how to handle that.

He's not handling it, honestly. He has mostly just been with his mum. They have temporary rooms in the castle, and James has one with Regulus, but he hasn't been in it. He's hardly moved out of bed with Effie, still instinctively taking up the middle like he's waiting for Monty to join on the other side.

Effie has been quiet. Well, she has cried, curled up next to James and breaking into tears with no warning, right in the middle of a sentence, or in silence. She rests her head on his chest a lot, and he strokes her back and hair, and nothing is devastating the same way as your mother crying; nothing in this world hurts the way that hurts, James now knows.

After all that he's suffered, James has learned that there's new pain to experience. All these people who lost their parents, or just one, and James still never dared to entertain the thought that he would, too. He tried to, once. Back when the Quarterly Memorial came about, James did try to entertain the thought that he'd lose his mum, because that was her original plan.

Never, through any of this, did he imagine losing his dad.

Perhaps that was naive of him. Too hopeful. Everyone around him was losing friends and lovers and family, and he was on the outside looking in, untouched by such cruelty. Yes, he has lost, but never someone who was *his.* Some would have called him lucky, and then his luck ran out, so they can't anymore.

What strikes him as unfair the most is how close he was. How close they all were. They *nearly* scraped by, making it to that final stretch, and then it all fell apart. But, honestly, James is aware that it doesn't matter when or how it would have happened—years ago or years from now—because it was always going to feel unfair to him. It always will.

What James isn't expecting is his curiosity. The desperate need to know every little detail of how and when, his mind hung up on the sequence of events that led to his dad leaving without getting to say goodbye. Yes, Monty was with Effie, and he got to tell her that he loved her, and he got to tell her to tell everyone else he loved them, but James wasn't there. He didn't get to be there, didn't get to tell his dad how much he loves him, didn't get to say goodbye one final time—and it kills him. He's obsessing over it, constantly biting back the demands of more, more, more from Effie, because he wants more of Monty, and there's no more to have.

It's unfair to her, James thinks. Selfish of him, really, to keep asking her to revisit it. She told him everything, has told him all of it, and there are no changes between one retelling and the next. It remains the same from beginning to end, and that's all they get. James wasn't there, and that's all he gets.

He flinched away from Effie when she reached for him; it's something that will always sit heavy and sour in his stomach, something he'll always regret. He didn't mean to. He just—he couldn't help it, in that moment, because she was the one who had to tell him that his dad was dead. All he could do was turn to Regulus. Turn to him and fall apart, just as Regulus had fallen apart before, because Barty is gone, too.

"James," Effie whispers.

"Yeah, Mum?" James croaks, his voice hoarse from lack of use, other than sobs. He turns his head to look at her, and it always makes his chest pang to look at her now. He's never seen her look like this. Small and listless. Old. She looks like she's aged ten years overnight, all at once.

"You don't have to stay with me, honey," Effie tells him, reaching out to cover his hand with her own. "You can—"

"I'm not going anywhere," James rasps, winding his fingers around hers, squeezing them.

Effie exhales, eyes drifting shut. "We have to go home soon."

"I don't want to go home and not find him there," James admits, then instantly regrets it when Effie's shoulders hitch, a harsh sob spilling out of her. "Oh, oh, Mum, I'm—I'm sorry—"

"No, it's—please don't apologize, it's okay," Effie chokes out, clinging to his hand. "I don't either, James, but he's—he's there. He's wherever we are. We take him wherever we go."

It's not the same, James wants to say, because it's not. It will never be the same: it can't be, when James won't be able to reach out and touch his dad, when Effie won't have someone sleeping next to her every night, when they'll believe with everything in them that he's looking after them from wherever he is, but they don't get the chance to look back.

James can't say that to her. He won't hurt her in such a way. So, he strokes her hand and blinks itchy eyes, swollen from the unrelenting sting of tears he did eventually run out of. They're reloading, though. Building up again. There's always more just waiting to be set loose. Crying hurts, too.

Effie is still crying, the sort of crying that doesn't stop easily, and James holds her and comforts her as much as he can, not very surprised when—later, much later—she drifts off into fretful sleep. Neither of them have done much sleeping, really. They're exhausted at this point.

It's getting late. The second day after the war ends is bleeding into night. James knows this because Sirius slips into the room once it's dark. He did this the previous night, too, and the chair he sat in before still sits on Effie's side of the bed. He'd held her hand all through the night and held James' gaze for as long as either of them could bear it, and James thinks the only reason he continued to breathe the night following his father's death is because Sirius was there for him to breathe with.

Remus stays with Lily at night, or so Sirius said when James asked. Regulus—well, no one knows where Regulus goes. He always comes back, not to speak or seek comfort, but simply to be here. That's all they can do for each other right now; exist in the same space and make sure the other gets to see them, to be reassured by the very sight of them. Regulus is grieving Monty as well, but he's also lost Barty, and that's—it's clearly weighing on him hard. He disappears sometimes to go wrestle with it alone, and James doesn't want to make him do it alone, but James can't figure out how he's supposed to get up again.

"Dumbledore is calling a meeting tomorrow," Sirius whispers, looking at James and looking so tired. His gaze flicks to Effie, face softening when he takes in how deeply she's sleeping, and then he focuses on James again. "Will you go?"

"No," James says immediately, glancing down at his mum, then looking at Sirius desperately. "Will you go for us?"

"Yes, James, of course," Sirius murmurs.

"I'm sorry. That's not—I shouldn't have—"

"Stop, James. Just stop. Anything you need, you know that."

James blows out a deep breath and peers at Sirius wearily, tracing his features through the dark. "You don't have to go. Fuck anyone who's expecting us, yeah? We'll just skip it."

"Regulus wants to go," Sirius murmurs. "I think he feels better knowing what's going on, and I'm not letting him go alone. Remus will be there, too, so I'll just…see what happens."

"Alright," James mumbles. "If you're sure."

Sirius nods. "I am. You should get some sleep. You're tired."

"You can—" James stops, then swallows and ignores the harsh clench in his chest, so harsh that he has to cough around it just to breathe. "Ah, what are you sitting all the way over there for? You don't have to do that. Come get in bed. It's—it's big enough for three."

It is. James knows because he's been waiting for the weight of his dad to settle in warm and secure on the other side, and that isn't going to happen. That's never going to happen again, but leaving that space empty doesn't do anything other than make him more aware of who doesn't fill it, and James is so tired of no one being there. He wants his dad. That's who he wants, but that isn't who he's going to get.

Besides, Sirius is still healing. He shouldn't be sitting up in a chair all night. So, when Sirius looks at him tentatively, asking if James is sure without having to open his mouth, James gives him a careful nod and scoots to make more room.

Sirius stands cautiously and eases around the bed, pausing on the other side long enough that James shifts a little to look back. Sirius' eyebrows are furrowed, and there's something there in his gaze, uncertainty and guilt, as if he's an unwitting intruder. James huffs and jerks his head, not standing for *any* of that. Monty loved Sirius like a father did; Sirius is allowed to mourn him as a son would.

Exhaling, Sirius bends down to brace his hand on the bed, then starts a little in surprise, blinking. Shockingly, a hoarse chuckle spills out of him as he whispers, "Sorry, I just wasn't expecting that. Did you keep it warm for me or something?"

"What?" James asks.

"The bed." Sirius sweeps his hand up and down the spot he's about to lay in. "Were you just laying here? It's really warm."

"What?" James chokes out a second time, his hand flying out to press his palm into the sheets, the sting in his eyes building once more as his vision blurs. It is warm. It's so fucking warm, and James hasn't been lying there, has kept his back to it for the sake of his own emotional state. The room is cold and all places that he and his mother do not lie are cool to the touch, other than this spot. Monty's spot.

"James?" Sirius asks, his voice small and wary.

"Can you—will you sleep in the middle?" James whimpers, his voice cracking as he rolls away from his mother and sinks into the spot that's even warmer than the one he just rolled out of. Sirius doesn't ask questions; he just shifts to the end of the bed and crawls up into the middle, letting Effie latch onto him in her sleep without complaint, one of his hands reaching out to press in between James' shoulder blades.

Maybe Monty is here, in his own warm way. Maybe he's not. James doesn't know, but he presses his face against the bed and lets himself deflate into a gentle spark of solace.

It's not the same as having his dad there, but since this is all James gets, it's close enough.

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The gravestone is made of white marble, fresher than most in the graveyard, not yet aged with time and the continuation of life where the dead can't carry on with the rest of the world.

It's warm out for the third morning in a row following the war, blue skies and birds chirping, the sun blanketing everything in warmth and making the headstone look bleached like bone. There's a name chiseled into it, along with a date, as well as a short and simple message that reads:

As the earth turns,

someone remembers me.

The graveyard is full—not of people, but of graves. Older graves through the years, those in the Hallow that died before the war made it here. In the center is Gellert Grindelwald's final resting place, a pristine gravestone bigger than the rest with a statue raised in his honor. He died young, before he made it to thirty; objectively, he was a handsome man, which is translated well through his statue even fifty years later.

Regulus tears his gaze away from Grindelwald's statue to look at the plaque beneath it. *The Hallow's First, Beloved Master.*

Riddle won't get a grave, from what Regulus has heard. They had him cremated—his head, too—and apparently threw his ashes away. He had no family to give his ashes to, and the only people he has to remember him by are those too ashamed to, now. Ironic how that goes, isn't it?

Next to Regulus, there's a soft sigh. Somber. Heavy. Regulus swivels his head and feels his heart clench as he watches Pandora swipe tears from her cheeks. One of her arms is tucked through his elbow, fingers draped over his sleeve.

The date on the headstone had made her cry. Her father died a little over two weeks ago; she missed him by fifteen days. Only fifteen days, back when she was giggling at the table in the Great Hall at the Phoenix, unaware that—at the same time—her father was taking his final breath. Fourteen days ago, his caretaker handled and arranged the funeral. Thirteen days ago, the war began with the fighting in the districts. Three days ago, the war ended in the Hallow.

The war lasted ten days. A build up of fifty years, and all the fighting sprinkled throughout, but the main battles from start to finish started and finished in ten days.

In the grand scheme of things, that's nothing. That's not the ten years of the Trojan War. That's the length of the average hunger games, really. And yet, it feels like both; it feels like a lifetime and a mere blink.

Regulus echoes Pandora's sigh, and she flexes her fingers on his arm before clearing her throat thickly, leaning against him like she needs to and like she knows he'll allow it. He will. He does. Of course he will; of course he does.

"Thank you for coming with me," Pandora whispers, gaze fixed on her father's gravestone.

"I didn't want you to be alone," Regulus admits quietly.

Pandora inhales deep and exhales slow. "Still… I know you have a lot going on with—"

She stops. Regulus doesn't need her to fill in the gap. He knows just as well as she does what he has going on. A lot, as it turns out. He doesn't want to think about it right now, as selfish as that may be. So, he stares blankly at the gravestone of someone he never knew, and he doesn't think.

"Yes, well…" Regulus pauses, then sighs and lifts his free hand to lay it over where hers drapes over his arm. He swallows past the lump in his throat and murmurs, "You're family, Pandora. No matter what's going on, you won't be alone."

"I will be when you all leave," Pandora says. "Or more alone, in any case. Are you going to the meeting later?"

"Yes," Regulus admits. "Are you?"

"No, I'm going home," Pandora tells him quietly.

"You can come visit us, you know," Regulus says. "Anytime, Pandora, alright? I know you'll come to funerals and such, but it doesn't have to be just that. You're always welcome with us."

"I know," Pandora replies quietly. "Just—for a bit, I think… I think, for now, I'm going to quit working for a little while."

"That's good." Regulus squeezes her hand. "Do what's best for you. Do whatever you need to, and if you need us, we're here."

"Rodolphus offered to come with me to go through my dad's things," Pandora replies. "Well, I mean, I offered to do the same thing when he goes home to go through Rabastan's, so I suppose it's an equal exchange. Tit-for-tat."

Regulus hesitates to reply for a moment, because Pandora just might be one of the most important people in his life, of those that are left. So many he has lost now, and so, naturally, he wants to keep her safe, wants to shield her from any further pain, no matter what form it takes.

But he thinks about how he dared to hope that Barty, in his last lucid moments, was comforted to have Regulus there with him. The comfort of human touch. The comfort of love, no matter what shape it takes. Everyone deserves that, everyone deserves to feel that, and everyone deserves to decide for themselves if they'll take the risks that come with it.

So, Regulus scrunches his face up and says, "He fancies you. Rodolphus, I mean. Do you know that?"

A pause.

"Yeah," Pandora replies, "I know."

"Fancy him?" Regulus asks.

A longer pause.

"No," Pandora admits. "I care for him very much. Love him, even, just the same as I love you and many people, but…"

"You don't have to explain," Regulus says.

Clearing her throat, Pandora shakes her head. "No, it's okay. I just—I don't really distinguish between different types of love. It's not different to me. Never has been. I just—love. There's no romantic inclination or anything, you know? I would be happy to spend every day with him, but I don't have sex, and I don't have romantic relationships."

Regulus hums quietly. That makes sense, actually. Pandora has always been unbridled in her love, giving all of herself to each and every person that she does love, and there's something so incredibly special about that. Not everyone in this world wants romance or sex, or both, and no one needs that to live a happy, fulfilled life full of love. Pandora is loved by many and loves many in return. That's special all on its own.

"Do you want to spend every day with him?" Regulus asks instead, glancing over at her.

"I'd like to," Pandora murmurs. "I'd be happy to."

"You don't owe him—or anyone else—anything, Pandora," Regulus tells her. "Sex and romance aren't required to spend your life with someone. Talk to him when the time is right and take the chance, if you want. You once told me that we don't gain anything by not trying at all."

"I did say that, didn't I?" Pandora muses.

Regulus' lips twitch faintly. "You did. You were right, too."

"I'll talk to him," Pandora says.

"Alright. If he hurts your feelings, I'll kill him for you."

"I know you will. Thanks."

"Anytime," Regulus assures her, and means it.

Pandora sighs and leans her head over on his shoulder, gazing at her father's grave. "I hope he went peacefully."

Regulus makes a quiet sound of agreement and listens to the birds whistle at each other, still wondering after all this time what they talk about, and he stares at the gravestone before him while hoping the same thing Pandora does.

These days, dying peacefully is a gift.

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Remus frowns at Lily as he gently rubs her temples, her head resting down in his lap, hair spilled out in a scarlet curtain over his thighs. She's worked herself up to a tension headache at this point, her whole body so stiff and strung tight that Remus' muscles ache in sympathy just looking at her.

"I want to see Mary and Bingley," Lily mumbles, eyes closed, expression strained. It's not the first time she has said it; she keeps saying it, like if she says it enough, then she can simply manifest it. "That's all I want, Remus."

"I know," Remus replies quietly. "I think we'll be leaving soon—or those of us who are done here."

"I'm done here. There's nothing for me here."

"I know what you mean."

Remus gets it. He also has no desire to linger in the Hallow for much longer. Along with Lily, he'll be one of the ones leaving sooner rather than later, because he needs to get to his dad and then—and then…

Well, honestly, Remus doesn't know. Or, okay, he sort of does. He knows there are going to be funerals, so many fucking funerals, both in the Hallow and in the districts. He knows that, at least, and he knows he'll be at more than a few. It's a difficult thing to manage, really. With so many dead, it's hard to schedule funerals and such, and a lot of the dead won't even be properly buried. Most of them had to be cremated, simply because the sheer amount of dead outnumber the living that can handle them, and a good majority were so injured that an open-casket funeral wouldn't be able to happen anyway.

So, it's more accurate to say that there will be a whole lot of memorial services to juggle in separate districts, likely with a lot of overlap. Some to go to for courtesy's sake, and some to go to that he actually had connections with. There will be proper memorials for those who died in the battles leading up to the final one as well, individually planned by those who remain to remember them, and Remus will go to those, too.

Dumbledore also wants to talk about a proper mass scale of a memorial for everyone, so the world doesn't forget, or maybe something like that. Remus doesn't really know, or care. He's tired now, no energy left in him to scrounge up the emotional response he should probably be having to these things.

Almost like she senses it, Lily opens her eyes to peer up at him. "How are you doing? You know, with…"

"Ah, yeah, that," Remus mutters, wrinkling his nose as he blows out a deep sigh. She doesn't have to elaborate; he knows exactly what she means. "A part of me… I mean, it's not like I thought that I'd just—feel better, you know? Because I knew I wouldn't. I knew doing what I did to Riddle wasn't going to make everything that happened to me less…of a struggle. Just turning that pain on the person who helped cause it for me was never going to be enough to make it stop hurting, I knew that. I know it's not going to stop. It'll fade, with time, and get easier to handle, but there was nothing hurting Riddle could do for me. I was aware of that, but I still—I wanted…"

"Retribution?" Lily suggests.

Remus swallows. "I guess? I—I thought, maybe, I'd feel some sort of relief. Even a little bit. And I didn't. I don't, and I wish I did. Does that make me a bad person, do you think?"

"I think we're all bad people, in a way, because we live in a really bad world. I don't know if any of us could have ever escaped that," Lily murmurs. "I'm a bad person."

"I don't think you are," Remus says quietly.

Lily exhales deeply through her nose. There are sallow bags beneath her eyes. She looks as tired as he feels. "People are dead because of me. Not just people I've killed, but people I never wanted to die at all. My parents. Petunia. Sybill."

"None of that was your fault," Remus croaks. "I'm as much to blame for your family as you are, if you want to go that route, and in that case, we'll share the burden."

"It's so heavy," Lily whispers thickly.

"Then I'll take some of the weight," Remus tells her, and her eyes film over with tears. He gently brushes his fingers through her hair. "As for Sybill… Lily, Sybill wanted to be a pilot. She didn't want to die, and she was scared, but she *did* want to fly. Dumbledore may have asked her to because he knew she could, but she chose to agree. The weight of asking falls on him, not you. Even Kingsley knows, logically, that you're not at fault, and that you never wanted that to happen. She was your friend. You loved her."

"I know," Lily rasps. "I do know that, and I know he knows that, but we—Remus, we'll never overcome that. She's not here, and the truth is, I had a hand in the lead up to that. I have to carry that now, and—and he has to live with it, too."

"Maybe, with time…" Remus trails off, his chest clenching.

"I don't think so," Lily says softly, and then she blinks rapidly and clears her throat. "And then there's Dorcas. I—I was afraid of her. She…scared me, Remus. I'm so tired of being scared. I don't want to be scared anymore."

"I know, I know, me too," Remus whispers fervently, hunching down to collapse in on himself so he can fold over and press his forehead into hers from upside-down.

"I just want to see Mary and Bingley," Lily chokes out.

Remus nods against her. "You're going to, and then you'll…"

They both stop for a moment, and Remus lifts up to gaze down at her. Lily's mouth is set awkwardly on her face, twisted up, and her eyes are a shimmering green of genuine solemnity. It sits there between them in the silence, an unspoken question.

"I don't know," Lily says, finally. "I think—I mean, I think Mary will want to go home, and I…want to go with her, if she's okay with that. I—I don't want to go back to district twelve."

"Okay," Remus replies as steadily as possible, despite the way something in him wilts. He gets it, though. Her home has collapsed, and there's nothing for her to return to. He can't blame her for not wanting to go back.

Lily bites her lip. "You—you'll be in twelve, right? With your dad, I mean."

"Yeah," Remus mumbles. "He's not… He won't leave that house for good. He basically built it for Mum, and they raised me there. I wouldn't ask him to. I mean, he'll be with me for all the funerals, I think, but when it comes time to settle again, that's where he'll go, and I—I want to be with him for a while. I just—I went so long not getting to be with him, and I want —I only want to—"

"Remus, Remus, stop," Lily cuts in gently. She reaches up to cup his cheek. "You don't have to explain to me, yeah? No matter where we end up, we'll find our way back to each other again. We always do, don't we?"

Remus nods, a lump in his throat. "Yeah, we do."

Two bodies, one heart. They always make it back to each other.

"I just…" Lily hesitates, then swallows. "What about…Sirius?"

"I don't know," Remus whispers, fighting the stinging in his eyes. He doesn't want to be selfish. He really doesn't, but he's so tired of having to be without Sirius. He just—he wants Sirius *with* him, and he can't—he won't dare ask for it. "We've spent so much time apart, and I don't want to do it anymore, but after everything, I can't imagine that he'd want to be away from Regulus and James. Effie, too."

Lily's face softens. "Monty was a good man."

"He really was," Remus agrees, his heart heavy with the loss. In the time spent at the Phoenix, Monty was nothing but kind and comforting to Remus. He cared for him and treated

him with open acceptance, someone important just because of his importance to Sirius, and then beyond that. No one quite had the capacity to love the way Monty did.

"I don't want you to be alone," Lily tells him, her voice tight.

"I won't be," Remus assures her. "I'll have my dad, and—and I'll be back with everyone soon enough."

"You should ask him, Remus," Lily murmurs, thumb sweeping along his jaw, her gaze gentle. "I know you won't, because you like to be all self-sacrificial and such; that's sort of your thing, but I just… I think you've done more than enough sacrificing now. You can at least ask him. You have that freedom."

"I know," Remus admits, "and I also have the freedom not to. I want him to do what's best for him more than I want him with me. I've been without him before. I can do it for a bit longer."

"You shouldn't have to," Lily whispers.

Remus gives her a wan smile and weak half-shrug, lying his face over in her palm. "When have I ever done what I should? It's something, you know. It's not nothing, and that's enough."

Lily clicks her tongue, a wrinkle forming between her eyebrows, a protest clearly perched on her lips, but she never gets to say anything before a knock on the door grabs both of their attention. They swivel their heads in unison to see Sirius poke his own inside, blinking at them.

"Speak of the devil," Lily mutters, giving Remus a pointed look before she pushes herself up.

"Talking about me?" Sirius asks as he steps in the room, then he pauses and gestures towards the door. "Um, I—I don't want to intrude, or interrupt. I can come back if—"

"No, you're fine," Lily tells him, rolling away from Remus to get to her feet. She pauses long enough to hold his head still and lean over to kiss him, then lets go and approaches Sirius with a tired smile. "I want to go check on Poppy and see if I can help her a bit more before the meeting anyway. We still have a few hours. How are James and Effie?"

"I coaxed Effie and James out of bed to eat and get showers. Effie's out and asleep again, but James' leg was bothering him, so he said he needed to take a walk. Pretty sure he's going to find Regulus and try to spend some time with him before the meeting. You're going, right?"

"I'm glad to hear they're okay, or as okay as they can be, and yes, I'm going. I'll meet you two there, yeah?"

"Yeah, Lil, of course," Sirius mumbles, ducking down to let her kiss his cheek as she wraps him in a hug. He returns the favor with no enthusiasm, his face blank over her shoulder.

Lily slips out after shutting the door gently—banged doors are a legitimate issue for a lot of people these days. Sirius looks at Remus, and his face seems to just *sag.* His whole body droops, and he miserably shuffles over to plop down next to Remus, heaving out a deep sigh as he presses his face into Remus' shoulder. He seems to seek more, starved for closeness, wanting to inch his way right onto Remus, or perhaps into him, his face rubbing against Remus' shoulder as he presses closer and closer, trying to make it to the crook of his neck.

"Okay, hey, come on," Remus urges softly, scooting back on the bed, entirely unsurprised when Sirius follows like there's a thread between them, tugging him along. Remus barely even gets situated where he's going before Sirius is crawling right on top of him and going limp, blanketing Remus' body with his own, face buried into the curve of Remus' throat. Remus grunts a little, straining to maneuver them, moving Sirius around like a puppet before reaching up to card his fingers through Sirius' hair, over and over and over.

They stay like that for a long time in complete silence, just breathing. The weight of Sirius on top of him makes Remus feel ridiculously secure, like he can't go anywhere, and when there's no place he'd rather be, it's the biggest comfort he has.

Eventually, at some point, Sirius speaks, his words muffled into Remus' skin. All he says is, "We should have run away."

Remus swallows and replies, "We were never going to."

"Yeah, I know," Sirius croaks. He turns his head a little so Remus can hear him better. "Well, here we are. We made it through, and our everything still feels so far away."

"Closer than we've ever been, though," Remus murmurs.

"I, um…" Sirius goes quiet for a long moment, then lifts his head to peer down at Remus, the thin skin on his bottom lip bitten and peeled away from where he's been worrying at it with his teeth. "I know you're going back to district twelve with Lyall. After the funerals, I mean. And I—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in calmly, "it's okay. I'm not going to—I just—I get it, yeah? I know you'll want to stay in district six with James, Regulus, and Effie. That's *okay.* That's—"

"I want to come with you," Sirius blurts out, his breath catching as his eyes grow shiny. His lips tremble as Remus stares up at him. "Remus, I want to stay with you."

Remus blinks, genuinely startled, though maybe he shouldn't be. Sirius always manages to surprise him, always manages to do the very last thing that Remus expects. In all honesty, this isn't something Remus saw coming, so his mind is just blank for a long moment, trying to process that.

This doesn't go over well with Sirius, who needs exactly five seconds before he starts to get splotchy, wilting in visible dejection and doing his absolute best not to show it.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Sirius chokes out. "That's not—I don't mean to just—just invite myself. That's—that was presumptuous of me, wasn't it? You want time alone with your dad. That's —"

"Sirius, sweetheart, no," Remus says quickly, hands flying up to frame his face as he tries to turn it away. "That's not it at all. Of course you can come; of course you're welcome with us. It's not even a question, and I—I would love to have you. My dad would, too. I want you, okay? I just—I thought you'd…"

"I *can't,"* Sirius says, practically gasping. "Remus, I can't stay with them. Regulus—it'll get bad again. It's—I can feel it, like before, because I—I can't take care of him, and I feel like I have to, like I need to, and I can't handle hating myself for not being able to—and it's not his fault, it's not, but I—I—"

"Sirius," Remus tries, but Sirius isn't done babbling.

"And *James,"* Sirius continues. "I don't want to leave him after Monty, I don't, except he'll—he'll just fall back on taking care of me, focus all of his energy into me and his mum instead of taking care of himself, because I can't hold it together right now, and—and we always trade out on one of us keeping it together for the other, but neither of us can, and he'll do it for me, he will, and I can't—I won't do that to him, Remus."

Remus strokes Sirius' cheeks as his tears fall, trying so hard to soothe him, but Sirius is falling apart in slow motion, his chest stuttering on his hiccuping sobs, stumbling over his words, so much spilling out of him at once.

"I need to be there for them, and I can't, and it'll kill me. I'll slip away, and I don't want to slip away anymore," Sirius rasps, his face twisting. "I can't do it. I can't be there for them this time, and it's wrong, it's fucked up, but I'm so tired. I'm so—I just—I'd die for them, but no one's dying anymore, so I can't, and they need me, they need me to live, and I have to figure out how, because I don't know, I don't—"

"Sirius—"

"I don't know, Remus. I don't know, because there's so much fucking *guilt.* I have so much guilt; it's *in* me, and I—I was there when Marlene—if we'd have been swapped, if I'd walked where she did, she'd still be here, and I—I was supposed to look out for her, but I forgot the fucking landmines, and she's not—I'm here, and she's not, and I can't—I can't—"

Remus tugs Sirius down to muffle the harrowing sound of sobs that spill out of him, the chest-heaving, gut-wrenching sort of sobs that travel through his whole body. He spills hot tears into Remus' throat, and Remus holds him.

Some part of Remus knew to expect this, as much as he wished he didn't have to. The survivor's guilt. They all have it now in various ways, met with death on such a mass scale like this, an event so many went into that so many didn't come out of, and why did some make it out when others didn't? That's the question. *Why me? Why not them?*

The thing is, there's no clear answer for that. There's no true reason for death, and maybe there's no true reason for life. People live, and then people die. It's all a matter of how and when. That doesn't make the questions easier to handle.

For Sirius, it's especially hard-hitting, in that he was *right there* when he lost a friend. It could have easily been him, if they'd been three steps to the right. Three steps, and it'd be Marlene here asking why. She wouldn't get an answer, either.

This is an answer no one gets.

"Regulus knows already," Sirius says eventually, once he's settled down enough to speak. "He was—so fucking good about it. I don't know, like, supportive?"

"Everyone who loves you only wants you to do whatever you need to so you're okay, Sirius," Remus murmurs.

Sirius makes a quiet sound. "I—I haven't told James and Effie. I don't—I'm not sure how. I don't want to hurt them."

"They love you, too, you know," Remus reminds him, sweeping his hand up and down Sirius' back. "It's not like you're going to be gone forever, for one thing, and you're not just—up and leaving immediately. We'll stay in six for a little while, I think. And hey, Lily will be there even when you and I go."

"Yeah?" Sirius whispers.

Remus *mhms.* "Yeah. She thinks Mary will want to go back, and she wants to be there with her. It's—it's just one of those things, really. She'll be there, and I'll be in twelve, but that doesn't change that she's my best friend, and I'm hers. It's not going to change that for you and James. We just—sometimes, life takes us all in different directions."

"I hate it," Sirius mumbles fretfully. "I hate how much I need it. Because I really do need it, Remus. I don't want to leave them, I don't want them to be alone—"

"They're not," Remus insists firmly. "For one thing, like I said, Lily will be there, and so will Mary, but they'll all have each other, too. And you're not going to just disappear off the face of the earth. We'll work out the details, but I know we'll all stay in contact, and we *are* going back."

Sirius sniffles. "Yeah, okay. That's—yeah. Right. Just—for right now, what I need is to be with you. I want—that's what I want. Because we'll—we can take care of each other and figure this out together, one day at a time."

"Yeah, sweetheart," Remus says, tipping his face down to bury it in Sirius' hair, breathing him in. "That's what we'll do."

And so, that's what they'll do. It won't be everything, not quite yet, but they're closer than ever before. For now, something is enough.

It always has been.

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Regulus has his head between his knees, hyperventilating, when James finds him. He's not—he isn't supposed to find him; Regulus has gone to desperate lengths not to be found.

It wasn't enough to make Riddle scream. Barty is still gone. Regulus knew revenge wouldn't solve anything; what hurts still hurts, but that doesn't mean he doesn't wish it had given him a little more room to breathe. These days, breathing is so fucking hard, like he's drowning all the time.

James makes a small sound and moves over to sink down on the floor next to Regulus with the help of his cane, getting as close as he can without touching. Regulus chokes out a harsh sound in the back of his throat and wants to lean away, and wants to lean closer, and wants Barty to be alive.

"Oh, love, I'm sorry," James whispers. "I'm so sorry. Hey, come on, breathe with me, yeah?"

Regulus does breathe with him, because breathing is easier when there's a guide to follow, and James is doing it oh so carefully, oh so steadily. Regulus gasps for air, chest stuttering, and he can't quite follow it over the ringing in his ears, so he reaches out and puts his hand against James' chest to feel it rise and fall beneath his palm. He matches it, slowly, letting James' heartbeat beneath his fingers soothe him.

Even when breathing better, Barty is still gone, and what hurts still hurts. He's gone, and it hurts. It hurts so fucking much.

"I loved him," Regulus rasps, looking at James and feeling sick with the love he had, and still has, for another man. Because it was never a love with a name for either of them, but that was still enough for both of them, and now he's doing it all alone. "Never like you. Not the way I love you, but it was love."

"I know," James says softly, looking so sad.

"You hated him," Regulus mumbles. "You were jealous, and you never even had a reason to be. He was never you, and I was never, to him, what you are to me, and what I am to you. He

was just Barty. He was just Barty, and he was mine. He was the only thing that was just mine, and he's gone. He's gone, James. He was just Barty, and he's gone. He was—he was just—"

James wraps his fingers around Regulus' wrist, expression twisted with sympathetic grief. "Reg, even if you did love him as you love me, I would never wish for this. I would never be angry at you for how you feel."

"I wish I did love him that way," Regulus confesses, "because it would have been easier than this. It would have been easier to define how losing him feels, but it's not. James, it's *not."*

"Does it need to be defined?" James asks. "You two never really had a definition, did you? Sometimes people are just important to each other, and that's all that matters. Your grief is valid, regardless of how the relationship worked; you lost him, and it hurts. That's the only definition you need."

"I *felt* him die," Regulus chokes out, and he can't help it, can't stop himself from scooting closer to James and curling into the willing give of his warmth, pressing into the curve of his body and hiding against his shoulder.

"I know," James whispers, stroking his hair. "I'm so sorry, Regulus. I'm sorry I haven't been here for you. I'm—"

"Stop it," Regulus cuts in, gagging almost, and James stops.

They both stop for a while, just breathing together. It's quiet out, and early, the whole world seeming solemn and still. It's still been three days since the end of the war, and Regulus wonders when they'll stop measuring the passage of time that way. He has a stupid meeting to go to later, which seems laughable and ridiculous in the face of war, as all things do. How he spends all his time—well, it's hiding, mostly. He hides a lot.

Regulus knows how to go without being found, which is why it's hard to work out how James located him to start with. See, Regulus has been hiding in the dungeons, built below a body of murky, black water that can be seen rippling out past windows. It's the last place anyone would expect him to be, considering his issues with water and such, but something about

bodies of water that can't reach him comforts him. At times, he'll put his hand against the glass and feel the muted, muffled waves rocking against the pane upon his palm, and he'll feel safer in that moment than he ever has.

There are a lot of things for Regulus to be upset about, now. He's pulled into too many directions between it all. It'll hit him out of nowhere sometimes; he'll be worried about Sirius, and then he'll be smothering sobs about Monty; he'll be fretting about James, and then he'll be having a panic attack about the fact that Barty isn't here anymore. All of it's a jumbled mess within him, and he can't sort any of it out.

He shuts down sometimes, without meaning to. Has to go through the motions, because he doesn't feel anything at all. Has to let the world move him around like a puppet, because he doesn't feel quite human. Has to work to breathe when it's supposed to be instinctive, because he's pretty sure there's something dead inside him that doesn't get the point behind the very first step to living; breathing, that very first step, and he's so much of a fuck-up that he fails at that, too.

Regulus thinks they're all struggling like this right now. He knows, logically, that grief is unforgiving and takes this heavy toll on them all. He understands that he can't escape it, or avoid it, but it feels simultaneously as if he can't handle it. He will handle it, just as they all will, because they have no choice.

This is life, this is what it is to live, just the constant repetition of having to figure out how to. Trying and failing over and over, and experiencing every lesson learned and every step taken along the way. Maybe there's hope to be found in that, but it's not a hope any of them can feel right now.

"I want to go home," Regulus croaks.

"Me too," James whispers, "but I'm scared of what we won't find when we get there. I think there's a part of us that's always going to be searching."

"Monty," Regulus breathes out, and James turns his face further into Regulus' hair. He makes a small, hurt sound that Regulus feels catch on the inside of his ribs, constricting.

Oh, Monty. Monty, Monty, Monty. James' father, not Regulus', but the epitome of what a father is supposed to be. Regulus loved Monty and never found the words to tell him. He'll always wish he did. He'll always regret that he didn't, because Monty deserved so much love, all of it in the world, just as he shared his love with the whole world. A sense of comfort to anyone who needed it. Orion wasn't a fraction the man Monty was and never once made Regulus feel safe and loved the way Monty managed to, and yet they're both dead anyway, and yet Regulus misses them both anyway. Monty did more for him, though, and how fucked up is that? The fear of his father sometimes stole Regulus' breath, and Monty taught him breathing exercises. Maybe that's why breathing is so hard, because Monty helped him better learn how to, and now he's gone.

"What do I do now?" James chokes out. "Who am I supposed to be, without him? I—I don't—I can't—"

"I don't know. I'm sorry, I don't know," Regulus confesses helplessly, brokenly, because he never knows what to say, never has the answers, and he aches with his inadequacy.

"Just—just tell me we're going to make it." James presses into him harder and holds him tighter. "We're going to make it, right? We always do, so somehow we will again, won't we?"

Regulus doesn't know that either—no one knows that, really, because people make it, or they don't, and it's something you can only find out once it's done—but he still buries his fingers in James' hair and says, "We will, James. We'll make it."

"I don't know if you want me right now," James rasps, his voice thick. "Mum is—she's asleep right now, and I just—I wanted you. All I want is you. I'm sorry. I'm—I don't know if you want to be alone, or if it's okay that I'm here—"

"I want you," Regulus says softly, hands slipping down to frame his face, thumbing at the corners of his eyes, missing his glasses. James raises his head, those lovely burnt umber of his eyes murky with tears, a beautiful melancholy. Regulus flicks his gaze all over James' face, drinking him in, drowning in the comfort of him. "I want you no matter what, through anything, wherever we are. At all times, baby, at all times."

James tips forward and presses their foreheads together, his voice a mere breath full of shame when he says, "I don't know who I am anymore. I don't recognize myself, and I said there are

some fundamental things that can't be changed, some things that can't be taken from us, but I think I was wrong. I hadn't made it here yet, and I was wrong. Too much has changed, and too much has been taken, and what's left?"

"We are," Regulus murmurs, trying so very hard for James, as James has always done for him, for everyone, for the whole world. He strokes James' cheeks. "We're here, aren't we? We're here, and we're going to make it, right?"

James makes a small noise again and rocks his forehead against Regulus', fists clenched in the sides of Regulus' shirt down by his hips, clinging for dear life.

"James," Regulus prompts, shaking with it, needing to hear it from him as much as James needed it in reverse. They're both clinging to each other now in grief, and it's ugly, ugly, ugly; and it's human; and it's pain; and it's love.

"Yeah, love," James chokes out, like he's being strangled by it, like he isn't sure it's the truth and he still struggles to lie. He whimpers. "Yeah, we're going to make it."

The fact of the matter is, they don't know, and so maybe all they have is hope. There's not very much of that to be found here, but they have found each other, and that's what they cling to. It's not enough to take away the pain, and maybe Regulus was a fool to think it could be. Here they are, as close as they can get, yet here they are, as they've always been.

Doomed to be a great, big tragedy.

Chapter End Notes

so, that was sad :(

alright, starting from the top!

sirius and regulus. did i cry writing that scene? yes, yes i did. the war tore them apart just like the arena did. 😭 OH IM SO UPSET. however, there was no other way this could have gone. some people won't like it, and i get why, but. well, the truth is, sirius

and regulus are extremely unhealthy, sirius even more so than regulus in some cases, and they NEED this. like, their codependency is, ah, not good, especially when it comes to their current state. just. the way this story started with them being distant because they were torn apart and them going about it all wrong, and now they're torn apart again, but they're going to try to go about it right and heal and GROW. god, they are so special to me. if you doubt me for any specific relationship/story in this fic, don't you DARE doubt me about these two. i promise you, on this, when it comes to them, you can trust me.

next! lily... gah, that whole scene with dorcas was fucking BRUTAL. clearly, ah, dorcas isn't doing well. she will not be doing well for...a while. she's. she's in a very bad spot, as you can tell. just the fact that lily tried with her and got scared... fucking awful. like, lily just wanted to help. :(

dorcas and minerva. yikes. yeah, so, dorcas is a bit unstable at the moment. hell hath no fury like—well, her. and just, like, how steady minerva was, and that moment where she's like "will it grant you peace, will it grant me peace?" because they're both hurting. just. FUCK. and dorcas pulling the trigger... imagine if she hadn't shot at lily... GAHHH. she is not okay, but i mean, considering everything, that's to be expected. and just like, the way she's still waiting on marlene. oh i wanna curl into a ball and CRY

speaking of crying, james and effie make me BAWL. james struggling with his grief...yeah, uh, that. that continues for a while, but it does get better! there's a conversation in chapter 70 he has with effie that made me cry, like actual tears, and i think that's the first time that i ever cried writing that didn't have to do with siblings. but anyway, just the way that sirius is there for them, and regulus tries to be, and how sirius helped james breathe through the first night after he lost his dad. and then the warm spot on the bed. god, it hurts so bad

pandora and regulus. god, how fucked is that? pandora missed her dad by fifteen days. that's so sad. im so sad. but regulus being there to comfort her 😭 he's the one who went, he's the one who didn't want her to be alone, he's the one who COMFORTED HER. oh, i feel ill, he has truly grown so much. also, yes, pandora is aroace! she finally told me, because i genuinely had no idea until this scene btw. i had no idea in this fic, because she was being all secretive about it and letting people flirt with her, the sneaky little shit. but her wanting to spend her life with rodolphus 😭😭😭 REGULUS GIVING HER OWN ADVICE THEN THREATENING RODOLPHUS FOR HER AND SHE JUST SAYS THANKS OH I LOVE THEM <3

remus and lily my beloveds <3 just them being their for each other. and remus not wanting to ask sirius to stay with him for a bit in district twelve. oh, that made me so sad, because he was so ready to settle for being apart from sirius again if that's what sirius needed, because what remus needs is to be with his dad. and just. like, it wasn't that he thought sirius wouldn't need him, it was that he thought sirius wouldn't let that be a priority over james and regulus needing HIM to stay instead of going with remus. like, sirius has rarely, if ever, put himself first, just like remus hasn't, and it's a step towards healing that they're doing that now, by staying together. they're so special to me.

and then you've got james and regulus, who are both struggling so much right now. oh, they make me ache, they really do. like, they're both so hurt and trying for each other, but it's hard, so all they can really do is, like, cling to each other in grief. they can't take away each other's pain, especially when they share so much of it, but that's all they want to do. :(

rest assured, as rough as things seem, they DO get better. i know that seems hard to conceptualize at this particular moment, but like. this was a bit of a beautiful journey for me, exploring grief and how it fluctuates for people and with time, and how healing happens etc etc. we'll get there, i promise.

The Phoenix Tree

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death/violence/murder/torture
-references to past child death
-references to past war/warzones
-references to past biological warfare
-a brief vomit mention (no one does)
-depictions of blood
-depictions of violence
-depictions of grief
-death/murder

yes, someone dies in this chapter. ill put a little spoiler in the end notes for those who need to check.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aberforth heaves a sigh when he steps out of his temporary room to find Albus waiting on the other side of the door. Oh, so they're finally doing this, then.

"Done avoiding me, are you?" Aberforth asks gruffly.

"I've been busy," is Albus' stiff reply. "Are you coming to the meeting?"

Aberforth eyes him. "Suppose I am, yeah."

"Very well," Albus says, clipped, then turns and starts to sweep off without another word.

Aberforth stares after him for a bit, his mind blank, because Albus has never… Well, frankly, Aberforth can't recall a time that Albus was ever rude, or curt, or cold. Not to Aberforth, for sure. Make no mistake, Albus has patience saints would envy, but this translates into how he has always responded to his anger; Albus can hold a grudge like no one else in the world, even worse than Aberforth himself. You need only look at the war he dedicated most of his life to to be sure of that, and this is perhaps a trait that Aberforth shares with him, but the truth is, Albus is better at it than Aberforth by far.

Grunting, Aberforth calls out, "Well, it's a damn good thing I wasn't expecting anything different out of you!"

Instantly, Albus stops. When he turns around, it's a slow pivot that makes the blaze of his eyes stick out stark in Aberforth's mind. Maybe if they were years younger, back when Aberforth wasn't yet a grown man, the look in Albus' eyes would make Aberforth want to shrink down in his own skin and shrivel up from the dread of Albus being angry at him. Aberforth isn't years younger, though, and he doesn't care one bit.

"Do elaborate, Aberforth, I'm *begging* you," Albus bites out, speaking harshly in the way he only does when Aberforth brings Grindelwald up to him.

This is—hm.

Yes, okay, Albus is very angry at him. Aberforth has no idea why. They haven't spoken, even when Albus arrived once the war was over. Aberforth has hardly spoken to anyone, due to his decision to help with body transport, ensuring that those from districts who died are returned safely back to their home districts. He felt better by the idea that he could oversee that and make sure it was done correctly, no mixups, keeping his eye for detail as a mayor who cares about the people in the districts, dead or alive. *His* district primarily, yes, but he can just as easily spare that level of concern for all the rest.

When it comes to the dead, it's easy for the living to let things slip through the cracks, particularly when it's not anyone dead they care about. So, he has chosen to be the one who cares.

Aberforth is very sure that most people think he's a crazy old man. There are stares and whispers wherever he goes, and he's not entirely sure why. He doesn't really know much at

all, if he's honest. Hell, he didn't even know the war was over until Poppy burst in and told everyone that Riddle was dead and the fighting had stopped. He was in the back courtyard with the others abducted during the war, narrowly escaping being executed on live broadcast by Albus' secret informant, who turned out to be the Head Auror. A damn strong player to have in his back pocket, as it turns out.

Aberforth doesn't know much about how it all went down. He's heard whispers about the boy, so he knows he's involved and hopes, like a foolish old man, that he's doing alright wherever he is at the moment. There have been whispers about Remus Lupin and Dorcas Meadowes as well, but he knows no other details. He's heard something about Hallow government officials and Riddle killing his own people; he's heard his own name thrown around here and there for some reason, along with Albus', but he stopped paying attention and focused on doing what he could where he could.

He did hear of Albus' arrival and actually attempted to see him, only to be…refused. Turned away. *Dismissed.* Aberforth didn't appreciate his visceral and unexpected reaction to that; the shock of it, followed quickly by hurt, which he finds very distasteful. What else was he expecting? Even when the war is over, everything involved with it—even the aftermath—is Albus' priority before everything else.

"Don't act like you don't know, Albus," Aberforth tells him, feeling his molars grind together. "You're focused on what comes next, because you've decided that's your responsibility. You have the Hallow all but resting in your palm; no, the whole world, now. Here you are, the new Master, it seems. You just don't know how to retire, do you?"

Albus stares at him, gaze sharp, and then he says, "I am *no one's* Master, nor do I wish to be. Truly, how small-minded are you? It's the third day following the final battle, and people want a better world that takes time. We can't do it overnight, because we have to do *this* first."

"We?" Aberforth gives a rusty chuckle. "No, not *we.* You have no part of this, in case it escaped your notice. You come here, and you hide behind your orders, never giving them directly. You let everyone bring you information and direct them in what to do, but you do nothing yourself. You don't observe the fallout from the very war you brought here."

"Because I *can't!"* Albus bursts out. "You think I could be the new leader people look to, even if I wanted to? Don't be foolish, Aberforth. No one will follow me."

Aberforth scoffs. "The Aurors—"

"The Aurors follow the Head Auror," Albus snaps, "who takes the advice I give him on what to do. They will not follow me. The district volunteers follow Kingsley and you, it seems. The people that came from the Phoenix follow Minerva, as do most of the Hallow sympathizers. I can't give direct orders, because I lost all credibility as a leader during the war."

"You—" Aberforth blinks. "What? Why?"

"Because of *you,"* Albus hisses. "And still, you treat me this way. And still, you—"

"Because of me?" Aberforth snaps up straight, anger crawling sticky and abrasive down his spine. "You're angry with me because they recognized you for the leader you are?"

"Aberforth, I'm not angry about my leadership. I don't *care* about my leadership. It is a blessing in disguise, and the moment a plan is set in motion to properly honor those lost in the war, as well as begin the wheel turning on a better world for all, I'm *done.* I'm stepping back, because I did what I intended to do, and I'm no longer of use to anyone." Albus shakes his head. "No, I'm *angry* because you nearly died, and I think you wanted to, all in the name of teaching me a lesson. Didn't you? All in the name of punishing me, you said."

Aberforth doesn't react for a moment, his mind turning over with this new and startling information. He doesn't—get it. He doesn't understand. Albus not caring about the war, even once it's over; Albus not caring about his leadership, or how he can't contribute to the better world he was aiming for in the first place, from the very start—it doesn't make sense. Aberforth isn't sure how to wrap his mind around that.

Where will he go?

Home, says a soft, small voice in Aberforth's head that sounds so dreadfully like Ariana. *Ask him to come home.*

Aberforth's pride will not allow for such a thing. Furthermore, district six is home to Aberforth, and that hasn't been Albus' home in some time. Would he even want to go back?

In the next second, Aberforth feels his agitation spike as he realizes the reason Albus is done. He said it, just now. He has no choice but to *be* done. The impact of the war has to fall on someone, and for some reason, people have decided it falls on Albus. Fitting, Aberforth thinks. He may not be all to blame, but it's adequate karma.

But of course it's forced. Of course Albus didn't choose this; he never actively chose this, or anything besides righting his own mistakes and avenging someone who never would have wanted him to, if it cost the world this much. Of course it was the war for Albus from beginning to end. Not anyone else. Not his own brother, and Aberforth *hates* the disappointment that courses through him when he knew that already. He's known that since the day Albus walked out the door.

"Yes," Aberforth declares harshly. "A part of me hoped you'd have to lose me, too. Because here you are, at the end of it all, and what have you learned? What matters to you now, Albus?"

"You and Ariana are the *only* things in this world that have *ever* mattered to me!" Albus bellows. "You two mattered to me more than *myself.* If you didn't, Gellert would still be alive! If you didn't, I would have been selfish enough to let him live and stay with him! How *dare* you even—"

"If you expect me to praise you for killing the man who killed our sister, because of *you—"*

"That's not all he was! He—he *loved* me, Aberforth! He—"

"I don't care!" Aberforth shouts. "I don't give a damn about your fucked up love story with our sister's murderer, Albus! The fact that you even came to love him to begin with *sickens* me, let alone that you continued to *after* he killed Ariana, and still do to this day!"

"I can't *help* it," Albus chokes out. "I didn't mean to."

"But you did," Aberforth says coldly. "You do."

Albus releases a punched-out breath. "Yes. *Yes,* I did then, and I still do, and for as long as I am breathing, I will always love him—and it is my greatest burden. Do not think yourself above such a burden. You are just as capable as I or anyone of loving someone you do everything in your power not to love."

"I am above it," Aberforth spits out. "I've never done it."

"Do you not love me?" Albus asks, quiet now, and Aberforth feels a lurch in his stomach as he meets his brother's eyes and realizes, like the gut-punch of loss, that Albus is right.

Albus is as responsible for Ariana's death as everyone else involved. He is responsible for so much death, so much loss, so much of this war that tore this world apart—and Aberforth loves him still, helplessly, powerlessly. He loves him as he has always loved him, and hates him doubly as much.

"You're my brother," Aberforth croaks.

"Gellert was my soul," Albus replies. "The only thing he wasn't was my little sister and my little brother. That is why he's dead and I'm here now, without him, and you still wish to punish me. You *can't* punish me more than I already punished myself the night I plunged a sword into his heart."

"You can't expect me to pity you for that."

"I don't. I don't ask for your pity, or even your understanding, but I can't take what you throw at me any longer. I'm done with it, Aberforth. I'm done with you."

Aberforth firms his jaw. "Haven't you always been? You were done the day you left me behind."

"Do not *lie,"* Albus snaps, drawing to full height. "You know that's a lie. You—" Albus stops, his expression twitching before it crumbles, his eyes growing wet. "Between us, I was never the bad brother."

"Oh, so it's me, is it?" Aberforth asks. "I never *left—"*

"Exactly!" Albus cuts in explosively. "You wouldn't *leave.* Yes, you asked me to stay, but did I not beg you to come with me? Did I not give you every available opportunity to join me? Did I not offer you ways to contact me? I gave you a phone; you had it for *years,* and you never called, not once, not until you needed me, and I was *there.* The instant you called, I was there. I carried that phone on me for years, every day you didn't call, just in case you did—and, when you did, I answered *instantly.* I tried for you, with you, tried everything in every way I knew how, and it still wasn't good enough. Nothing I have done was ever good enough for you. What about the fact that I needed you, Aberforth? I needed you, and you refused to leave."

"I couldn't," Aberforth retorts sharply. "Unlike you, I wasn't going to leave Ariana. I had to watch over her."

"Ariana has been dead for fifty-two years," Albus says, holding his gaze. "All you did was watch wood."

Aberforth flinches, feeling that like a slap, his breath going short in his chest. It feels like he's sipping in acid, as if Albus has exhaled it with his words, and Aberforth can't escape the necessity of breathing it in. It burns the inside of his lungs.

Albus' lips tremble around words he can't seem to bring himself to say, and then he closes his eyes. He breathes in, then he breathes out. "Rarely does life go as we plan, and not all of that is my fault. You place the blame on me for this war, but the truth is… It was bigger than us. It was always bigger than us, or so many people wouldn't have been willing to die for it. They never needed my reasons; they only needed their own. They only needed the fact that the war could give us all a chance at a better world, and now it can. I'm simply the person who helped make that possible, even when it required the worst decisions no one should have to make."

"So, why did you?" Aberforth rasps.

"Someone had to, and I took that burden with the intention of making up for past mistakes," Albus whispers. "That's the truth, Aberforth. I did what needed to be done, and I am not the evil brother you have made me out to be. Evil doesn't know love, not really, and you are the only thing I have left in this world that I love at all. For you to—to try to remove yourself from it, to hope that I go untethered from that love, and have to lose it after losing every other source—I can't forgive that."

Aberforth feels oddly weak all over, a sinking sensation slipping through him, feeling like a ship cast out at sea with no anchor. His hands are shaking. There's a sour coating in his mouth; it tastes of regret. *Wait,* Aberforth thinks. *Please wait—*

"After Ariana died, after I killed Gellert, the war was never my priority," Albus says softly. "You were. The world is going to be a better place, and you're going to be safe in it. That's all I ever wanted, really. So, you can go home now."

"Albus," Aberforth whispers.

"Go home, Abby," Albus murmurs, gazing at him for a moment longer, something irrevocably and unwaveringly sad there in his blue eyes, and then he turns around.

"Wait, Albus, just—" Aberforth chokes on it, chokes on his pride, chokes on that tangled, writhing knot of contradictory love and hate right in the center of his chest. Albus stops and turns back, regarding him with his eyebrows furrowed. Aberforth nearly croaks like a damn frog trying to force the words out of his closed-up throat. It's a fight, a war on its own, just for him to say, strangled and thick, "Come with me."

Albus stares at him. "I just said—"

"I know what you just said," Aberforth interrupts, his voice low and sullen. "I don't really care about what you can't forgive. I didn't die, did I? Still here, against all odds, and there's

plenty I can't forgive you for, but I still want you to come home anyway. I can live with that, if you can."

"You always were as stubborn as your goats," Albus mutters, huffing out a weak laugh as he shakes his head, then he sighs and tilts his head back, staring up at the high ceilings of the castle, lips pursed beyond his stupid beard.

"Albus." Aberforth waits for Albus to tip his head to the side, peering at him over his glasses, then his shoulders slump. He is old and world-weary. All the fight goes out of him like this, here and now, when Albus is ready to walk away from him yet again. Aberforth doesn't want him to now any more than he did the first time. "Just come home. You should see how much Ariana has grown."

The dead sister card is a little underhanded, admittedly, but Aberforth knows a thing or two about manipulation tactics. He'd have to. Albus is his older brother, after all. He knows it works the moment Albus' face softens, and it feels like there's a very old, very quiet *pop* in Aberforth's chest, like a frayed rope hanging by a single thread just snapped. He can breathe deeper than he has in over fifty years, suddenly, and it makes him oddly dizzy. He's so lightheaded from the relief that he thinks, for just a moment, that he should apologize. When he exhales next, it's with the knowledge that he never, ever will.

"Alright," Albus agrees, finally. "I have a few things to take care of, and that meeting, and then I'm passing the torch, as that saying goes. After that, we'll go home."

That's what it takes. Over fifty years, a war, a complete lack of forgiveness, and a persistent love in spite of that—and they finally agree to have a home again.

At this moment, all Aberforth can think about is that Ariana would be so proud of them both.

~•~

"Doing okay, Reggie?" Sirius asks quietly as he sinks down into the chair next to Regulus, the room set in a low murmur as everyone arrives and takes their seats.

Regulus glances at him and lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug, a lazy and drained motion. His eyes are so—they're so fucking haunted right now. It makes Sirius want to crawl right out of his skin. He wants to help him. He can barely look at him.

"Tired," is all Regulus says, even though they both know it's more than that. Regulus clears his throat. "You?"

"Ready to go home," Sirius admits. He hates it here in the Hallow, always has, and that hasn't changed even with the war finally over. "Listen, I—I don't—I know that I'm—"

"Sirius," Regulus mutters, frowning at him.

"I—I know I'm not being here for you like I should," Sirius says, strained. "I just want you to know you can talk to me. You can tell me—anything, okay? Even if—even though I don't know what to say back. I'll listen. That's all I've got, really, and if—if that can be enough, for now, then—"

"You're doing enough," Regulus cuts in, and Sirius snaps his mouth shut. "You're doing what you can, and that's enough. Didn't you tell me that once?"

Sirius swallows, then he nods.

Regulus nods back. "It doesn't just apply to me, and—" He halts, then drops his gaze, looking weary. "Look, um, I don't really—I don't want to talk about…anything right now, if I'm honest. I could tell you that I can't sleep, and I could tell you that I miss Barty, and I could tell you that I feel lost, but you already know all that, and you can't fix that. There's nothing you or anyone can do. This is just…what it is."

But you're my little brother, Sirius thinks. *Always my little brother. I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to make sure no one ever, ever hurts you. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure you're safe.*

"Alright," Albus calls quietly, gathering everyone's attention as he sits down, "I believe that's everyone who's coming."

Sirius looks around the table, not too terribly surprised to see less people here than Albus would probably prefer. Kingsley is sitting on the other side of the table, as far away from Lily as he can get, with Minerva sitting between them, and Remus sits right beside her, across from Sirius. Their ankles are locked under the table. Regulus sits on the other side of Sirius, and next to him is Filius, with Slughorn on the end. At the head of the table right next to Sirius is Albus, naturally, though to his left is Aberforth, sitting closest to Remus.

"I want to be efficient about this," Albus states calmly. "I know many of you, and many others, have only the desire to go home. I know that everyone needs this time to grieve those that were lost. Regardless, everyone here today—and some that aren't with us now—has every right and more to discuss the matter of how to properly memorialize the losses, as well as what the next steps are for the state of the world."

Sirius already doesn't like where this is going. Maybe it's selfish of him, but he doesn't want to have an opinion. He doesn't want to have any say in this. He just wants this all to be over and done with. Let the world figure itself out, or let other people handle it. He doesn't want to be here anymore.

"I think first, we should go over the ideas for a memorial," Albus murmurs. "Many people here now—and many people who are not here—have lost someone they love to this war, or to the hunger games, or to the neglect of those in a position of power that were meant to take care of them. I think it's important to honor these people, and I think it's important that what has taken place stands the test of time and isn't forgotten. This will one day be history, but I believe we all agree that it shouldn't be repeated."

"Not everyone is going to want their loved ones memorialized, at least not in the Hallow," Regulus says stiffly.

Albus inclines his head. "I understand that, and I respect that. For that reason, I would suggest an annual memorial video in place of the hunger games. Those that wish to partake would be allowed to give interviews and talk about their loved ones, or even their own experiences, and approximate numbers of those lost will be released, rather than names,

unless those who remain *want* the name released. It would be entirely optional. No one would be forced to do anything."

"Realistically, that's a good idea," Filius admits carefully, clearing his throat. "We can't simply brush the past under the rug. The hunger games *did* happen, and so did this war. People need to remember that, and people need to remember why it should never happen again."

"And what about future generations?" Lily snaps. "Say I have children someday and they learn Mummy is a murderer. What do I do with that? What if I want them to grow up in a world they don't have to be afraid of?"

Sirius' stomach squirms. She…makes a good point, to be fair. In truth, Sirius hasn't given much thought to children, and likely won't for some time, but what if…? He flicks his gaze to Remus, finding him in a similar state of alarm. They stare at each other, a little wide-eyed, because neither of them have even considered being parents someday.

Remus raises his eyebrows and Sirius chokes out, "For fuck's sake, don't look at *me.* I've never even thought about it!"

"Sirius—"

"Have you?" Sirius wheezes, fully in panic mode. "Fucking hell, do you even want—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in, "let's not…do this here. Later."

Sirius snaps his mouth shut, deflating in instant relief. Remus coughs and looks over at Lily, who smirks slightly. Sirius looks to Regulus, who is not smirking. He's frowning, looking at Sirius almost incredulously.

"What?" Sirius whispers.

"You've never even thought about it?"

"You have?"

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "James and I are going to have four children."

"Four—" Sirius chokes, staring at Regulus in a mixture of horror and disbelief. He cannot *believe* Regulus is more put together about this than him. What the fuck? And then, belatedly, the idea of Regulus and James with children hits him, and it hits him in such a rush of emotion that tears almost instantly spring to his eyes. "Oh. I'll be an uncle."

"Someday," is all Regulus says, and Sirius has to look away so he won't start blubbering immediately. "Will I?"

Sirius groans and blurts out, hysterically, "I don't know, I have no fucking idea, but—but Lily is right. If—I mean, fuck, none of us want the future children in our lives to have to face the horror of this. It's—that's just—"

"To remove it from history entirely will only open doorways to have it happen again," Albus says quietly. "I do believe it can be done tactfully, however. It's memorial footage, not videos of past hunger games or even of the war. Everyone will be granted the opportunity to handle the matter with their children at their own discretion. I can't tell anyone how to do that, or how they should. As I said before, Ms. Evans, it would be entirely optional and only the names of those who agree or their loved ones that agree would be released."

"It'll be especially good for the Hallows to remember," Slughorn adds softly, and no one can argue with that.

"Is this acceptable?" Albus asks, and after a few moments, they all tentatively agree. "I believe Filius, if you're amiable, you should spearhead the project." Filius nods, and Albus nods back. "Another thing I wish to discuss. I think the castle should go under construction to be turned into a place for war relief until the world evens out again. People are willing to

volunteer to help those in need that have been affected by the war. There is so much space here that could and should be used. To turn this place into a safe haven for people, rather than what Riddle used it for, is the only alternative I can think of that would benefit everyone. There are many children that are orphaned by the war, along with families that have lost their homes and their funds, both in the Hallow and in the districts. The castle could be a major asset to helping."

"People have died here, Albus," Slughorn says, aghast.

"People have died everywhere," Regulus snaps. "There's no place anyone can go to escape that."

"Using the castle is smart," Minerva agrees. "I believe it would also be optional. No one would have to go, would they?"

"No," Albus confirms. "The fact is, there needs to be programs for war relief, at least until the world recovers. There will be help given here to those who need it, and it will extend out to the districts as well. Food made and shipped out there. Any amenities needed. Build crews. Things such as that."

"Riddle would have hated it," Sirius mutters. "Sounds good to me."

"What else needs to be discussed?" Minerva asks.

"There is, of course, what comes next for the state of the world as a whole once it has recovered," Albus announces.

"And what do you have to say about that?" Lily demands.

"Utopia is a concept that doesn't exist," Albus murmurs. "It may be something that people work towards and possibly even get close to, but it's impossible to fully achieve it. There will always be crime. Deceit. Loss. Struggle. Starvation. Disasters, either man-made or natural.

Death." He pauses and sweeps his gaze over everyone. "I do believe, however, there are things in any world that overpowers all of that. Justice. Trust. Discovery. Hope. Sharing. Rebuilding. Life. There is so much life in this world, and that alone makes it worth living in."

Sirius thinks about that for a second, how for everything bad in this world, there is an opposing good that makes surviving seem a little less like a chore and a little more like a chance.

Sirius flicks his gaze over to Regulus, studying him for a second, taking in how tired he looks, how he's flipping his dagger—Bellatrix's dagger—between his fingers beneath the table, hidden in his lap, possibly a nervous tick or just a comforting motion, or perhaps it's a mindless action that he does because it's as much a part of him as the way he breathes. There's life there, in Sirius' little brother, and he feels it hit him how grateful he is for that.

He feels it like the day he heard Regulus' name called the first time, the day Sirius volunteered at only sixteen years old, just because of that instinctive need to keep Regulus alive and protected at all costs. He was so reassured by the knowledge that he was risking his own life instead, not knowing that, someday, Regulus would face all the things Sirius feared he would, face all that Sirius saved him from.

What did Sirius save him from, really? In the end, not very much; all he did, it seems, was prolong the inevitable. And yet, here Regulus is anyway, alive. His heart is beating.

Everything is so tangled up with Regulus now, simply because Sirius doesn't know how to love him without making himself meaningless in the process. It's very hard for Sirius when he's not keeping it together, because he *does* put Regulus first; he has *always* put Regulus first, and when he can't—when he's struggling too much to do so—it's like he malfunctions.

Sirius drags his gaze away from Regulus to Remus across the table, meeting his eyes. They gaze at each other for a moment, and Sirius feels something in him soften. Oh, there's those eyes. Even now, even here, Sirius feels the lurch of looking into Remus Lupin's eyes, as if it's the very first time.

From Regulus to Remus; from difficulty to ease. That's the reality of it. Ugly and shameful, but honest. The things Sirius has suffered pale in comparison to the things he has gained.

"The truth of the matter is, the current state of the world is up in the air," Albus continues. "Replacing an old Master with a new one is not a solution, this we know through Riddle. What we do know is that the world needs people in charge to keep things running smoothly, but I don't believe—and I don't think anyone here believes—that it needs to be done the way Tom Riddle and Gellert Grindelwald saw fit to do it. The power shouldn't be taken from the people. One person alone shouldn't hold all the power. Does everyone agree to that?"

Lily frowns at Albus. "What about—"

The sentence is interrupted by a very abrupt click of the door swinging open, everyone turning to watch as Dorcas marches right into the room, shutting the door carelessly behind her. She's still wearing the same clothes she did during the war, covered in bloodstains, sporting scabbed over minor scrapes and cuts that went untreated, a few of her braids falling from the large hairpins that seem to be keeping her hairstyle in place by sheer force of will at this point. She comes right in without missing a beat, snatching a chair to place it at the end of the table directly across from Albus and throwing herself down into it, a rather worryingly wild gleam in her eyes.

"Sorry I'm late," Dorcas drawls lazily. "What are we talking about?" There's a heavy silence, stifling, and no one seems eager to break it. Sirius can barely breathe. Just looking at her makes his guilt flare so bright that he feels genuinely sick, like he's in danger of throwing up. Dorcas arches an eyebrow and looks around at everyone. "Well? Is everyone here fucking dumb? I asked a question. What are we talking about?"

Albus clears his throat. "Thank you for joining us, Ms. Meadowes. We were discussing the moves needed to be made next for the world overall."

Dorcas snorts derisively. "Good luck. What did you come up with, then?"

"We haven't really—"

"Oh, *brilliant,* none of you have any idea what the fuck you're doing! Love that."

"Did you have…a suggestion?" Albus asks slowly.

"No, I'm just here to observe," Dorcas says lightly, in a tone that suggests she has other motives, which—from how she's acting—is a concerning thing. "Can't wait to see the world collapse in on itself or end up in another war in fifty to eighty years. But hey, suppose that won't be our problem, will it?"

"If this is done correctly," Albus murmurs, "this will be beneficial for all, and it will uphold *equality.* It will also take time and be flexible to changing as needed, though the core point to it should always remain. This will take years, likely, before it's ever fully running smoothly, and it will need to be held under constant scrutiny to ensure that it never deviates from what's important. Of course, if you have any suggestions that are genuinely viable, we would be happy to hear them."

"Oh, no, I don't give a shit what happens to the world," Dorcas replies. "If it goes down in flames, I'll be more than happy to sit back and laugh. Carry on pouring the fuel."

"Dorcas," Lily says softly.

"Anyway," Dorcas continues, "you were saying something when I came in, Lily. Go on, what was it?"

Lily hesitates, gazing at Dorcas for a long moment, and then she swallows harshly and looks away. "I was just—ah, I was going to ask…" She looks at Dumbledore. "We're talking about who would be in charge. Will *you* be?"

Dorcas scoffs. "Of course he will."

"Actually," Albus says, "I won't."

"What?" Dorcas retorts sharply, sitting up straight, something dangerous flashing in her eyes.

"I won't be in charge," Albus states calmly. "I am not the leader this world needs or will even accept, and frankly, I'm quite old. I don't have many more years left, and I may not even see the world in harmony before I go. I've given most of my entire life to this cause, and there are better people who can do more for what comes next than I can. So, no, I won't be in charge." He slides his gaze towards Aberforth, the look in his eyes warm. "I'm going home."

"What about the Phoenix?" Kingsley asks, face slack with disbelief. "What about everyone there?"

"I do believe those in the Phoenix will want to leave and join the world outside; there is not one person there who wishes to remain there, and so I intend to have it shut down once it's empty," Albus informs them. He pauses. "Unless, of course, it can be utilized to help. If anyone has ideas for how it can, feel free to mention them now, or when you think of them."

"No, wait, rewind," Dorcas spits out. "You're *quitting?"*

"Retiring," Albus corrects. "Sort of."

"You—" Dorcas' nostrils flare. "You *can't.* You don't get to do that. This—no, fuck that. Fuck you. After everything, after you brought everyone right up to this point and barely even *did* anything, you don't get to just walk away."

Albus sits with that for a second, then says, gently, "Just as you, Ms. Meadowes, I have the freedom now to live as I wish."

"You started this war!" Dorcas shouts, slamming her hand to the table. "Fucking *finish* it!"

"The war is over," Albus murmurs, and Dorcas glares at him with pure fury. "I was there from start to finish. The war is no longer the priority; building a world everyone can be safe and secure in is the priority now, as well as forming the transitions that will smoothly allow the world into that state of being."

"Transitions?" Dorcas leans in, eyes blazing, fingers curling into claws on the tabletop. Most of her nails are chipped and torn. "What you really mean is something to keep the whole *point* of the war fresh in the Hallows' minds when they inevitably get pissed off about the war anyway. You want to make sure there's no backlash. Give them something else to worry about or focus on, right? Well, hey, here's an idea—why don't you make sure anyone who would protest *understands* the point? If they can't grasp it from an outside view, toss them inside and see how well they handle it."

Sirius feels his heart start to pick up speed. Everyone is staring right at Dorcas, and so is Sirius, but he thinks he's trembling all over, his whole body feeling faint and jittery.

"Inside where, Ms. Meadowes?" Albus murmurs.

"The arena," Dorcas says, and she doesn't even flinch when she does. "Do it. A ceremonial hunger games to signify the end of the war and the next step into peace. It'll be the same, just raise the age, but leave the rest; same schedule, same sequence of events; reaping, introduction parade, training, evaluations, interviews, arena, and only one Victor."

Yes, Sirius thinks immediately, breathless by the mere idea, lightheaded just from the mere possibility. *Yes, yes, yes.* He can't stop himself from it, that immediate surge of ruthless agreement as a knee-jerk instinct. It's a rush of pure euphoria to imagine that he would be safe somewhere, cozy and entirely untouchable, while the Hallows—for once in their privileged fucking lives—have to experience what it's like to *not* have that. Let him—oh, fuck, let him be the one who gives the interviews. Let him evaluate. Let him decide who to sponsor, wave his money around, and watch Hallows who have salivated for his smile groveling at his feet. Yes. *Yes.*

And then—no.

No, that's not right. Maybe his first thought, or instinct, is cruelty. Vindictiveness. Revenge. But his second?

His second is being twenty-six years old and hearing his best friend's name called, followed by his brother's. His third is the way it felt to watch them fight and suffer and claw their way

to the very end. His fourth is how he wanted to rip his own heart out of his chest when he watched his little brother tip over into that crimson river the very first time. The thing is, when Sirius thinks about the worst thing the hunger games ever put him through, it's not his own experiences with the arena that comes to mind; it's theirs. James and Regulus.

It's not the twenty-four Hallows that could go into the arena and suffer, twenty-three of which would die, that gets him from yes to no. Sirius has killed twenty-three people. More than. He doesn't even know how many people he's killed now; no one knows anymore. What he does know is that he hasn't killed one fucking Hallow in any of this, ever, and something about that makes him want to go on a murder spree to show them the weapon they've been worshipping for years, the weapon they forged him into. He thinks about it, when he told Remus he wanted to kill them all, and that desire still exists within him to this day. Perhaps it always will.

But, beyond that, there are those that the twenty-four Hallows matter to. People that love them. Siblings, friends, lovers, parents, children. Sirius knows intimately what it feels like to experience people he loves going into the arena, and it's not an experience he would wish on anyone, even his worst enemy.

So, no. *No.* Not again. Never again.

There's a heavy, devastating sort of silence in the aftermath of Dorcas' declaration. Everyone seems to be holding their breath, and they are all staring right at her with varying types of expressions. There is horror. There is pity. But, mostly, in the silence, there is a dawning sense of opportunity where they all realize that they could do this, that they have the power to do this, that they would have the support to do this. And is this how it started decades ago? People sitting around a table, and then eighty-five years later, here they are.

If James were here, he would be the first to say no. It would fly from his lips so fast that Dorcas would have barely gotten to finish her sentence before he was arguing. He wouldn't even have to think about it. His first thought *would* be no.

James isn't here, though, and so the silence stretches. Sirius feels his protest bang against the sides of his throat, and he knows he has to set it free, but he is so scared. He is utterly terrified to speak in Dorcas' presence; he can barely look at her, and she hasn't looked at him. Not once.

Sirius' dry swallow clicks loudly in the silence, and he parts his lips, croaking, "No," with more effort than it takes for him to kill. Maybe, someday, doing the right thing won't be so hard.

As expected, all eyes turn to him.

Dorcas' do, too. There's something there in how she looks at him, something he's never seen before, something he can't quite put a name to; it makes his insides feel like the curl of melting plastic caught on fire. He's dripping everywhere, a teardrop trash of a person who was there for Marlene's last breath, while the woman who loved her wasn't. Dorcas looks at him like she wants to steal the breath from his lungs, like maybe to do so will give her even a piece of Marlene that she's missing. Sirius shouldn't be guilty about breathing, but he is.

"No?" Dorcas murmurs, gaze locked on him, focused.

"No," Sirius repeats in a rasp. His mouth is so terribly dry, and his fingers tremble in his lap. He didn't even do anything; he couldn't do anything. He was just there. She died, and he didn't, and that's all there was. That's all there is. "No more hunger games. No more, Dorcas."

"Says who? Says *you?"*

"Yes, I say, and—and Marlene would want—"

"Marlene," Dorcas cuts in so sharply that it's like being sliced cleanly at the jugular, her eyes flashing, "yes—oh, yes, let's get into that, shall we? You want to talk about what she wanted, Sirius? Sure, let's talk about it. Marlene wanted to fucking live, but clearly we don't all get what we want, do we?"

Sirius finds himself incapable of speech. He feels like he's about to vomit. Their grief clashes, unable to coexist, too different over the same person. Sirius wants to remind her that Marlene

was his friend, that he knew her for years, that he's carrying the loss, too. He doesn't, though. Something in her eyes tells him that she wouldn't care.

"Stop," Minerva says firmly. "Dorcas, stop it. This isn't about what you believe is fair, or even an idea you wholeheartedly agree with. You said to lift the age, and I'm assuming you'd fit into the new age range. How convenient." Her gaze is sharp when Dorcas glares at her. "You want to go in to die, or to try to be closer to Marlene, but you won't find her there."

"Maybe we should make it to where only Hallows involved in the production of the hunger games goes in," Dorcas counters with a sneer. "Gamemakers. Stylists. Sponsors. Reapers. Maybe we'll go in together, Minerva. Wouldn't that be a riot?"

"And what about Pandora?" Regulus demands harshly.

Dorcas looks at him blankly. "What about her?"

"You're fucking losing it," Kingsley breathes out, shaking his head when she scoffs. "No, you are. The whole point—the whole fucking *reason* behind everything was the hunger games! How could you even—" He makes a low, strangled noise, eyes wide. "Sybill *died* to help, to save people, to get everyone to a place where this shit doesn't happen anymore. And you want to smear that? Are you absolutely mental?"

"Sybill died because Lily asked her to fly a fucking heli-carrier," Dorcas argues bluntly, and Lily flinches.

"And who asked her to go on the mission in the first place?" Remus asks, visibly bristling on Lily's behalf. "You want to blame Lily? Everyone wants to fucking blame Lily, is that it? Have you considered for one second that Lily *isn't* to blame, at least no more than each of you are. Take some responsibility and leave her the hell out of it."

Dorcas starts to snap something back, but Remus raises his voice, and Kingsley talks over them both, and Lily is quietly trying to make them all stop, and everyone is talking all at once until Sirius' head spins, feeling the war spill out into the room, everything getting hazy around the edges until he can almost feel Marlene breathing down his neck, his skin hot and

itchy, and then Aberforth bangs on the table, flat-palmed, until everyone tapers off into heavy, broken silence.

Sirius doesn't want to be here anymore.

Sirius wants—James. He wants to go curl up in bed next to James again, sandwiched between him and Effie, feeling them breathe, even as he aches about the fact that Monty isn't anymore. He wants Monty, too. Wants one of his hugs that soothed every brittle nerve-ending in Sirius' body. All his nerve-endings seem to be calling out for a father now, because he has lost every father he has ever had, and the only dad he truly ever had, and Monty is gone, and Marlene is gone, and people are breathing, and people are dead, and—

"There will be no more hunger games," Albus states, and Sirius exhales shakily, shaking all over. "There will be no more promotion of death and slaughter. The world needs to move away from that, farther and farther with each passing day. What the world needs now is to heal. It needs hope. It needs love. It needs the dawn to break through the clouds after the storm and signify the new era of peace."

"Oh, is *that* what it needs?" Dorcas asks derisively. "And just how are you going to suggest managing that?"

Albus' gaze slowly crawls to the left, sweeping past Sirius and landing on Regulus, stopping there, latching on. Sirius stiffens immediately, all of his senses and instincts going on high alert in an instant. Now is *not* the time to fuck with Sirius about his little brother. Not now. Not when he's feeling like this. Not when it lives right under his skin, that intense feeling he knows inside and out where he volunteered for him twice, and would die for him, and would kill for him, and has, and will again. He's so fucking insane about Regulus right now, and one wrong button pushed is going to send him spiraling.

Don't do it, Sirius thinks, staring at Albus. *Don't you fucking dare. I'll kill you. In a heartbeat, I'll kill you.*

"I would suggest that Regulus help with that," Albus says, entirely unaware that something ferocious is coiling up at the base of Sirius' spine, about to snap in half. "Regulus and James, actually. This war picked up when they both went to desperate lengths to win their games and

make it home together. The symbolism of their union would be healing for many, and so a wedding televised—"

"No," Sirius cuts in, practically snarling it, disbelieving at the audacity of this man to not only *still* attempt to use Regulus, but also bring James into it, too. "Absolutely fucking not. It's not happening. Their relationship belongs to *them,* no one else, and no one gets any of it anymore! No more!"

"I understand the wariness to do it," Albus starts.

He never gets to finish because Regulus states, in a very flat voice, "James' father died three days ago."

Everyone falls silent.

"His dad just died," Regulus continues. "He can barely get out of bed right now. My—someone very important to me died, too. Barty died. I laid there, bound and helpless, while he died. I laid there with his corpse. In what world do you think either of us are ready to get married right now?"

"Of course you would be granted time," Albus begins, and again, he's interrupted before he can finish.

"Granted time?" Remus blurts out incredulously. "Time isn't a gift given or taken away by *your* decisions. What, they'd have time until things slow down, and then they're expected to perform again, no matter what *they* feel?"

"I know it's a lot to ask," Albus says quietly. "It's undeniable, however, that it would be a good transition for the world as a whole. To see the very people who motivated this war actually glean something from it and achieve peace as everyone wished them to, as yourselves have wished for, would symbolize for others that they can achieve it, too. People believe in you, Regulus. You and James. Your love."

"Albus," Aberforth mutters, "you can't just expect them to do this. They're entitled to their damn privacy, for one thing. It's not even about how much time they'd get; it's about the fact that they never did anything they did *because* they were trying to be defiant, or symbols of rebellion, or motivation for the war at all. You don't know just how long these boys have loved each other. You didn't see that, but I did. It's not for the world, and you can't ask them to give it to everyone, especially the damn people who stole it from them in the first place."

"Oh, can't he? I mean, he doesn't actually care about them, only how they can be used," Dorcas announces, and then she starts laughing. She genuinely just cracks up, fully scooting back to slap her knee and overflow with mirth. Everyone stares at her as she laughs and laughs, wheezing to the point that she actually has to gasp for air.

Sirius can't help but agree with Kingsley. Dorcas is losing it.

"Oh, oh, fucking hell, this is too good," Dorcas chokes out, leaning back in her chair. She hums on another laugh, but seems to smother it, looking right at Albus with a gleam in her eyes. "Well, go on, tell them. Or should I?"

"Ms. Meadowes," Albus says softly, "this isn't about—"

"No, no, don't do that now. Own up to your shit, yeah? Let's see how well this goes over with everyone, shall we? What was it you said? *You did this. Ms. Meadowes. You don't get to quit now.* Same goes for you." Dorcas leans forward, eyes sparkling with satisfaction, and she braces her arms on the table. She threads her hands together. She never looks away from Albus. "I'll give you the chance to say it, because if you don't, I will."

Albus says nothing. The silence is stifling. Thick. Heavy. Sirius feels it bearing down on him, and he swings his gaze between Dorcas and Albus in sheer confusion, not understanding what the fuck is going on. When he looks around, he can see that no one else knows either. Everyone looks uncertain, except for perhaps Minerva, who is stone-faced, but she often is, so Sirius assumes she doesn't know anything either.

"No?" Dorcas asks. She laughs again, harsh and brittle. "So, not only are you a fucking hypocrite, but you're a coward. I never thought I'd see the day. For as long as I've known you, I never would have labeled you a coward, but look at you now."

"It's not cowardice," Albus whispers. "It's the wish for peace."

"You should have thought of that before you started a fucking war," Dorcas retorts ruthlessly. "But you didn't, and here you sit, one of the biggest hypocrites I've ever met. No more hunger games, right? Funny, you're saying there should be no more promotion for death and slaughter, but you were happy enough to promote it yourself when it suited you."

"Dorcas," Minerva says sharply, a light dawning in her eyes, and she does know. Sirius can see that she knows what's coming, and he's never seen her look so alarmed before.

Dorcas ignores Minerva. "But you did it in secret, didn't you? You did it through someone else, and I didn't say a fucking word. I guess it must have slipped my mind when I was worried about protecting Minerva from the fallout, because you used her as your conduit, your shield, and you knew just how much I cared about her. Guess you weren't expecting me to stop caring, I suppose."

"She is not at fault," Albus croaks.

"Oh, she's not an innocent party," Dorcas snaps, "but you're definitely the one at fault. What was it you wanted? Martyrs, right? And Regulus—ha, he was the main one!"

Regulus stops flipping his dagger in his lap.

Sirius fixes his gaze on Dorcas, that coil at the base of his spine growing tighter, at the breaking point. He hears *martyr* and *Regulus* paired together too closely and immediately wants to split the world apart like busting open fruit-rinds.

"Why can't you say it, hm? Are you ashamed?" Dorcas taunts softly, tilting her head, playing with her food before the pounce. And, when she's ready to sink her teeth in and feel Albus' blood coat her tongue, she strikes. "That's alright. I'll tell them all about it. How the rule for Quarterly Memorial wasn't Riddle's idea. He didn't even think of it. No, that was you, wasn't it? You had Minerva give him the idea, because your plan all along was to have everyone the

Hallows idolized turned into martyrs, but *especially* Regulus. He was supposed to suffer—all the Victors were—but him the most. The tragedy of it all, him dying and James losing him, and *Sirius* losing him, and Sirius being the winner. Because you were going to make sure that Sirius won, just so he'd help end the war for his dead brother the way you started it for your dead sister."

Sirius' whole body goes cold. His ears ring to the point that he almost misses the punched-out breath that escapes Regulus right next to him, echoing in the silence.

The *what-could-have-been* reaches up and grabs Sirius by the throat immediately, squeezing until something ruptures in him and floods like a brain-bleed. He imagines it—and it's the worst thing he's ever imagined, Regulus dying in the arena, any arena, after all that Sirius did to ensure that he wouldn't, up to and including volunteering for him not just once, but twice, and he would do it again and again and always. Oh, oh, he would have—he *would* have ended the war. He would have done exactly what Albus expected; he would have given all of himself to it in a way he honestly didn't with Regulus alive, and Albus knows, because he started the war for his little sister and tried to surrender it for his little brother.

Slowly, in perfect sync, Sirius and Regulus swivel their heads to stare at Albus, a carbon-copy of each other in this moment, the mirror they have always known. Right now, they reflect a deep, yawning sense of danger that pulses like a heartbeat, an abyss opening up and revealing teeth. It's the same exact level of bloodthirsty, because Albus wanted to take Regulus away from Sirius, and they never really handle that well, do they?

It must be a fright, seeing the same empty expression on their faces, the same heavy-lidded stare that all Blacks have, the one that intimidates even the bravest of people, because there's a cursed sort of madness in this family that writhes like black tendrils around their souls, predetermined to damnation, doomed from the womb, and here is the window. Their eyes. Look into them and get that glimpse; it makes hairs raise on arms, makes spines shudder, makes hearts speed up in instinctive fear, because it is only a glimpse, a hint, so much and so heavy, and yet there is still more hidden beneath.

If James were here, perhaps there would be hope. Perhaps there would be forgiveness. He is the best of them, after all. The best parts of them both are laden with James' fingerprints, some of their sharp edges sanded down to smooth curves people would give their life to trace, but never all. They still have edges that cut deep enough to turn someone inside out, and James isn't here. Sirius relishes that James isn't here, because there is no one else who could, or would, stop him.

"Is this true?" Sirius asks, his voice measured. Albus tears his gaze away to look at Sirius, looking old and weary. "Did you give Riddle the idea to make us go back into the arena?"

"Yes," Albus confirms steadily.

Albus stares at him for a beat, and then he turns his head to look at Aberforth, who…doesn't look surprised. He knows this, too. He has known this, and despite the strain on his face that clearly states he despises what Albus did, he never said a word about it. No one spoke of it. No one confessed it. They all kept it a secret to protect someone they love; Dorcas for Minerva, Aberforth for Albus. And now, Albus looks at Aberforth with a quiet kind of remorse, for something beyond what he did; perhaps only for what the things he did will cause.

He's not even sorry for what he did, and the worst part is that Sirius knows why. Sirius, who knows manipulation better than anyone at this table other than, as it turns out, Albus himself. Sirius, who knows what it is to do horrible things for the reason one dedicates themselves to, and makes the often difficult choice to take responsibility and full blame. Sirius, who was willing to go into that arena for Regulus, and then willing to kill everyone in there, including friends and himself, just to make sure Regulus would get home; willing to give up everything for Regulus, and go to whatever lengths necessary to keep him alive and safe. Sirius, who would have devoted himself—all of himself—to the war in Regulus' name, had he died, just the same as Albus did, but the difference is he would have done it until the war was all he cared about; not James, or Effie, or Monty, or Remus, or *anyone,* and he wouldn't have had another sibling to love. He'd only have the one he lost.

For Albus, what he cared about was avenging his sister and making room for a safer world for his brother. Whatever it took to get there, no matter how horrendous and heavy, he did it. He did what no one else could; he did what Sirius would have done in a heartbeat, in his position. He did it, and Sirius is in the exact state of mind to do the same.

"Why?" Sirius asks coldly. Albus holds Aberforth's gaze for a moment longer, then focuses on Sirius again. "Tell me why."

"You know already," Albus murmurs. "My history and my motivations are not a secret to anyone any longer. My past is riddled with mistakes I regret. All I ever wanted to do was

whatever needed to be done for the greater good."

"That's not good enough," Sirius tells him. "You tried to kill my brother. He's my little brother, and you tried to kill him, and then you used him, and you still want to use him. Your reasons aren't good enough."

Albus looks at him, looks into his eyes, and something falls away from him as he releases a soft sigh. It's not quite a sense of resignation in his gaze, more like acceptance, even a simple understanding. Older brother to older brother. Albus nods.

"I know," Albus says. "I just wanted to make things right."

"Sometimes we can't make things right. Sometimes we can only make them better," Sirius announces, and then he flings his hand out and buries Regulus' dagger right into the side of Albus' throat. Hears him choke. Rips it back out. Watches the blood spill and says, calmly, "Like that."

It's Aberforth who cries out first, Albus' name tumbling from his mouth in a frantic shout as he stumbles from his chair in visible panic while Albus sinks to the side and pours out a crimson river over the chair, in his beard, on the table. His blue eyes are fixed on Sirius for only a moment, and then they roll around to locate Aberforth, staring at him as he weakly folds forward into his hands. It's like he's trying to stand, and he can't manage it, can't even breathe as he gurgles out something that could be Aberforth's name, or an apology, and somehow both sound the exact same.

Chaos unleashes after that. Minerva rushing towards Albus, demanding Lily—as a medic—to help, and Lily does not, will not, just sits impassively and watches it happen. Slughorn taking the immediate opportunity to flee from the violence, calling for help, which causes Aurors to arrive. Remus jumping to his feet for Sirius in a heartbeat, and Regulus going on the defensive, and Kingsley cursing as he bolts from his chair, and Filius stumbling out of the way as everything falls apart, losing all semblance of control immediately.

Aberforth is there with blood on his hands, and he is there when the light in Albus' eyes goes out, gazing up at his little brother with all his regrets bleeding out of him. It's not what Sirius ever expected to see, those tears that drip down an old man's nose, two pairs of eyes of the

same shade and the same sights of shared memories, and only one pair left with life in them. Albus dies swiftly under his brother's hands.

Maybe it should be expected that Aberforth would respond to this by attempting to attack his brother's murderer. Sirius doesn't expect it, for some reason, and doesn't see it coming. He does nothing to defend himself and would surely suffer for it, if not for the fact that Regulus is right there. He moves so fast and with no regard for his own fondness of this man. It's seconds between Aberforth lunging for Sirius and Regulus coming out of his chair to put him flat on his back.

Aberforth goes down with a grunt and a wheeze, one that dies out into a frustrated, grief-stricken whine, and Regulus stands there between him and Sirius like a brick wall, daring him to try again. When they look at each other, it's almost like they're looking at one another from the other's position.

Somewhere in all of this, Sirius can hear Dorcas laughing in utter triumph. Leaders lead until they leak their blood all over the floor; they don't get to quit until they're made to, and this was her motive all along, wasn't it? The start of the war a husk on the ground with blood in his beard and a vacancy in his gaze; the start of the war finished. Sirius listens to her laugh and laugh in victory, and he looks at the blood on his hands.

War is over, and what have they done? Sirius doesn't know. He wishes he could undo everything, but he doesn't know what else he would do if he could. There's just this.

Sometimes, this is all there is.

~•~

Regulus hears the door to the highest tower creak open and doesn't turn, because sometimes, for no reason at all, it's as if siblings can read each other's minds. Sirius knows he's here just as well as Regulus knew he'd come find him, eventually.

Because it's just Regulus here, he's not right up against the rail where he can see the stomach-swooping length between here and the ground. Not brave enough to go that far if Sirius isn't

close by. A part of him resents that. A part of him is resigned to it. Either way, he's not here to look at the ground. He came here to see the stars. The Hallow is dark and solemn at night now, and they're visible. Sirius is the brightest, of course.

Sirius stops next to him, clearing his throat, keeping distance between their shoulders. Regulus doesn't close it, doesn't want to right now, and Sirius doesn't either. That's familiar, isn't it?

It's been six days since the war ended, two since Sirius killed Albus Dumbledore, and in the immediate aftermath, he was dragged away and held with no information released. Naturally, this didn't go over well with Regulus, Remus, and Lily. Even Kingsley was upset and demanding answers. Dorcas found all of it so, so funny.

James and Effie, when they were informed of what happened, got out of bed and kicked up a fuss worse than anyone knew how to deal with. Effie on her own is a force to be reckoned with, and *no one* wants to be scolded by an angry James, because an angry James is so unusual that it just instinctively makes you feel guilty, so paired together, there's no stopping them, really. Even still, they were going head-to-head with Aberforth, who had just lost his brother.

Regulus tries to ignore the squirming in his chest that feels a whole lot like guilt. He does think that Albus sealed his fate for himself, and got what was coming to him, just karma making its way back around. But, then again, they've all done horrible things, haven't they? It wasn't just him, but he made the mistake of crossing the wrong person. It was his own history, and he still repeated it.

Just… Aberforth watched his brother die. His big brother died in his arms. It doesn't matter how fraught their relationship was, because that was his *brother*. Regulus can't even imagine what that felt like. Doesn't want to imagine it. He thought Sirius died, and didn't have to *see* it, didn't have to be one hundred percent sure the way Aberforth is forced to.

So, when everything shifted and it was time for someone to make decisions, that fell on Aberforth as Albus' little brother, as well as Minerva and Filius, who Albus had originally asked to oversee a lot of rebuilding decisions to start with. It was those three who essentially figured out what the hell to do with Sirius, and they shut themselves away from the large group of people demanding Sirius' release and promising to start a whole new war if they had to, if they didn't get what they wanted. Regulus was on the verge of killing people when,

finally, Minerva and Filius said they were going to have a long meeting with Sirius, discuss some things, then release him.

Aberforth apparently opted out, choosing instead to handle everything with Albus' body and go home, briefly. He left tonight and will arrive in the morning, and when he returns, everyone else will be going. Tomorrow, a week after the war, Regulus will be home again, along with James and Effie, along with Sirius and Remus, at least for some time.

Regulus stuck around long enough to see Sirius be led out of a room a few hours ago, immediately drawn into a hug by Effie, and then he walked away. Left and didn't look back. Came here and waited, watching the stars shine high above him.

"So, uh. I've been banned from the Hallow as a punishment. That's what they went with. When I leave, I'm never allowed back." Sirius clears his throat, then snorts weakly. "Not much of a punishment, honestly. More like a gift."

Regulus doesn't acknowledge him. The silence is heavy.

"You're angry at me now," Sirius says. He sounds glum about this. Disappointed, but not surprised.

Regulus turns his head and just stares at him.

"Yeah, you're angry at me now," Sirius confirms with a heavy sigh, his shoulders slumping. "Not exactly what I expected you to be angry at me *for,* I won't lie…"

Regulus stares at him harder.

"You had to know I was going to do it," Sirius mutters, his eyebrows wrinkling together in the middle. He looks confused. He's such an idiot. "I mean, you gave me your dagger, Regulus. You knew what I was about to do. You had to have known."

"I didn't know," Regulus admits quietly. "I just—I saw you tense up like you were about to move, and I felt—it felt like we were threatened again, after learning what he did, and I just wanted you to be safe. That's all. That's why I gave you the dagger, Sirius. I just wanted you to be safe."

"Oh," Sirius says softly, lips tipping down, though something in his gaze goes gentle. He seems to sit on that for a long moment, then bites his lip and looks at Regulus carefully, his eyes a little wide. "Albus knew."

Regulus blinks. "What?"

"Yeah." Sirius clears his throat. "He knew I was going to kill him. He—I don't know. He just…looked at me, and he saw it, and he knew. I knew he knew, and he—he nodded."

"He nodded," Regulus repeats.

Sirius coughs, looking vaguely uncomfortable. "He accepted it, I think. I—you know, honestly, I think there was a part of him that never really expected to…make it out of the war to begin with. But it wasn't even about that. He knew, because he'd done it first, yeah? He killed Grindelwald for killing his little sister. He handled the threat against his little brother. The war was always in the name of them. I think… Well, I don't think he was a good person, and no one is these days, but I do think he was a good brother."

"Do you regret killing him?" Regulus asks.

"Yes," Sirius says, and then, "No," and then, "I don't know. I regret everyone I've killed, and I also don't, and I never know how to feel about it. But him… That's complicated."

"How?"

"I…understood him, I guess. I—I could have been him. Would have been, if he got what he wanted. But it's—I mean, he knew what was coming, because what else could anyone expect? He tried to kill you, tried to have you killed, and he hurt you. He was still a threat to you, even at that table."

"So, it was for me," Regulus murmurs.

Sirius blows out a deep breath and tosses his hands up, looking at Regulus incredulously. "Yes, alright? It was for you. Fucking hell, Reggie, I know you hate it, but everything I've ever done has been for you. And it's never just for you, either. I do it for everyone I love. You said I'm the first thing in this world you've ever loved, and I meant it when I said it was the same for me. I can't help that you're the first person that comes to mind, and that doesn't mean I love anyone else less and wouldn't do the same exact thing for them. This is just *me,* and—and with this, it was more than that. It was more than just you, or us, or anyone. It was about—everyone."

Regulus exhales, his eyelids fluttering as he blinks rapidly, feeling those words hit him square in his chest. He looks at Sirius, his brother, and feels it take shape in his mind how it *was* more, repeating the words Sirius spoke back to him in a new understanding of them. "Sometimes we can't make things right. Sometimes we can only make them better."

"Yeah," Sirius agrees. He offers Regulus a tentative smile, sad and tired around the edges. "You know who taught me that?"

"James," Regulus says immediately, knowing it already, because he's known it most of his life.

Sirius shakes his head and says, gently, "You. It was you, Reggie. You taught me that."

Regulus stares at him and wants, at first, to deny this, because it doesn't feel possible to him, that he—of all the people in Sirius' life—would be able to teach him that anything could be made better, being the perpetual fuck-up that he is, failing more consistently than anyone Sirius has ever known. And then, well, he thinks about it. He *really* thinks about it.

They never really did make things right between them, did they? Those ten years still exist between them and always will. They're still unhealthy in how they shape their lives around one another, not even sure how to begin to make that right. They have said and done horrible, horrendous things to one another, caused each other pain, been the reason behind the worst moments in the other's lives, and there is no changing that, or erasing it. They've failed each other over and over and over, and it's each other that they struggle to try with the most over anyone else in their lives, and it'll never just be *easy* with them, for all the things that they share, and can't let go of.

And yet, they do try. And yet, they have worked together, with each other. And yet, here they are, loving each other anyway, on either side of the war and through it. They put in the effort for each other, closed distance despite how wide the divide was, and they can again. They always can. Maybe they can't make things right, maybe they'll never be able to do that, but they can make things better, and have, and will keep trying to.

Regulus really doesn't have it in him to be angry anymore. He isn't angry about this the way he would have been a year ago, or even further back. Now, he supposes he understands it; he remembers that moment when he realized what Albus had done, the reason that Sirius ended up in the arena again, and then Azkaban, just as much a source behind his pain as Regulus—in that moment, Regulus had wanted to kill him. If it hadn't been Sirius, it would have been him. And, deep down, Regulus thinks if it hadn't been them, it would have been Lily. If not her, then it would have been Dorcas.

There was no way Albus was making it home after everything. For a second, Regulus mourns that for Albus. For Aberforth. It's a tragic thing, isn't it? A bitter end and a bitter beginning and bitter throughout. Decades of bitter with the sweet of siblinghood stolen like branches breaking on family trees.

Regulus shifts to press his arm into Sirius', bumping into him like leaves swirling in a breeze. It's easy once he's there; it's always easier once he's there, once they're there, once the distance is closed. It's closing the distance that's so hard.

Sirius leans into him, murmuring, "We just need some time, and then we'll make things better again, right?"

"Yeah, Sirius, we will," Regulus says softly.

"Me and you," Sirius whispers, nudging their shoulders together, a steady weight, a steady comfort.

Regulus tilts his gaze up to look at the sky, his voice just as steady when speaking to the brightest star there, and the brother who outshines it when he agrees, "Me and you."

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Long ago, Aberforth liked explosives. Grenades, landmines, dynamite—you name it, anything that goes boom, he liked it. This was because, long ago, Aberforth was always looking for something bigger. Something *more.* Something—not home.

Home was…stifling, when Aberforth was young. Ariana was a sickly girl. Kept them in poverty just from all that she needed. It makes Aberforth sick to think of it now, how he was back then, because as much as loved his little sister—and oh, how he loved her, and still does—she felt like a chore to him.

For Aberforth, getting away was the dream, not that he had anywhere to go, properly. He never wanted to go to the arena, just to get to go to the Hallow—he wasn't that desperate, or that stupid—but he did want to go…somewhere. Anywhere. Just away, far away from it all, because he was stuck.

Stuck with dead parents. Stuck with a sickly sister he didn't want to take care of, not knowing he would one day ache to take care of her just one more time. Stuck with a brother he could never see eye-to-eye with, in all their differences, in the patriarch that he became that only suffocated Aberforth more.

Aberforth found his escape in all things loud. Bleating goats, and the crunch of some boy's cheek under his fist, and the sizzle-whistle-pop of tiny, bright fireworks he slowly taught himself to make. He remembers his first; it was a dud, he thought, and then it went off in his face.

Well, that's how life goes, isn't it?

Much the same, Aberforth's love for explosives went off in his face, too. He probably should have seen it coming, but there's no way he could have predicted it.

He didn't expect that to be how Ariana died.

Aberforth's love for explosives dwindled after that, and so did his desire to leave home. He wanted to stay. He wanted to do something, anything, take it all back that he ever felt and feel differently the second time around—except there's no second time. There's just what you get, and what you do with it, and so Aberforth decided he'd do something with it. He decided he would become mayor someday, and—make a difference.

Yeah, that went off in his face as well. Just look at him now.

Aberforth is the very first to enter district six after biological warfare was released within it. The state of his home is hollow. A ghost town. Misshapen with silent streets and abandoned homes. It's been months, and the imprint of death still lingers here. The wind that blows seems to be howling with the screams of people who died here, who never reached safety, who he was meant to protect and, in the end, couldn't.

He walks through streets he knows better than the back of his hand, streets he ran through as a child, streets he has watched children run through as an older man, streets he has seen children die in—and that is all he can see now, the children who died, none of them his sister and all of them his sister. Home has always been his sister, really. Before, he couldn't bear to leave it. Now, he can hardly stand to be here.

In the distance, Aberforth can see his house. It's the house he has lived in his whole life. Albus inherited one in the Victor's Village, but they didn't go there, and wouldn't go there when Ariana never lived there. They stayed home until Albus left and never returned. He was going to and simply didn't get the chance. It hurts more than anything ever has for Aberforth to exist with the knowledge that he wasn't the one who would reflect Ariana's fate. Albus was.

Aberforth returns home entirely alone.

He doesn't have much, really, but he has photo albums with old pictures of Ariana and Albus. He features, too, but it was always them he looked at when he reached a point low enough to revisit memories his aged mind couldn't recall in perfect clarity. It was so much easier to remember the sound of laughter when he saw it caught in a photo. That's what people don't tell you about grief, about loss; you do get farther away from it with time, and as much as you might wish not to, you forget the very things you want to cling to. Without pictures, he wouldn't fully remember what Ariana looked like.

Slowly, methodically, Aberforth sweeps through his home, ignoring the dust that has collected and keeping the doors closed on Albus and Ariana's rooms. He hasn't opened them in a long time. Can't remember the last time he did. It's his last chance to, and he doesn't. The rooms are empty; they've been empty for longer than they weren't.

He takes the bags he packs—a whopping total of two—and sits them on the corner of the street out front, then locks the front door and pockets the key. The steps on the porch are older than him and creak more from disuse than they ever did when he'd stomp up them behind Albus and Ariana, rolling his eyes as they chattered and laughed.

Would it kill you to be easier on those steps, Abby? Albus asked once, a mixture of exasperated and scolding.

Leave him be, Albus. He's heavy-footed, like his goats, Ariana had said, breaking out into giggles when Aberforth yelped in offense, and Albus had laughed with her. Laughed and laughed. Oh, they always laughed more than he did.

There was a time the echoes of their laughter greeted him every time he stomped up and down those steps. That time has passed. He doesn't hear that anymore and never will again. All he gets is the echo of his shoes against wood.

Sighing, Aberforth moves around the side of his house, stops by his shed, then takes the trek out to the edge of his property, a lump in his throat as he gazes at Ariana's tree, coming closer and closer. It's been a while since he's seen it, and he forgot how majestic it really is. Fifty years of growth, green with life in the summer, and there's the cut up dents in the bark from that boy, aged to the point they almost blend in.

When Albus and Aberforth planted this tree, all Albus said was that it was the phoenix tree. Something miraculous and lovely that would grow from Ariana's ashes. The Order of the Phoenix—yeah, that moniker never surprised Aberforth at all. Now, the phoenix tree feels like it belongs to Albus as much as it does Ariana.

Clearing his throat, Aberforth does something he hasn't in many years. He reaches out and touches the trunk of the tree, and he speaks. It comes out gruff and a little strangled when he says, "Brought someone to see you."

There's no response. The wind doesn't even have the decency to stir the leaves or make the branches creak. Swallowing harshly, Aberforth lets his hand drop, then lifts it to grab onto the shovel he's holding with his other one.

He begins to dig.

I never meant for it to happen, Aberforth. I told him—I swear I told him I was saving her. I was always trying to save her.

Dig.

He clearly didn't listen, because he killed her. You killed her.

Dig.

I never meant for this to happen.

Dig.

Albus. Albus, stop! What are you doing?

Dig.

I have to go back.

Dig.

Go back? Where? What, the Hallow? They'll never allow it!

Dig.

He will. He'll let me in.

Dig.

For what? What will you do? What can you do, Albus? Haven't you done enough? Just—just stop. Stop packing the bag. Just—

Dig.

I—I have to go. Aberforth, come with me.

Dig.

Come with you? Are you fucking stupid? No!

Dig.

Abby, please.

Dig.

I can barely stand to be around you now, and you think I'll go with you? Ariana is buried right out there! I'm not leaving her! How can you leave her? How dare you be so swift to leave her when it's your fault she's where she's at in the first place?

Dig.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I can—I want to make it right. I—

Dig.

There is no making it right! Ariana is dead!

Dig.

Okay, Aberforth. Okay.

Dig.

Wait. Wait, what are you—where are you going? Albus—

Dig.

Albus!

Dig.

Don't go. Please don't go. Don't do this. Don't leave me.

Dig.

It's okay, Aberforth. It's going to be okay. I'm going to fix it. I'm going to make it right.

The shovel, when it hits the ground one last time, sounds like the door slamming when Albus walked out of it. Aberforth flinches now just as he did then, breathing heavily as he straightens up and leans against the shovel, wiping sweat from his brow. He hadn't ached when digging with Albus to plant the tree and bury Ariana's ashes. Maybe it was because he was young then, or maybe it was because he had Albus there to halve the strain. This time, he suffers the strain alone. It's like loss. More than brotherhood, in the end, they shared loss between them; this is the first loss Aberforth will have to carry on his own.

With a grunt, Aberforth crouches down before the hole in the ground, seeing the faded blue of the canister that holds his little sister's ashes still right where they buried it. Roots of the tree have grown around it, and there's a spot right next to it that's empty, a place to nestle a new canister into. Aberforth sits his brother's ashes there, right next to his sister's.

For a long time, Aberforth just kneels there, staring at the canisters and feeling homeless. All he can think about is how some part of him had anticipated this in some way. All that Albus did… Could this have ended any other way? Was Albus ever going to be able to just come home?

That's what Aberforth wanted, though he suspects he was alone in that, as everyone else wanted Albus to pay just as they did Riddle, just as Albus did Grindelwald long ago. But Aberforth had a unique perspective on the whole matter, didn't he? Albus was his brother.

Albus couldn't be everyone's brother. To everyone else, he was a leader. He was a manipulator. He was the harbinger of war. The worst part is that, somewhere in all the years between them, that's how Aberforth viewed him, too.

Aberforth didn't find out until after Albus died that he attempted to surrender the war for him. Give it up, all of it up, for Aberforth. *Give him to me,* Albus said. *You can have the war, but him—give him to me.* Aberforth was too busy fighting to see the footage, and he didn't pay attention to the attention he received after, and it was Filius who spoke of it first, and Filius who played the footage for him when Albus was already dead.

Aberforth wishes a lot of things, but what he wishes the most is that he had sat aside his pride to apologize while he still had the chance, while Albus was still here to hear it.

Albus isn't here to hear it, and Aberforth still releases a shuddering breath and whispers, "I'm sorry," to the pair of ashes at the base of a tree. Ariana died young, Albus couldn't make things right, and Aberforth is all that's left of them both, and he's so sorry. He'll always be sorry.

Then, with that, Aberforth stands and shovels the dirt back in through the blur in his vision, old and weary, aching and alone. The breeze stirs the leaves, the branches creak, and Aberforth packs the dirt in, burying Ariana and Albus together.

Aberforth leaves home after that, grabs his bags, boards a train, and has no plans to go back. No, he's going back to the Hallow, where he intends to stay, because there is no next time around; no second time, no third; there is just what's left, and what you do with it, and for Albus and Ariana, for them, he will do his best. And, when it's all over, when he's given his last breath, he'll leave it as his last wish to turn to ash and join them there at the base of that phoenix tree, beneath the dirt.

Then, finally, they'll all be home.

Chapter End Notes

SPOILERY WARNING:

the person who dies is albus, who is stabbed in the side of his neck and bleeds out

to everyone else!

likely to the surprise of...exactly no one, this chapter hit me hard. brothers... god they get me every time, and listen, i know albus wasn't everyone's favorite character, i get that, but PERSONALLY, his relationship with aberforth as his brother got me, okay? yeah, it got me, im predictable, i have issues, i KNOW 😭

but on a real note, albus was possibly one of the most complex characters in this fic, along with dorcas (we'll get to her in a minute), regulus, sirius, and marlene. like he had nuance, and i saw a lot of commentary that was like "so albus does the same thing that are faves are doing and yet he's the bad guy???" and the thing is, he was never the bad guy. he was never the villain in this story, regardless of those who labeled him as such, including his own brother. albus was the scapegoat. he was always the one who carried the weight so others didn't have to, and maybe he didn't always do the right thing or get things right, but no one would in his position.

so anyway, like, there's a lot of nuance with his character that we really got to see through aberforths pov, and ofc i had to twist the knife even more and have them sort of reconcile (enough that albus was gonna go home 😭) before albus died.

however, dorcas saw to it that that would not be happening. speaking of dorcas, she is. Not Doing Well. i know it's rough, but it gets worse before it gets better. she's um. well, she wants to watch the world burn, as that saying goes lmaooo. whatever your feelings about her, just know she looks hot while she's doing all of this <3

the way these povs fell between brothers and just like. this is another hard-hitting chapter for me, and likely other siblings, because like. we really do see these dynamics and how they're similar and how they're different and just. How Important They Are.

this story is, first and foremost, about siblings—primarily sirius and regulus ofc—like that is the whole point of this fic, the core of it over anything else. and that feels right considering the source material, like in thg, it was always about katniss' love for prim and how important that was over peeta or gale or anyone else. and i just. i really adore that, and hope i paid a good homage to that, because i really admire it. thg was the first piece of media that ever did that, in my life at least, and it's always meant a lot to me BECAUSE of that.

so, sirius killing albus. that was planned from the start. because sirius and albus are narrative foils. like, they're the textbook definition of narrative foils, pretty much, and also just. like, there genuinely was no way albus was making it out alive, and the moment he essentially wanted to keep using regulus (and james), and sirius found out he tried to kill regulus, that was it. there was no going back from that, and albus knew it. he knew it because he did it first.

god, aberforth at the tree :(him burying albus with ariana :(their last argument there :(oh im so sad. the dumbledores are such tragedies in this 😭

YOU KNOW WHAT, YES, LETS DO HONORABLE MENTIONS AGAIN:

-albus dropping absolute BARS when he said "ariana has been dead for 55 years, all you did was watch wood" LIKE??? THAT WAS VILEEEEE
-aberforth essentially being like "kay well get over it lets move on" lmaooooo such sibling energy pls
-regulus telling sirius he's doing enough :(
-sirius "WAIT DO YOU WANT KIDS???" black panicking when remus looks at him like 🤨 about the subject of children lmaoooo. he's such a mess
-dorcas in her evil queen era cackling and unleashing choas she is TRULY unhinged
-remus defending lily 😭
-regulus thinking sirius is an idiot lmaooo
-regulus giving sirius his dagger just because he wanted him to be safe I WILL SOB
-lily refusing to give albus medical attention, like she's so PETTY pls 😭
-effie and james rising from their grief pile to threaten people to release sirius, no ones doing it like them
-sirius "aw you're mad at me :(" black and regulus "why can't you be normal" black
-just...Brothers, is the main takeaway from this one
-the phoenix tree, and the fact that albus named his whole organization after that, in honor of ariana... 😭

Home

Chapter Notes

alrighty, everyone!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past war/warzones
-references to past deaths/murder/violence
-vague references to past bomb/bomb-violence/death by bomb (nothing explicit/grotesque)
-brief depiction of violence/injury (its light, i promise, and no one's hurting anyone else)
-depictions of grief/mourning
-references to past child death
-blood mention
-brief mention of people vomiting (only in passing, not explicitly described)
-depictions of dissociative amnesia (from an outsider perspective)
-brief descriptions of james' issues with time (nothing as heavy as it has been before)
-mentions/depictions of funerals/memorials

this chapter, in my opinion, isn't as angsty as the ones before and even has some hope/healing to it, but ive said that before and people have been sad anyway, so i don't think im a good scale for these sorts of things. but no one dies, so it's a win!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

District six greets Regulus with dead flowers on his kitchen windowsill and a knitted hat on his bedside table with the bell inside it still not ringing.

"Nice digs," Remus comments mildly, running his finger through a layer of dust on Regulus' countertop.

Regulus understands that Remus is trying to make him crack a smile, or even scowl the way he used to, but what Remus doesn't get—what he *can't* get—is that the state of Regulus' home is utterly devastating to him.

It was his *home.* He was making it into a home. He kept it clean, and now there are cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling, and there's a faint smell of something stale over everything, the

stench of absence. His flowers are wilted and brown.

The Victor's Village was empty when biological warfare was released here, so it didn't take the brunt of it, and there are certainly other homes in the district in a worse state, but this is *his* home. It has the furniture Sirius built for him, and the flowers James brought to him, and books Monty gave to him, and food Effie made sure he had, and little pieces of himself left lying around because he was here, he was living here, he was alive here. And now the furniture is covered in dust, the books haven't been touched, the flowers are dead, the food has spoiled, and all the little pieces of himself from before feel foreign to him, like they're from a complete stranger.

Regulus comes home and doesn't recognize it, doesn't feel at home at all, doesn't know where home is anymore if it's not James. Certainly not here. Not this decrepit, hollow excuse for a home. He detests it. Won't stand for it. No, absolutely not.

Without a word, Regulus starts cleaning.

It's a big house, just as all those in the Victor's Village are. Four bedrooms, two bathrooms. He only ever used one of the bedrooms upstairs, the one that conveniently faced the street out front, the window giving him the perfect view to the house right across the street. Regulus starts there.

The last time he was in this room, he and James were tangled in the sheets of his bed, lost in each other's skin and doing their very best to avoid the reaping that they never should have had to worry about to start with. The sheets are still wrinkled and tossed aside, but they don't smell like James anymore. It makes Regulus angry for some reason, so he's seething as he strips the sheets and pillowcases to wash them.

Regulus takes all his clothes to wash those, too. Goes from room to room, gathering all the sheets and blankets, wiping away dust on furniture, opening doors and windows to let fresh air in. Goes back to his room to tidy his desk, furious to find all the journals in his desk drawers covered in layers of dust that he methodically wipes away, careful not to crumble any of the pressed, dead flowers between the pages. One of the journals tumbles from his grip, an older one, falling awkwardly with the pages bent. He picks it up and straightens it out very carefully, briefly glancing at a page, and then he stops.

There are two poems on the page, both that still stand the test of time, still resonating even now. The one above is not as uplifting as the one below, the very first time he decided he would like to grow, if he could not climb. He had no idea that he would one day do both.

It's not those poems that get to him, however. It's not even *his* poem that makes him feel as fragile as the flower in between the pages, a curdled pink tinged with brown, the petals on the verge of crumbling like ash. No, it's what exists in the margins, ink-blotted words faded, but still visible.

Roses are red, my dad is a prick, don't make me go to work, I'd rather die — an idiot who, sadly, thinks he's a genius

Regulus swallows past the lump in his throat, reaching out to carefully trace his fingers over the words. Stupid, meaningless words said flippantly, marked down without a care in the world or any way of knowing that it'd be a quote belonging to a dead man. Regulus couldn't have imagined it, then. Barty dying. Being dead. He was safe, aged out from reapings, and he would have made it if the war hadn't taken him.

Regulus remembers this day. The day Riddle showed up to his house. The day he really spoke to James the first time after the arena. He was still dreaming of Evan then. He was still waking up in Barty's arms then.

It hurts to think about, looking back on all the moments he took for granted, not appreciating them when he had the chance, not knowing they'd run out. It hurts to think about a lot of things, and maybe it always will.

It *hurts* to think about Barty; it hurts to think about how the most consistent thing about Barty, now, is how much Regulus misses him. It hurts to think about how no one will ever miss Barty the way Regulus does, because no one ever got to have Barty the way Regulus did. Amos is dead, Barty's mum is dead, and the few other friends Barty made along the way didn't have quite the same history with him as Regulus did. The full brunt of the grief over Barty falls on Regulus' shoulders, and he doesn't want it. He never wanted it. Barty was supposed to be here. Regulus wishes Barty was still here.

It hurts to think about Monty, who was one of the few older male influences in Regulus' life that he was actually proud to have. Regulus wasn't afraid of Monty, not even for a second, not

the way he was afraid of Orion at times. Regulus spent so much time with Monty at the Phoenix, listening to him laugh and indulging him in startlingly competitive games of tic-tac-toe and hangman, giving into smiles when he would tell stories of James as a baby, as a young child before he ever met Sirius and then Regulus. Monty was so, so painfully and reliably kind, far too kind for the world they were living in; if anyone should have made it to a kinder world, it was him. He would have fit right in, better than anyone else could have.

It hurts to think about how much it hurts James, Effie, and Sirius that Monty is gone. Effie knew the moment Monty left this world, but James and Sirius didn't find out until the war was already over, their relief to see Effie alive instantly crushed when she had to deliver the news—and how crushing is that? Just that *she* had to be the one to stand before them and watch their hope die and their tears spill over when they found out, when she could barely hold herself together to start with? Regulus can't even describe how the loss of Monty has torn through James, carving something out of him that he'll never get back, a missing piece that Effie felt slip through her fingers just the same. And then there's Sirius, who barely knows what to do with his own pain, struggling to balance it, like he's not allowed to have it, feeling like an imposter for simply daring to grieve a man who wasn't his father as a father, as if that man didn't love him as a son.

It hurts to think about Marlene. Maybe it hurts so much because it was the least expected. Perhaps the universe knew she couldn't make it through everything, but the people in her life never suspected it, because she always made it through, didn't she? That was her thing. Marlene kept surviving, always surviving, and it's hard to fathom the concept that she didn't; that, after everything, she couldn't.

But Barty… For Regulus, that hits him the hardest.

They never talked about anything. That's the sad part. They weren't really—friends. It was always something less than that, and something more. Barty was the first person to see all of Regulus' scars after he got them. Regulus is the only person who knows the nursery rhyme Barty's mum used to sing to him. They could have gone their separate ways the moment sex stopped being something they wanted from each other, they just chose not to. They could have lived without one another, they just didn't want to.

In the end, only one of them got their wish.

"Regulus?"

Clearing his throat, Regulus eases the journal shut and puts it back in the drawer, closing it before swiveling his head to see Remus lingering awkwardly in his doorway. "Yes, sorry, what is it? Where are James and Sirius?"

"Across the street, probably merging their souls together or something," Remus says wryly, and Regulus snorts.

"Yeah, they're a bit…" Regulus trails off, then can't stop himself from grimacing ever so slightly. It's not jealousy, and Regulus knows this because Remus grimaces right along with him. "Ah, James is—it's—I think he's…"

"The problem?" Remus asks.

"Well, he's certainly perpetuating it," Regulus mutters with a weary sigh.

"Are you going to say anything about that?"

"Sirius is letting him. Are *you* going to say anything?"

"He's your brother."

"Yes, I didn't get a choice in the matter. You did, and you chose to be with him. This falls on you."

"You know," Remus says delicately, "maybe now is too soon."

"Let them handle it?" Regulus suggests, and Remus nods, then swivels his head to look around the room.

"Do you want me to do anything?" Remus asks. "I can—"

"No, you don't have to do that," Regulus cuts in, standing to his feet. "It's fine, Remus, really."

Remus frowns. "It's the least I could do. I mean, you're practically giving your house to everyone who can't stay across the street, including my dad."

Regulus shrugs awkwardly. Yes, he is doing that. Mary and Bingley's house is trashed, so they need somewhere to stay until they get it cleaned up and set to rights. Lily will be staying with them here, of course. The Potter's house will be full as it is, because James, Sirius, and Effie all have their own rooms, and the fourth room was used as Monty's little study. Regulus will be staying with James and Remus with Sirius, but the others need somewhere to go as well, and Regulus' house is the only other one on the street that has the furniture and accommodations to let people live here for a bit.

He volunteered it willingly, without having to be asked, with only the stipulation that no one uses his room. That one is to stay shut, left alone until he returns. Lyall will get a room, so will Bingley, while Mary and Lily will share the last one that's available. Regulus doesn't feel strange about letting them into his house; they're all people who matter to him in some way or another, either just as themselves, or through those that matter to him to start with. Regulus has hardly spoken to Lyall, but he's Remus' dad. That's enough for him.

"Let me help," Remus murmurs. "I can clean. I'm good at it."

"That's not all you're good for, you know," Regulus says quietly, resisting the urge to sigh. Really, Sirius is the one who should be saying these things to Remus, though he probably already has. Remus is just stubborn.

"I know that. I just—" Remus stops, then huffs out a weak laugh, shrugging in defeat. "Want to know something stupid? Cooking, cleaning, doing things for others—I was forced to do it so much that I started to frame it as a natural state, almost. I hate that I turn to it when I'm stressed, because it's—that was conditioned into me, wasn't it? When I don't know what to do, I revert to doing what I was forced to."

"Well, you're not forced to anymore," Regulus reminds him, holding his gaze. "You don't have to do anything."

"But I do want to help," Remus admits. "I want to keep my hands busy. I want to do *something."*

Regulus stares at him for a bit, then says, "I'm not going to tell you what to do, Remus. Do whatever you want. You're not a servant, and you can decide for yourself what to do, and how to do it. Have at it, or don't. Up to you."

With that, Regulus turns away from him, and Remus makes an exasperated noise, muttering, "But it's *your* house."

It doesn't feel like it, Regulus thinks. *I'm not sure it ever did.*

When Regulus doesn't acknowledge Remus any further, he huffs and stomps off, and there's eventually the distant sound of cabinets opening and closing downstairs.

Regulus finishes up at his desk, putting the pencil he left lying out in the holder that Sirius made for him, gingerly picking up the silent hat to run his fingers over it. After years, it's frayed and worn. Holding it puts a lump in his throat, and a part of him wants to throw it away, while another part—as ridiculous as it may be—wants to put it on again. He hasn't worn it since the day he turned fifteen. Two days before disaster struck.

In the end, Regulus doesn't throw it away or put it on. He sits it carefully in the top drawer and shuts it, trying to forget it exists and knowing he never will. The last thing on his desk is his last journal, no flowers in it, only one entry waiting inside. When he wrote in it, he believed it was the final time. He did it when he believed he wasn't coming home. Regulus knows what's waiting there, and he still opens it to look anyway.

James,

If anyone will return here, I know it'll be you, and not Sirius.

I'm not going to give you answers, so if that's what you're seeking, you may as well stop reading now. All I have for you is honesty in the form of what I have hope for, even in death.

I hope you don't miss me. I hope the only thing in this world that you stop trying to do is hold onto me. I hope you let me go, and I hope you have no guilt for it. I hope you live a long, beautiful life full of love, and I hope that any hollow crevices in your life that once consisted of me are filled by things much better. I hope you know that what you may now consider the worst moments of your life—all those moments with me—were the very best of mine.

I know I will be dead long before you read this, but I want you to know that I died loving you. I have stolen your heart with no regard for treating it as well as you did mine and now intend to harm it no more. I face death in the hope that your life is less of a great, big tragedy without me in it.

R.A.B.

He remembers writing this letter and saying so little of what he actually wanted to, because what he *really* wanted was to beg for forgiveness. He wanted to explain to James why he did what he was planning to do, only to refuse to leave James with that burden. He wanted to beg James to love him, always have love for him, only to hold that plea back, because he saw that as a burden, too. He looks back on this letter now and sees how much he hid away, never sharing it, never letting it see the light of the day, where it exists now, and shines.

Regulus sighs and rips the page out, crumbling it in his fist and wanting to burn it to ash. A fool. He was such a fool. It invokes a sense of pity in him to think of just how badly he viewed himself back then. Yes, he was a fuck-up, and still is; yes, he rarely gets things right; yes, James deserves the very best, and Regulus certainly isn't that. But Regulus tries, but Regulus works to make things better, but Regulus is what James wants, and so he shall have him.

The words make Regulus cringe, because he'll be *damned* if he's letting James get away from him now. They're in this for the long-haul, and they'll have a life so far from a great, big

tragedy that they'll forget the meaning. Regulus thinks about this letter that was supposed to be his final one, and he's so fucking grateful that he failed.

Closing the journal, Regulus leaves it behind and takes the page downstairs, finding Remus with a bin bag that he's tossing spoiled food into. As he passes by, Regulus carelessly dumps the paper inside without a second thought, and with that, he goes to gently remove the dead flowers in the window.

It's okay. Someday, James will grow him some more.

~•~

Remus finds Sirius out on the roof, arms wrapped around his legs, head tilted up towards the moon. One look at his eyes, and Remus knows he's not really here right now.

Sighing softly, Remus settles in beside him, his body aching from a long day hard at work. There are a lot of houses in the district that need help, and he's been helping where he can. There's something almost beautiful about it, the way the whole community has come together to work on rebuilding, even around funerals and memorial services. There's one of those every day, and people still come together to make this place a viable option to live in. A home.

Monty's funeral was today. Sirius, James, and Effie didn't take the day off. They could have, probably should have, and many people insisted on it, but each of them simply said they wanted to help. Monty would have helped, if he could be here.

From up here, everything is quiet, but everything is often quiet these days. It's almost peaceful, though. A facade of peace. No one really knows what peace is supposed to look like yet; the world flashes by in a blur for everyone, loss a shroud over them all. Remus almost feels guilty sometimes, getting to see Lyall every single day, getting to be with him. Hearing his voice. Seeing his smile. Feeling the comforting weight of his hand upon his shoulder. He went without it for years, and some will never get it back, as he did. Sirius and James won't.

Cautiously, Remus glances over at Sirius, concerned about him. He's not doing well, but no one really is. It's just—well, this is the first time he's slipped away since the war.

Sirius is rocking very gently, gaze latched onto the moon, face blank otherwise. There's always something chilling about how he goes away, and something equally tender about it, too. He seems empty and simultaneously innocent. Nothing there and still something to protect. Dangerous and delicate.

"Sirius," Remus tries softly, because he remembers that Sirius didn't want to slip away anymore. Remus knows he isn't the cure-all to bringing Sirius back, like he can just call his name and he'll return, but he wants to try for him anyway.

It doesn't work. Sirius only briefly glances at him, empty-eyed, then dismisses him and returns to his moon-gazing. He continues to rock with his usual self-soothing technique.

Remus whispers, "Okay, sweetheart, that's okay," and says nothing else, content to sit beside him and wait.

It takes a while. A long time, in fact. Hours of Sirius just sitting there, utterly enraptured by the moon, rocking in place and not seeming to notice the steady drop in temperature as the night drags on. Remus goes back inside to grab a blanket, bringing it back out to carefully drape it around Sirius, who ignores that as well, though he does stop shivering, thankfully.

Remus only knows Sirius is back when the rocking stops. It's abrupt enough that Remus looks over to see him blinking rapidly, looking around in confusion. When he realizes what happened, his face falls, and it's fucking *heartbreaking*.

"Dammit," Sirius breathes out, eyes fluttering shut, then he opens them and jolts when he finds Remus right next to him. Remus gives him a sad smile, and he returns it, looking so pitifully defeated that Remus could cry. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Remus replies.

"Maybe it's stupid, but a tiny part of me hoped that the issue would go away when the war was over," Sirius confesses, like he's ashamed of it. He draws the blanket tighter around himself, heaving out a weary sigh.

"That's not stupid, Sirius," Remus tells him.

Sirius huffs out a bitter laugh. "The last thing I remember was getting up to throw dirt in Monty's grave. That was this morning, so I lost a whole fucking day. It's been a while since I lost that much time." He shakes his head and looks over at Remus. "Have I been with you?"

"No, you stayed with James and Effie," Remus admits. "We all grouped up to go help with rebuilding, so you and I haven't gotten to see each other, really. When we all got back, you just left, so I didn't even know you'd slipped away until I found you out here. We've been here for a few hours now. Three, I'd say."

"Lovely." Sirius clicks his tongue, then swings out an arm to open up one side of the blanket. "Come on, get warm."

Remus isn't really cold, honestly, but he's never going to pass up an opportunity to be closer to Sirius, so he scoots over and settles in. They wrap the blanket around themselves, curled together, leaning on each other.

"Are we star-gazing now?" Remus asks wryly.

"Oh, you can gaze upon all the stars you like, but *I* will be appreciating the beauty of the moon," Sirius replies, then pointedly turns to stare right at him.

"The moon's that way," Remus says, nodding towards the sky.

"My moon is right here," Sirius counters, pressing closer to him, something gentle and adoring in his gaze.

"Feeling soppy, are we?"

"What can I say? You soften me."

"Mm, big bad Sirius Black soft for little old me," Remus teases.

"Remus, there's nothing *little* about you," Sirius says, waggling his eyebrows at him, and Remus snorts. It makes Sirius grin, which he hides by pressing it into Remus' shoulder, gazing at him through his eyelashes. If he looked at the real moon like that, night would never fall again, because it would come down to earth just to be with him.

"How are you? Really?" Remus asks, voice going quiet with sincerity, studying Sirius' features.

"Been better," Sirius replies with a sigh, grin fading. "Been worse, too. Or maybe not. I don't know. Maybe all the worst things are doomed to feel the same."

"The best thing about the worst things is that they don't last forever," Remus murmurs.

"Monty's dead forever," Sirius counters solemnly.

"No, not forever. Just from now on," Remus corrects, taking a deep breath. "He's not dead forever, because he was alive once, and that life lives on with us. I—you know, it—it was hard when I lost my mum, even though I knew it was coming. I had all that time to come to terms with it, and then I still didn't until after she was gone. It takes time, and I will always miss her. You'll always miss Monty, Sirius, but eventually it stops hurting and starts to be a comfort instead. It's something special to love someone even when they're not here to receive that love, because that love still finds a way out into the world, and that's them, you know? We love them so much that we keep them in this world with us, even after they've left it."

"I'm not there yet," Sirius croaks. "I still just wish he hadn't left it."

Remus' heart pangs. "Well, that never goes away, I'm afraid. It just…gets easier to live with, someday."

Sirius swallows and looks down, then just tips his head down and rests it there against Remus' shoulder. After a moment or two, he adjusts to snuggle in closer, leaving his head laid there, his face turned towards the sky. Leaning on the moon he has claimed as his own to gaze upon the one everyone else gets to know.

"I haven't talked to James about leaving yet," Sirius whispers, eventually. Shame colors his voice again.

"There's still time," Remus assures him. "There are a lot more funerals to go to and much more rebuilding to be done."

"Terrible, isn't it?" Sirius asks softly. "How life and death go hand-in-hand. What's dead was once alive, what's alive will one day be dead, and we just have to accept that. There's no way around it. There's no way to escape it."

"Do you want to?"

"Don't you?"

"No," Remus says after a long moment of deliberation. He lays his head over on Sirius' and closes his eyes. "It's not a trap, sweetheart. It's a journey."

"Yeah, but we all end up in the same place," Sirius chokes out.

Remus mulls that over for a long time, eyes still shut, and before everything that has happened, every moment through the war, he would have agreed. He would have felt trapped

by a destination he couldn't get away from, finding no freedom in fate, but war has come, and war has passed, and he is still here to embrace the freedom at his fingertips now.

That makes it easy, almost, to whisper, "Where we end up isn't the point. What we do before we get there is."

"What are we going to do?" Sirius whispers back.

"Anything," Remus declares, and then he smiles. "Everything."

~•~

District six is…new. Lily isn't sure she likes it at first, but then she realizes that has a lot to do with the disaster that befell this place and the people within. It's during the rebuilding efforts that she really begins to find love for it.

Lily, Mary, and Bingley stay with Lyall in Regulus' house for two and half weeks. Mary and Bingley's home is smaller, as most houses outside of the Victor's Village are in all districts, but it's also more trashed than those in the Victor's Village are. The Aurors apparently went through homes to find any stragglers that may not have gotten to escape, and of course they didn't do so gently, likely on Riddle's orders.

It's hard for Mary and Bingley, having to go into their home and simultaneously clean it up while also going through their family's belongings. Boxing things up and discarding broken furniture. Donating clothes to those who need it more and sweeping up broken glass. Letting go of what they'd love to keep and having no other choice but to trash shattered memories of their childhood.

It takes time. Bingley is a bundle of anger and frustration, often fighting with Mary about what they get rid of, and what they don't. He finds a toy he had since he was a baby broken on the floor and runs away, and Mary wants to follow, but she's at a loss on what to do to help, and so fucking tired. So, Lily puts a hand on her arm and goes for her.

Bingley is found in the school, which is how Lily first learns what Mary's classroom looks like. The school itself is still intact, as no one was in it when the biological warfare was released. It's just empty and way too quiet for a place meant to echo with the laughter of children. Mary's classroom is lovely, though, full of art created by her students, popping with color. Even empty as it is, it feels warm. Lily gets why Bingley would go there, and he is there, curled up in a corner, crying.

Bingley talks to Lily that day. Talks and talks about all his friends and even some of the children he wasn't close with, and how over half of them are dead now. It's a heavy thing for a thirteen year old child to have to live with.

Lily comforts him, listens to him, and then coaxes him home.

Eventually, Mary and Bingley's home is livable again, and though they're both palpably wary to return, they do go back. For the first week, it's difficult and strange for them, and Lily feels like they're all walking around on eggshells, but they continue to go out and help others rebuild, attend funerals and memorial services, and soon enough, returning home becomes something they all look forward to at the end of the day.

For Lily, the hardest adjustment isn't settling into district six; it's settling into the world as a whole after the war. She isn't expecting the strange responses that grip her, unprepared for the random surges of inexplicable fury that rolls through her unprompted, out of nowhere, with no warning.

She'll close the refrigerator and get so fucking *angry* about the suction sound it makes, for seemingly no reason at all, and she will want to hit it. She'll want her gun. She'll want to fight, and there's nothing to fight anymore. She wakes up at night out of nightmares *pissed off* beyond belief, needing to get up and pace, wanting a new mission to throw herself into, and there's no new mission for her to fixate on.

Remus is the only one who knows about it, for a while. Lily talks to him, because she tells him everything, and because he gets it. If anyone understands anger and chaos, it's him.

But really, it's not quite him anymore, not the same way. They do everything together, but not this. If anyone deserves peace and calm, it's him; he seems to be getting closer to it every day,

while she feels as if she's getting farther away. Still, she tells him, and he listens, and he confesses his fears and doubts to her as well, and they comfort each other.

Lily doesn't talk to Mary about it for some time. Mary wasn't there, and Lily doesn't resent her for that. Doesn't want to, and can't, really, because Mary and Bingley being safe was one of the things that got her through the war at all. It's just—it is hard when they've had two different experiences, though they have both suffered and are still struggling, just not in the same way. Lily almost doesn't want to burden Mary with the weight of what she's feeling, and so she hides it.

Anger is hard to hide. It's blunt and obvious, an emotion that fills the body to the brim, red like blood and loud like screams. All intimacy with Mary has come to a halt, and they barely even touch anymore outside of when they're sleeping at night, and instead of reaching out, Lily shies away. It leaves these open spaces for her anger to fill up, impossible to miss, and Mary always sees right through her. Every fucking time.

It all comes to a head about a month after the war. Lily has declared war on the refrigerator in Mary's home, labeling it as her enemy, despising it every time she opens and closes it. She is aware that this is ridiculous, but she can't help it, and she can't stop returning to it over and over, drawn to her own rage.

There are a lot of things Lily is angry about. Her family, still. Sybill, still. Marlene, still. Dorcas—oh, she's so angry about Dorcas, about how no one knows where she is or what she's doing or if she's safe, about how she made Lily afraid and she was never supposed to, not her, never her. Lily is angry about the muffled cries she can hear from the bathroom when Mary is in the shower, and she's angry about how Bingley looks upset more than he ever smiles, and she's angry about how her body is so attuned to war that she responds to everything like fighting is all she'll ever know. Every loud noise is a threat. Every unknown space is dangerous. Every shadow is a memory, and every dream is a nightmare, and every dawn is a new day after the war is over, but the war lingers all around, and everything just blurs together. Still blurring, even now.

Eventually, Lily just snaps, and the refrigerator—her mortal enemy, at this point—takes the brunt of her breakdown.

She punches it maybe…five times too many, hitting it over and over while her chest heaves and a fierce noise grinds out from the very depth of her through clenched teeth, utterly

raging. It doesn't hurt, and it does, and it feels so fucking good in the midst of it. And then it's over, and her hand is hurt.

"Ouch. *Fuck,"* Lily spits out, cradling her hand to her chest and bending over slightly as she releases a stream of colorful curses, hand bruised and swelling already.

"For fuck's sake, what'd that refrigerator ever do to you?" Mary mutters from the doorway, which is when Lily realizes that Mary was an audience to all of that.

"It looked at me funny," Lily snaps, tossing Mary a scowl, then groaning as she peers down at her hand with a grimace. Oh, it hurts. That was catastrophically stupid, and to add salt to the wound, the refrigerator is entirely unharmed.

"Alright, stop it, let me see it," Mary says, sweeping in to cup Lily's elbow and peer at her injured hand.

Huffing, Lily looks away and ignores the pain shooting down the back of her hand, radiating out from her two middle knuckles. It's not broken, she knows that already, but it's definitely going to need to be set and wrapped for a few days, maybe a week, and she'll need to be careful with it until it heals up. Hands are so delicate for all the pain they can cause.

Sighing, Mary mumbles, "Come on," and guides Lily from the kitchen, taking her into the bathroom where they keep the first aid beneath the counter. Mary gestures for Lily to sit on the closed toilet, then settles on the edge of the tub herself.

"Antiseptic first," Lily tells her, then shuts up when Mary shoots her a flat look from up under her eyelashes.

"Want to tell me what's been going on with you?" Mary asks quietly as she starts cleaning Lily's busted knuckles.

"You mean besides the obvious?"

"Yes, Lily, besides the obvious."

"Oh, well, besides that…" Lily snorts. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"Hm." Mary lets that hang between them for a while as she works, possibly just so Lily can sit with how immeasurably stupid it sounds. Then, finally, Mary sighs and begins gently dabbing away dried blood as she says, "Is this about Dorcas?"

Lily feels that like a xylophone mallet dragging up the ridges of her spine. It makes her jolt, her eyes flying wide as Mary pauses and peers at her, assessing. "Dorcas? What?"

"You love her," Mary states bluntly, and Lily feels *that* like a fist shoved down her throat to grip her intestines and yank them out, her innards exposed. Her mouth runs dry, and she's instantly thrown into pure terror at the thought that Mary is going to see right through her as she always does, except she won't understand what she's looking at. She won't understand what it means. She won't understand how it works, and then she'll think it's something it's not, and she'll leave, or she'll make Lily leave, and Lily doesn't want to leave; Lily wants to stay, Lily wants to be here, Lily wants—

Lily wants, and so Lily lies, almost without even taking the time to ask herself what the truth is. The truth is complicated, and she doesn't fully understand it, but she does know it's a lie when she blurts out, "What? No! Nooooo. No, ha, no, I don't, not at all. I only love you."

Mary lets that hang there for a few moments, too, once again forcing Lily to sit there with how fucking *dumb* she sounds. Her face grows hot from the shame of it. Ironic, really. She used to be such a good liar, entirely unfazed by anyone, and then Mary Macdonald strutted into her life, and she came undone like Mary found her loose thread and *pulled.*

"Want to try that again?" Mary offers, genuinely giving her the second chance, and Lily deflates all at once on a harsh exhale.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. That was—I don't know why I did that. Why I lied." Lily grimaces and looks down. "I'm just…"

"Scared," Mary murmurs, her fingers gentle against Lily's swollen skin, barely even hurting her as she starts wrapping her hand, taking care of her like it's the most important thing she'll ever do, and Lily could fucking *cry.* "You're scared, and you have been, and we all have been. I just—I want to know what it is, Lily. Whatever it is, you can talk to me. It's more than just the war, isn't it? Or maybe it *is* the war, and not the parts I know about, or parts you think you can't share with me, or shouldn't—but I'm here. I'll listen."

"It's—" Lily swallows and squeezes her eyes shut, and then she opens them and looks at Mary helplessly, utterly defeated as she croaks, "You're here, but you—you weren't *there."*

Mary pauses again, lips thinning out for a beat, and then she continues working on Lily's hand. "I know I wasn't there, and I won't apologize for that, Lily. I—"

"No, no, fucking hell, *no,"* Lily sputters quickly, shaking her head. "That's not—I didn't mean it like that. I'm not saying I wish you had been, and I will forever be grateful that you weren't. It's one of the things that brought me comfort, and still does now, just that you and Bing Bing weren't there. I just don't know how to… I—I can't explain it. All that happened. What it felt like. What we saw. You—you weren't there, and you had to have been there to understand, and so you…can't."

"You don't think I would be able to understand considering the things I've experienced?" Mary asks, not as a challenge, just a genuine question.

"I don't know," Lily admits. "Maybe." She looks away, dropping her gaze down to her hand. "The issue is, I don't know how to say it. What to say. Can't—I can't really say much of anything, and I don't really want to, and everyone who was there doesn't need me to. Do you —does that make sense?"

"Lily," Mary whispers, smoothing down the wrap on her hand and reaching up to cradle Lily's jaw, tilting her face up until they're looking at each other. "I don't need to know all the details, okay? I don't need to know anything other than what you want me to know, or need me to know, whenever you're ready to tell me. But I do need to know a general idea of what's

going on with *you.* Not the war, exactly, but how it's making you feel, especially if it's pushing you to the point that you're assaulting my refrigerator."

"It makes a stupid fucking sound, Mary. I hate it so much."

"Nearly breaking your hand against it for sounding stupid seems a bit excessive."

"I know." Lily groans and tips her face into Mary's palm, eyes sinking shut. Mary's thumb strokes her cheek, and Lily breathes out as something in her seems to ease all at once, just for this moment, a chasm of safety she falls into by nuzzling at Mary's hand and ignoring everything wrong in the world to sit here with everything right—the woman she loves, indisputably. So much love here, like this, and it's a love that deserves honesty. A love that was built on the foundation of transparency. A love that Lily walked into with eyes wide open and has no desire in her to walk away from. So, she takes a deep breath, and she speaks. "I don't want to be the person I was before, because it was wrong—I was wrong, and it wasn't who I wanted to be, not really, but I don't know how to handle this, Mary. I just feel so *angry,* all the time. And what if, after everything that's happened, all that I've done and caused and been through, something's gone wrong inside me?"

"Look at me. Hey, *look* at me," Mary says fiercely, and Lily's eyes snap open instantly, something inside of her trembling in trepidation for whatever Mary will say. Mary keeps one hand on Lily's jaw, but raises the other and points towards the other end of the house, her eyes glimmering like black diamonds. "I need you to hear this—my little brother, him, down the hall, he is home. He's *home,* and he's safe, and it's—it's hard, yes, for all of us, but we're here. We are, and he is, and you went into war for him, and for all the Bingleys in this world, just so that this world could be one we all heal in. And we can. And we will. And we *are.* Lily, you know as well as I do that healing is not an easy process, inside or out. Sometimes, in the midst of healing is when we feel like never will, but we will anyway. We do anyway, and you're a part of the reason that's possible, so don't you *dare* think for even a second that there's anything wrong in you or with you for how deeply you love. It's love. It's always been love, and it still is, and that's why it hurts."

"Sometimes I want to go back there," Lily chokes out, her eyes stinging. "I want to go back to when I didn't know it was love, when I thought I didn't care, how fucked is that? I believed everyone I loved was dead, but at least I didn't have to feel how much it hurts when that's mostly true."

Mary's expression softens with such sadness. "Lily…"

"My family, they were killed because I refused to leave well enough alone. *Sybill* is dead. She's dead, and I had her pick out the heli-carrier she'd die in. The Thunderbird Thieves—we're the only ones left, Mary, and how—how do we live with that? Amos, Sybill, Barty—how are we supposed to—" Lily's voice cracks, and the tears fall when she blinks. "I wanted to die in the war, I think. Before you, I wanted to sacrifice my life for it, for the world, in honor of everyone I loved that was already gone, but I'm still here, and I've lost even more."

"Yes, you're still here, and though you've lost so much—too fucking much—you still have people here with you. We live with what we've lost by living with what we have."

"But I'm not sure that I am living. I—I can never tell, really. I thought I'd want to slow down and stop running, but I want to keep fighting, and I'm so angry that I can't anymore. It feels like I'm still there sometimes, in the war, just trying to survive and make my way back to you and Bingley and everyone I am so fortunate to still have, but I'm here, so why do I still feel so lost?"

"Do you know why I stole your gun the first day we met?" Mary murmurs, swallowing harshly. Lily shakes her head, and Mary exhales harshly. "I—I couldn't find Bingley. When the fighting started, I saw my parents go down, but Bingley—I lost sight of him, and all I could think was that I had to get to him. I didn't really know it until I found him, but there was this sort of relief I felt when I did find him, because I thought that at least I still had something to fight for. A reason to pull that trigger if that's what it came to. And there is no part of me that wouldn't pick up a gun for him or you right now, no matter how safe the world is supposed to be now. You want to keep fighting because you have *reasons* to. You need to give yourself more time. We don't feel safe yet."

"I'm not sure I ever will," Lily confesses, like it's her greatest sin.

"You will. We all will." Mary offers her a sad smile. "Until then, you won't be fighting alone."

"I'm addicted to grieving, I think, and that's worse for me. Can't quite quit that one cold-turkey, but it's an ongoing battle."

"It's always an ongoing battle. You can quit, but it never does."

"But it's a fight worth fighting, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but sometimes you get tired."

"Which is when you let someone else help you fight. We don't have to do it alone. That's the beauty of it. Give me the wine, Marlene."

Lily heaves out a harsh sob, feeling the stab of missing Marlene pierce through her as she remembers that moment, and remembers helping Marlene fight her on-going battle. Three times Lily helped Marlene fight; pulling her out of the arena, pushing air into her lungs and making her heart beat, and then taking that bottle of wine and being there to take it if she felt the urge to pick it back up again. Three times, and that was all Lily got. Three times, and she couldn't the last time.

Three times Marlene died; her first arena, her second, and that moment on the heli-carrier that Lily refused to let her go. The worst of it being that she died, and the best being that she got to live on afterwards anyway. Three times, and that final time, Marlene didn't get to live on past it.

The world is a cruel, cruel place. Lily has been picked apart by it, left lost and alone in it, believing herself loveless and continuing on in spite of that anyway. She said it then, being addicted to grief, and she still is. She takes all of it in and has to fight to get it out, to let it out as love, but just as Lily made sure Marlene wasn't alone in her fight, Lily isn't alone in hers either. Some people she wanted to be here aren't, but some are, and she'll fight until her last breath.

No matter what part of her life she was in, she always has.

"I'm sorry I haven't been talking to you," Lily rasps, scrubbing roughly at her tear-stained cheeks. Mary gently pushes her uninjured hand down and wipes the tears away with her own

hands much more tenderly. "I never wanted to let the war come between us. I'm sorry, Mary."

"Shh, nothing has come between us, lover," Mary whispers, leaning in to press a gentle, fleeting kiss underneath each of Lily's eyes. "There's no rush, okay? We can go slow through love and life, at our own pace, and do what we can when we're ready. Like, for me, I'm—I'm not ready to go back to the school yet. I don't know when I will be. We all have things we have to work through, and we'll work through them together."

"I'm here for you, you know," Lily croaks. "For anything."

"I know," Mary says softly. She pulls back and gazes at her, taking a deep breath. "I only ask that you don't lie to me again. If you don't want to talk, just tell me that."

Lily's stomach cramps up. "Okay. I'm—I shouldn't have. I know that. Dorcas is just… complicated."

"Dorcas is, or you two are?" Mary asks.

"At the moment, I'm sure Dorcas is, wherever she is," Lily admits, "but it's—it's both. I do love her, Mary, but it's all—history. Like a scar. The wound is healed up, but the scar remains, and it's not going to go away. It's just a part of me now, you know? I just—loved her once, and I suppose I'll always have love for her from that, even if it's different now. I wouldn't—it's not about want, okay? I want you. That's not a lie. I—"

"Lily," Mary cuts in. "Stop. You're not a bad person for loving as you do. Did we not just go over this? And, for the record, I'm not jealous or worried, or anything like that. Do you know that you look at me like—like I'm the embodiment of peace? Like nothing or no one in this world brings you a sense of calm, such as simply existing with me? And that's—it's a bit scary, that I can make you feel that way, if I'm honest, because all you want is peace and I can help give that to you, and I—I've never wanted to get something right like this before, when it comes to love. I'm so used to just—making peace with it not working out that maybe I'd give up before I even began, but with you, I don't make peace with it. I refuse to give up anything with you; there's nothing in this world we can't overcome, okay? Nothing."

"Dorcas isn't something we have to overcome at all," Lily murmurs. "But—maybe my anger is. I just—I don't know where to start."

Mary surveys her for a long moment, calmly, then huffs a weak laugh and says, "Yeah, I get that, and I think...maybe we should talk to James and Regulus, or Sirius and Remus, just to see if they have any advice. And, as for Dorcas, I do want you to know something, though. You can—Lily, you can go find her. If any part of you wants that, don't think that would come in between us, because it won't. If you—"

"No," Lily cuts in firmly, setting her shoulders, and she has to swallow past the block in her throat. "I—I'm worried about her, I won't lie. I know you are, too. I know we all are, but I want to be here with you. She scared me, Mary, and—and it's not that we can't overcome that, or anything, but you were right. I don't feel safe yet, but with you, I get closer to it every day, and this is where I need to be. This is where I want to be. If she makes her way to me, then I'll open the door. I'm not the one who closed it; she was, and I understand why, but she's the only one who can decide if it opens again. Not me. And, if she never does… All I can do is hope that she's okay. I—I really fucking hope she's okay, and for now, that's all I can do."

"I am worried for her, you know. She's a good person, and I care about her, too," Mary murmurs. "Maybe she'll find it in herself to knock again."

"Maybe," Lily says softly, but she doesn't dwell on it any further, because she knows better than anyone what it is to close yourself off from everyone and everything. Dorcas has her own battles to fight, and Lily will gladly help her, if she'll allow it, but she cannot abandon her own to do so. No one is alone, and maybe, maybe, maybe Dorcas will find comfort in that someday. Lily is here, as are many others, whenever she's ready. All she has to do is be ready, and she isn't yet.

Lily is, though. Lily's ready, and so, as much as it hurts, as difficult as it is, she lets her grief twist up in her until it aches more than her hand does, and then she lets it flow out, gives it away in the form of love. She tips in and meets Mary's lips with her own, and she is still angry, still ready to fight, but the cliche of it all is that she's also the safest she's ever been.

The world speeds around her in a blur, the war a background soundtrack she still can't get out of her head, but she forces herself to slow down and feel this moment for what it is.

Just a moment. A moment. One moment among many where she's healing, even if she can't feel it yet. But she's going to.

Someday, she will.

~•~

James is in his backyard, looking at his dead flowers again.

Don't ask him why, really. He keeps waiting for himself to get up and start over, and try again, and grow something new. It seems harder to do with each passing day.

His dad watched these flowers bloom.

His dad never saw them die.

Time moves strangely after war, as it turns out. James is in and out of it, sometimes struggling so much to figure out when he is that he has to be told his dad is dead all over again. It's not that he forgets, it's just that he is home, with his cane and his glasses, and the Quarterly Memorial hasn't happened yet, and Regulus is still across the street asleep with Barty, and Sirius is missing Remus, and James' dad should be somewhere in the house, but James can't find him. No matter how hard he looks, he can't find his dad, and then someone has to tell him why.

James, it's been a week and a half since the war. Your dad's funeral was today.

James, it's been thirteen days since the war. Your dad's funeral was three days ago.

James, it's been nineteen days since the war. Your dad's funeral was nine days ago.

James, it's been a month since the war. Your dad's funeral was nearly three weeks ago.

James, it's been—

It's been a hard month and a half. Seven weeks in total since the end of the war. They came home after, to an abandoned district with only a fraction of the people who started here. Others came, too. Some to just get away from their own worst memories in some other place in this world, and others because they had nowhere else to go. Everyone has been rebuilding together, as much as they can around a very packed schedule, death and mourning penciled in the most.

James has been to memorial services. Or funerals. Or some fucked up amalgamation of the two, because death in the midst of war is rarely simple. Some bodies never found, some not prepped in time, some dead before there was even space or time for there to be space and time to mourn them.

James had never been to a funeral before. Or, well, yes he has, but he was too young to remember it. His grandparents on his dad's side died before he was ever born, but he was nearly two when his grandparents on his mum's side passed away, both of them within days of each other. He knows he was there, of course, but he has no recollection of it. There was the funeral held for his cat when he was eighteen, but that was different, because it took place in this backyard; though, if it does count, James was a blubbering mess throughout the whole thing.

James wonders if Vanity got a funeral. What about Irene? Their bodies made it back home, even if they didn't. Hodge's body didn't make it back. Neither did Mathias, Axus, or Bernice's. Or Peter's. They were all in that river, torn apart.

In some way or another, James is at fault for that.

James doesn't like it. Funerals, or memorial services, or whatever. He'd never say that out loud, obviously, and it's clearly important for those mourning, but to him, it's stifling.

Fleamont Potter's funeral was the worst. There was a body to bury in the graveyard in district six, because Effie was with him when he died and took care of all of that. It was the first funeral James ever went to, that he could remember. The very first funeral—his dad. His fucking dad.

James didn't cry at his dad's funeral. It didn't feel…like his dad, so maybe that's why. They'd dressed Monty up in something warm and nice, and his face was set into something peaceful, and it—that wasn't James' dad. It just wasn't. James' dad was gone, is gone, and they closed the casket on an echo of him and lowered him into the ground, and James didn't cry. James didn't speak. James didn't throw dirt into his grave, asked Sirius to do it for him, just sat in the front row with Regulus' hand in his, then stood up and let people tell him how sorry they were for his loss. He thought of Alice. Sorry really is like a slap in the face, more than he ever realized.

Alice wasn't there at the funeral, not that James expected them to be. Marlene wasn't, but she would have been, if she could have been. Rodolphus came, and so did Pandora. Emmeline showed up, as did Minerva and Poppy, and of course Lily, Mary, Remus, and Lyall were there. Aberforth didn't come, and Dorcas didn't either. Dorcas hasn't shown up anywhere.

James expected to see her at Marlene's memorial service, but she didn't go. That one… Well, there was no body to bury, no casket to lower into the ground, and so they blew up a picture of her and mourned her through memory. Cordelia was a wreck, and Sirius threw up after it was over. Minerva and Poppy came on Dorcas' behalf, but when Cordelia asked for her, desperately, they had no answers for her whereabouts. They all waited for Dorcas to arrive, believing in her to show up all the way to the end and then beyond, dragging it out so she would get the chance to pay her respects, and then Dorcas never came. James almost envied her.

That's fucked up, he knows, but he didn't want to be there, or any other memorial service or funeral he has gone to. For once, he wanted to be the type of person who would walk away from such things. He's not, though. He's expected to be there, and so he has gone, gritting his teeth and bearing it the whole way through, hating every second and immeasurably relieved when it was over, so he could leave.

Barty got a funeral, too. Regulus planned that one, and you could tell, because it was done so delicately. There was a lot of gentle love threaded throughout, something James isn't quite sure Barty would have liked, honestly. James thinks Barty would have wanted a party or something; everyone getting drunk or high in his honor, raising glasses and laughing about all his greatest hits. No one is really in a place to manage that energy or atmosphere, so Barty

didn't get what he would have wanted—but then again, Regulus knew Barty better than James did, so maybe he's wrong. The service was lovely, in abstract. Barty's mum was memorialized with him, which Regulus insists he would have wanted, while Barty's dad wasn't so much as mentioned. Regulus wrote something, then couldn't read it in front of everyone, so he just folded up the paper and let it get buried with him.

Around a month in, the funerals and memorial services slowed to a stop, or at least those they were required to go to. There were others, of course. James went to the funeral for the Casselberrys, guilt choking him as he witnessed Sundry's grief firsthand. Dorcas—arguably responsible for it—didn't show up to that one either. There was a proper memorial service for Frank and Augusta, which James went to, and it was him that threw up afterwards on that one. Rabastan got one, and so did Sybill, and so did Amos. There were so many in district six alone, for all those that died before the war even picked up.

There wasn't anything for Albus, or Lily's family, or those that died with no family left, because all their family was dead already. There were a lot of Hallow funerals, and James didn't go to very many of those. Rita got a funeral; more people went to that one than those that showed up to Marlene's, because this world is always going to be fucked up, no matter how much better it gets over time. There's no changing that.

The world has started to get better, though, or so James has heard. Little bits and pieces trickle through the grapevine, announcements made and events thrown. Vanity got honored as a war hero in the Hallow, a statue raised in her honor on the castle grounds, replacing Riddle's legacy. They wanted it to be Remus, originally, but he refused and suggested her instead. Vanity's family—all of them alive and safe—have been given money and anything they could want, except for Vanity back. They can't get that. No one gets that.

The train opened up to free travel for all two weeks ago, and they're planning to use the underground stations throughout all the districts as well, which opens up more jobs for build crews and maintenance upkeep, as well as conductors. Sponsors have been throwing money around left and right for war relief, like that can overshadow all the money they threw around in the name of slaughter. The arena has been fully dismantled and destroyed, leaving it an abandoned battlefield soaked in dried blood and crowded with countless ghosts. A committee has come together in the place of one Master to work on things like new Auror reform programs, building a proper justice system, reworking laws, releasing and rehabilitating those that were in Azkaban, removing the concept of unwilling and unpaid servants altogether, and just in general better-world things, or whatever. James doesn't know and doesn't care, honestly, not that many of them do.

It's ironic, really. They all fought in the war for a better world, and then don't even care about how the better world comes to be. They don't have to fight anymore; other people are handling it. Aberforth is on the committee. Minerva and Poppy. Filius. Kingsley. The Head Auror who betrayed Riddle. Slughorn. Mayors from districts. Even some Hallows. It's a wide variety, a balanced system with representatives for all. The power to the people, apparently.

James doesn't feel very powerful these days. Mostly, he feels weak. He feels tired.

Death… He's tired of death. He feels like there's no escape from it, and he struggles to find the point in it. What's the point of death? That's the end of it all, a finality that he can't wrap his head around. He doesn't appreciate endings, or finality; to someone who never gives up, who is always trying, maybe it makes sense for this to be senseless.

James stares at his flowers a lot and thinks about how pointless it is that they're dead. How pointless it was that he grew them in the first place. How pointless it was when his dad complimented them. *They're beautiful, son.*

"James?"

"Hi, Mum," James mumbles as Effie comes to join him in staring at his dead flowers. He does this a lot, practically every day now, so they know where to find him when he isn't in the house with everyone else. They put a chair out here for him, but he never sits in it. He stands for hours and leans on his cane and lets his leg ache.

Effie stops next to him and sighs. It's her *we-need-to-talk* sigh. He has heard it a lot lately and usually tries to avoid whatever comes after, and would this time, too, except she says, "Sirius is about to come out here to talk to you."

"Okay," James murmurs.

"Before that…" Effie trails off, quiet, breathing. She's more careful these days, like she feels unsteady, still getting her footing in a world without Monty in it. Sometimes, he slips out of bed at night and finds her at the table in the kitchen, crying silently into her hands.

"What, Mum?" James asks.

"Your flowers are rotting," Effie comments softly, idly, like this isn't what she came here to say, but it's something to say anyway. Filling silences. Observations they all can see.

"Yeah, I know," James says. "Have been for a while now."

"Still hanging on, though."

"They'll fall eventually."

"You don't want to save them?" Effie asks.

James swallows. "I don't think I can. I'm pretty sure they're beyond help by now."

"You could try," Effie suggests.

"Don't see the point," James admits.

Effie is silent for a bit, then says, "Honey, I'm—I'm worried about you."

"Okay."

"James—"

"I know, Mum," James cuts in, utterly exhausted.

"No, I don't think you do." Effie sets her shoulders and swivels to stand in front of him, her jaw set. There are many things that James got from his father, but his stubborn streak? That comes right from his mother. "I will not tell you how to grieve, nor will I demand a damn thing from you, James, do you hear me? But I will not stand by and let you feel alone in this."

"I'm not alone," James whispers. "I know I'm not. I'm just…"

"What?" Effie prompts. "Honey, talk to me. You can talk to me. You can—you can tell me *anything."*

James' throat aches. "I don't want to hurt you."

"I know you don't, no more than I want to hurt you, but the thing is, this *hurts.* We are hurting. There's no way around that," Effie tells him. "I'm your mother, James. I'm here to be hurt, and to be loved, and all of it. I'm here with you for all of it, anything, so don't bottle it up. Share it with me."

"I don't feel him here," James chokes out, giving in swiftly and hating himself for it, and needing it. "I don't feel Dad here anymore, or anywhere. It's just his absence. He's *gone,* Mum, and you—you talk about him like he's still with us, and I don't want to take that away from you, but it doesn't feel like he is. I'm so—I'm so *mad* at him, because he told you he'd still be here, and I don't feel it. I can't feel him anymore."

Effie's throat clicks on a harsh swallow, and she gives a slow nod. "Well, that's—that's okay, James. You don't have to hide how you feel from me. We don't have to feel the same, you know. Neither of us is wrong, and no one really feels pain the same exact way. Sometimes I wish I *didn't* feel him, and I'm—I'm guilty about that. It's grief. It's all grief."

"I wish I could feel him," James croaks, then gives a brittle laugh. "Hey, let's swap."

"Do you want to know the truth?" Effie asks gently, and James nods, even though he's scared. "It's not that he's just here. I have to look for him to find him. To feel, you have to reach out through the pain and hope something reaches back."

"It hurts," James rasps, blinking rapidly and looking away.

"Yes, it does," Effie agrees. "It hurts to reach out, even more so when something *doesn't* reach back, but I keep reaching. I will always reach, and I will find him when I can, and you don't have to if you don't want to, but you can, too."

"I don't know *how,"* James confesses. "It's all just… It's dead flowers. I can't, Mum. They're dead, and what was the point? He's dead, and what—what was the fucking *point?"*

Effie breathes in, then out, and when James looks at her, she is swiping tears off her cheeks. He knows he has hurt her, deeply, by saying this, and wishes he never spoke at all, but she gives him a trembling smile and murmurs, "You were the point. The way he made his tea was the point. How he sang happily the first morning after we moved in together was the point. All the times he held you in his arms, and every kiss he gave me, and each time he smiled at Sirius—that was the point. James, death does not erase the point of life. A dead flower does not mean it never bloomed. It did, and it was beautiful."

James is pretty sure that cracks him wide open, splits him in half right down the middle, unzips him from throat to navel until the mess of blood and organs inside him are exposed. He makes a horrible, beautiful sound of pain and love in the back of his throat, eyes stinging as the tears immediately start to flow. It takes him apart. That absolutely takes him apart.

"Oh, James," Effie whispers, reaching for him, hands on his cheeks, thumbs brushing away his tears. She smiles at him through her own. "The flowers are rotting, but you can grow more. Those that bloom after honor the beauty of the ones before them. Your father is gone, and it hurts, but every single second with him makes up for every single second without."

James nods, unable to speak through his sobs, and he keeps nodding as he falls into her and holds on, clinging to his mum like a small child. His mum. It's in his mum's arms, in this very moment, that he feels his dad again.

They stay together like that for some time, Effie petting over his hair and murmuring soothingly in his ear, and they don't break apart until the door opens and Sirius slips outside. He halts, visibly unsure about coming out, clearly not wanting to break up the moment. Effie kisses James' cheek and waves Sirius over, pausing to kiss Sirius' cheek on the way back into the house. Lyall might be over, James hasn't checked, but he and Effie play cards almost every day.

James appreciates Lyall more than he can express, because he's friends with Effie and helps her a lot. He lost his wife years ago and knows how hard it is to handle that loss. James and Sirius lost a dad, so it's different, and Lyall helps Effie in ways that they can't. James can never repay Lyall for that.

"Everything okay?" Sirius asks as he comes to a stop next to James, hands shoved in his pockets. There's an anxious sort of energy to him. He can't quite meet James' eyes.

"Yeah, um—yeah," James mumbles lamely, not really having the words to explain what just happened. His eyes still itch, but he ignores it and slaps on a smile, leaning over to knock their shoulders together. "Anyway, Mum says you wanted to talk to me. What's up?"

Sirius looks at him cautiously and swallows.

James forces himself not to show his anxiety. He forces himself to remain calm and casual, not letting on just how close to falling apart he feels right now, and all times, really. It's easier with Sirius, because taking care of Sirius is as instinctive as breathing. When Sirius is down, James is the one who lifts him up, and the same in reverse. Just…lately, James hasn't been letting himself be down around Sirius, because he likes pretending that there's nothing to be down about. He doesn't want to be lifted up. He doesn't want anything.

He knows, distantly, that this isn't healthy. He knows that, and he knows he needs to stop, but he doesn't want to. He isn't sure that he can. Can't he just take care of Sirius? Check on him, focus on making him laugh, put all his energy into being sure that he's okay, rather than worrying about himself. Why can't he do that? Really, that's all he wants to do.

Remus has bluntly told him that it's worse for him. James has ignored him. Regulus has tried to talk to him about it, but that's a very, very complicated topic between them, so they gave up before they even began. It's not a conversation that ever really gets anywhere with anyone;

even James and Sirius haven't talked about it. James thinks they're about to, and he's dreading it. Everyone else gets unhealthy coping mechanisms, so why can't he? It's not even drugs or anything; it's literally just him pretending he's fine when he's not, because his best friend is also not fine, and he chooses to worry about that instead. As far as unhealthy coping mechanisms go, that one's not even that bad, so really, can't they just leave him alone?

Apparently not, because Sirius takes a deep breath and says, quietly, "We, uh. We need to talk, James."

"Breaking up with me?" James teases weakly.

"Well…" Sirius grimaces. "I mean, kind of? Temporarily?"

James rears back, immediately alarmed. "What? No. You can't do that. Don't do that."

"Oh, come off it, you know you're still my better half," Sirius says with a snort. "I just…"

"Sirius," James mutters, "let's—can we not do this? Just—just let it lie, yeah? Let it be. We're fine."

"We're really not," Sirius whispers.

"We've *always* been fine," James whispers back, getting a little heated now. "Don't—please don't do this to me. You don't get to do this to me. Not you."

Sirius closes his eyes and hangs his head forward, blowing out a deep breath. "Fucking hell, James, we're still in love, so calm down. It's—it's not an *actual* breakup, you know."

"Then why does it feel like it?" James demands, on the verge of desperation already, just that quickly. Sirius really did not start this off properly, because James is flying into damage

control immediately. "What did I do? What did I not do? Just—if you need something from me, whatever it is, it's yours. If I did something wrong, or—or—"

"Okay, no, stop," Sirius cuts in firmly, and James snaps his mouth shut. "James, this has nothing to do with you."

"Oh, the *'it's not you, it's me'* line? Really?"

"In this case, it's true."

James scoffs. "Well, okay, so—so what do you need, then? We'll fix it. Figure it out together, like we always have. We—"

"We *can't,"* Sirius snaps, face twisting up. "James, it's not—I mean, it's what *we* need. Not just me. And, right now, you need to stop focusing your every breath on me the moment I walk into a room. You *need* to focus on yourself, too, and it's like you can't do that when I'm so fucked up. Do you remember before your first games? All you fucking *did* was take care of me, and you were planning to *die.* You broke down and cried once. Just one time in all of that. We can't—we've never really figured out that balance, because when I can't take care of myself or anyone else, you step up every time, and you don't need that right now. You shouldn't have to do that."

"You're my best friend," James croaks. "What else am I going to do? Am I not supposed to do that? *You* do that. You take care of me plenty. You're always there for me, Sirius."

"Yes, okay, I know that," Sirius says softly, "but you're using me to block everything else out."

"I—" James chokes. "I don't want to see it, and you're brighter than it is. Brighter than all of it."

"You can't avoid it forever, James. We know that already. We've both learned that by now. We know it doesn't do us any good," Sirius whispers, and James *does* know that, but James is clinging to him for dear life.

He doesn't have to think, or hurt, or struggle when Sirius is his focus. In that, he also doesn't work through anything, or heal, and that's the choice he makes. It's Sirius, his best friend, every breath in and out of his lungs, and James will always take care of him, because Sirius will always let him. Regulus—he doesn't always let James the way Sirius does. James and Sirius will rip themselves apart trying to keep each other together, and cling to one another through the mess, but Regulus won't let James rip himself apart, and Remus won't let Sirius rip himself apart, and how did they get here? How did they end up here, where they made it all the way into war breathing in sync, and on the other side of it, they're both gasping for air and can't catch their breath?

"Remus and Lyall are returning to district twelve in a week," Sirius murmurs, and James gets it. He immediately gets why they're having this conversation.

Sirius is going to be a mess about Remus leaving, and he's preemptively trying to stop James from avoiding his problems by focusing on his. It's kind of him, James thinks. So kind. It also won't work. James is going to be there for him every step of the way for anything he needs, James' own needs be damned. Of course he is. This discussion is pointless.

Then Sirius says, "I'm going with them," and *oh.*

Oh.

"You're what," James says flatly, his mind blank, and the first thought he has when his mind kicks back online is that he isn't sure how he'll like being in district twelve, but okay, he'll just…get used to it, maybe.

"I'm going with them," Sirius repeats on a shaky exhale, looking at him with wide eyes. "I'm —I plan to stay with them for a while."

It hits James belatedly that Sirius is using a lot of *I* statements. He is not asking James to come with him. James will not be going with him. Oh, shit, Sirius really *is* breaking up with him.

Honestly, James needs a minute or two to process that.

It doesn't go well for him, as you can imagine.

"How long is *a while?!"* James bursts out, eyes bulging.

Sirius winces. "Ah, I don't—I mean, I don't have an exact timeframe, James. Just, ya know, Remus will want to spend more time at home with his dad, make sure he's settled in, and we'll—of course we'll be back. We *will* come back, and we'll stay in touch the whole time, and—"

"And I won't know if you're okay," James rasps. "I won't be there to make sure you're okay. I won't—"

"You need—"

"Fuck what I need. I don't care—"

"I care!" Sirius explodes, all at once, his voice raised to a shout and his eyes a little wild. *"I* care, James. I care about you, and what you need, and what's best for you. Don't you get that?"

"You said that there were things that could never be taken from us," James croaks. "You said I was that for you. Sirius, I've had everything taken away from me. I've lost my dad, and I've lost hope, and now this. You lied."

"Just as you have me, I have you, and *nothing* can take that away from us," Sirius argues firmly, his jaw clenched. "I didn't lie to you, because you're not losing me now, you will find hope again—we all will—and your dad… James, you said to me once that those who love us never really leave us. Monty loved us, and we loved him, and we still do. He may be gone, but we carry him with us, and we always will."

"Sirius," James starts, his eyes stinging.

Shaking his head, Sirius grits out, "Listen to me, it's not just about you, okay? You want the truth? I need this, too. I—I need—I can't do it, James. I can't do it the way I did the first time, after my first arena. It's every day. Every fucking *day.* I want to drown myself in drinks and drugs, and I can barely stand to look at my own brother, because he's hurting, and I can't stop it. I can't be there for him, not while I'm falling apart *all the time.* I lose hours at a time, sometimes half of a day, and I can't get it back, and I can't fucking *breathe.* I have too much to be guilty about now, too many people I've failed; Marlene, Dorcas, *Regulus.* And I refuse —I *refuse* to add you to that list. You're going to get better. *We* are going to get better, no matter what it takes to do it, no matter how hard it is."

"But I—" James chokes, ashamed, and drops his gaze. "I need you for that, don't I?"

"You have me," Sirius replies bluntly. "Of course you do. Fucking hell, there's nowhere in this world we could be where that's not true. Every time we breathe, even struggling as we are, we're right there with each other. But please, please just be honest with me. Is focusing on taking care of me an excuse not to take care of yourself?"

James stares at the ground, his vision blurring, mouth twisted up. It feels like there's a hand shoved through his chest, holding onto his lungs, *squeezing* them.

"Look at me." Sirius waits, and then he exhales shakily when James lifts his teary gaze. Sirius swallows harshly, his throat working. "If I stay here, I'm scared I'm going to spiral. I'm scared I'm going to lose Regulus, or not be able to build a healthy relationship back up with him the way he deserves, and the way I do. I'm scared I'm going to slip away, not meaning to; I won't remember any of it, and I'll fail anyway. I'm scared the guilt is going to kill me, and I want to live. I want to live and be alive with all of you and be *present,* and I want to reach a place where I am okay, where we all are. I'm scared, alright? Of so many things. Of everything. And I think we both are, and I think we're clinging to each other to avoid working through our fears, and I think we *need* to work through them."

And still, *still,* there is something inside James railing against this. Whining like a child. Wailing in despair. *Let's fall apart. Let's crumble to pieces. Let's lose everything, until we have nothing to lose. Let's lose it all, and never have to lose again.*

It's not good. James knows it's not good. He knows it's wrong and even a bit selfish, and he knows he's in a terrible place right now, so embedded into it that most of him is too exhausted to find his way out. He wants to succumb to it.

He doesn't want to try anymore.

"Regulus knows I'm going, and he said I need to do what's best for me, but if he *didn't…"* Sirius trails off, his eyes getting brighter with building tears. "If he didn't, and if he asked me to stay, I would stay here, even knowing that's not what's best for any of us. It's the same for you. If you ask me to, James, I'll stay. Just, before you do, ask yourself if that's what's best for *you.* Is that what you *need?* Do you need me to stay?"

James wants to reflexively say yes, because the idea of anything else is unfathomable to him, but he can't speak past the lump in his throat. He feels strangled, and slowly, aching inside and out, James turns his gaze to his dead flowers.

The thing about trying is, there's always a reason to. If not for yourself, then for others, and James can't find the point in trying for himself, or in trying for the sake of trying, but maybe a part of him wants to again, someday, because that's always been a part of him, and he doesn't want to lose that. He can't feel that yet, but he thinks he will. There's the faintest glimmer of hope in him that he will; it's reflected in Sirius' eyes, visible on Regulus' face every day, heard in the way Remus speaks to him, felt in the touch of his mother's hands.

James looks at the dead flowers and thinks about the fact that Regulus doesn't have any sitting in his windowsill, and isn't that reason enough to grow more? James turns his gaze to Sirius and thinks about the fact that he loves Remus so fucking much, doesn't want to be without him more than he's already been forced to, and wants to work on himself—and isn't that enough reason to let him go, to follow his lead and get past this, to let them all heal how they need to?

There was a time, years ago, when Sirius was neck-deep in drinks and drugs, and James took care of him every single step of the way without asking for anything in return, without even asking for Sirius to get better. When Sirius did get better, he always said that he did it for James. It's only now that James truly gets the meaning of that, because sometimes, it's through caring for others that you learn the importance of caring for yourself. James will learn. They'll all learn.

The building heat in James' eyes erupts, spilling over in tears, and he gives a choked laugh, half-smiling and half-sobbing as he looks at Sirius, who looks at him so tenderly in return, and says, "You have to call me every day. Video call, so I can see your face. We—even if it's for an hour, just—just—"

Sirius makes a small sound, pained, when James' words hiccup out of him, his shoulders bowing in as he hunches down, head dropping as he loses the thread of his laughter, his smile, his facade. He breaks down there, and it's instantaneous the way Sirius comes for him, gathering him up in his arms and letting James collapse into him, everything in him seeming to *heave.*

"It's okay, we're okay, we're going to be okay," Sirius whispers fretfully. "I'll call you every day, James, I swear. And—and you know I won't be able to stay away too long. We just—we all need time, yeah? In the meantime, we'll just keep breathing."

James nods against his shoulder, clinging to him, listening to him murmur *'in and out, in and out, that's it, in and out'* over and over as James follows him, slowly starting to calm. It feels good to cry like this, like some sort of pressure is lifting. It also feels awful, makes him feel sick, because the only one who is responsible for this pressure on him *is* him. Monty would be so sad that he's not going easier on himself.

I'm sorry, Dad, James thinks. *I'll try. For you, for them, I'll try.*

Someday, maybe he'll even try for himself, too.

"I love you, you know," Sirius says gently, when he and James slowly shift apart, looking at each other.

James sniffles hard and nods. "I know. I love you, too."

"I'm sorry," Sirius mutters, his voice low, threaded with guilt in every word. "I'm sorry for leaving so soon after—"

"Don't," James cuts in, and Sirius stops. "That's not—you're not a bad person for leaving, Sirius. Please don't think that. Besides, two months is—I mean, you've stuck around this long and…what? Have you been—well, I know it's been bad, but have you just been…tolerating it?"

"I wasn't going to leave you and Effie so soon, or Regulus for that matter," Sirius admits. "It helps that Remus is here. Lily and Mary, too. I…may have kept pushing it back, delaying it, but I couldn't do that forever, especially not when it was actively worse for both of us."

"I'll thank you for this someday, you know," James murmurs.

"Hopefully," Sirius says.

"In the meantime," James declares, "we keep breathing."

Sirius hums. "Yeah, exactly. We're okay. We will be. Come here, can we kiss and make up now?"

"Regulus and Remus are peering through the drapes, being nosy," James muses. "Mum, too."

"Ah, in that case," Sirius teases lightly, then makes a big show of throwing his arms around James very dramatically while pressing an over-the-top, smacking kiss to each of James' cheeks, winking at him as he pulls away. "There, now they'll know we're alright. Nothing to worry about."

James frowns. "Did they all know before me?"

Sirius freezes like a spooked horse, then coughs and tosses his arm over James' shoulders. "Say, let's head in, yeah? Come on, if we turn around really fast, we can make the others scramble all over themselves to get away from the window."

Sighing, James lets it go, because he gets it. If roles were reversed, it probably would have taken him time to work up the courage to talk to Sirius about it. Breaking up is hard—or, well, they're just on a break, really. That's all it is.

When he and Sirius swivel around in perfect sync, Regulus and Remus do, in fact, hastily jerk back from the window. Effie doesn't. She looks out at them, and she smiles.

Ten minutes later, James is riding the seat Sirius built him up the stairs and limping his way into his room, finding Regulus there as if he has no idea what's going on, the prick. There's a nervous energy to him, and he never handles being nervous well. It makes him overcompensate with rudeness, or it makes him fussy, no in between. James adores that he knows these little quirks about Regulus.

"How many times have I told you to keep this blasted thing in its jar, James?" Regulus fusses—he's apparently in fussy mode, due to his nerves—and he scoops up the Horcrux Hornet that James did admittedly leave out of the jar again.

It's the same one Riddle left as a warning for them, having no idea that it would one day hold no threat to them. It was in the exact place James left it, sitting on his dresser, a green glow cast across the dim room the first time he entered it. James has been trying to work up to taking it into the forest to release it where it belongs, far away from where anyone could come within range of anyone afraid, not that anyone afraid would be at risk, because everyone here is immune, but that's besides the point. The point is, James should let it go and knows that, but hasn't found the energy or the will to just yet.

Regulus dumps it back in the jar with a huff.

"Oh, and would it kill you to straighten the bed when you get out of it after me in the morning?" Regulus continues, turning swiftly away from him to start making the bed, because James carelessly left the sheets and blankets wadded up. "It takes five minutes, at

most, and no one wants to have to fight with the blankets when they're ready to sleep, do they? And *wrinkles*. I know you don't care, but the wrinkles, James; they're criminal, and I hate them, and if you just—"

"You told him it was okay to go," James announces.

Regulus stops talking. The silence is jarring, and so is how abruptly he comes to a halt, just standing there with his back to James, tension bleeding into his shoulders. After a moment, he turns around and meets James' eyes, lips pursed, then he tilts his chin up and says, "Yes, I did. You better have, too."

James stares at him for long, long moments of silence, and Regulus spends every second remaining resolute, not backing down. Stubborn, stubborn, stubborn.

It's sudden and quick, the way James' hands dart out to capture Regulus' face in between them, palms framing his face and guiding it to meet his own. Regulus jolts the second James gets their mouths together, a startled and muffled noise escaping him, because he clearly wasn't expecting it. Maybe he was expecting a fight. Not this. But oh, this.

The thing is—well, the thing is, they haven't kissed in two months. Haven't kissed since the night before the war, and James forgot just how all-consuming it can be. For a second, it surges through him so fresh and wonderful and lovely that he goes in and out of time, never having kissed the man he's been hopelessly pining after for a decade, and he's triumphant with finally getting to. His heart is racing, every single atom in his body lit up with delight and triumph and love, so much love, because he's kissing Regulus Black. Oh, fuck, he's kissing Regulus Black. Has he ever done that? It's the first, isn't it? This feels like the very first, and so it must be, and James doesn't know how they ended up here, but he is so thankful to have ended up here. James only knows that this is the only kiss that exists between them, and already, he wants another.

And then Regulus is pressing closer, breathless, and it's familiar. James' body responds like an instinct, something inside him waking up with a yawn, stretching languidly and flexing muscles suffering from disuse. James is launched firmly back into the present, into reality, and he has kissed his fiancé so many times now, but not in a while, and he's so glad to remedy that. It's been far too long.

"What?" Regulus asks, dazed and panting when they break apart, lips kiss-bitten and delectable. His eyes are glazed, a dawning clarity taking time to make its way back. He blinks rapidly. "I don't—what?"

"You told him it was okay to go," James breathes out, gazing at him, cradling his face. "Why?"

"Because it's what's best for him. Because it's what he needs," Regulus says, eyebrows wrinkled with confusion. "Because it was the right thing to do."

A beat.

Regulus blinks.

Regulus' eyes absolutely light the fuck up.

"Oh," he whispers, "it was the right thing to do."

"Yeah, love, it was the right thing to do," James agrees, lips curling up, "and you did it first."

"Did—did you?"

"It wasn't my first instinct, but yes."

"So, he's—he's really going, then?"

"He is, yes. He's going."

"It's okay," Regulus whispers. "We'll be okay, won't we?"

James closes his eyes and leans in to let their foreheads settle together with a tap, and he says, "Yeah, we'll be okay."

Chapter End Notes

alrighty, from the top!

regulus coming home and immediately cleaning oh im so sad :(and remus kind of fumbling with his new sense of freedom, gahhhh!!! but regulus letting people use his house, that's so sweet!!! also lmaooo him and remus being like: whatever james and sirius have going on, let's just stay out of it GOODBYE 😭

remus, my babyyyyy. he's dealt with so much grief and pain at this point that he's almost like, a guiding light for sirius, at least when it comes to losing a parent. like, he KNOWS already, and so he knows what all these people around him are going through; his life has genuinely been a war for so long. and just like, his new relationship with freedom, and how he's open to letting himself explore it. ITS WHAT HE DESERVES 😭

sirius not doing well... :(yeah, being in district six is hard for him, which is so sad. i hope it comes across clearly why he needs to go, and why he's chosen to. it really is the best thing for him to go, which is why it's so heartbreaking that he would stay if regulus or james asked him to. but like, in that situation, the idea of him leaving if they were begging him not to... there's no way he could, if they did. and the fact that, in the end, they all knew that and didn't put him through that, like. GOD, they all love each other so much.

lily. oh, lily, she breaks my heart. i like to think harry got his anger issues from his mother, and just how it's so tied into his love as well, so when i kind of was digging into the root of what lily was struggling with past just grief, there was that moment of like— oh, she's scared of her anger the way harry was, like it was something inescapable. it kinda floored me how that came full circle, for her to have that harry line. i think lily has a lot of love in her, and she loves so STRONGLY, that it's like it heightens all of her other emotions too, and sometimes she does just want to be. calm. and throughout this, mary has always granted her that serenity, and navigated her love with her and returned it, unmoored, and they're just SO special to me <3

james 😭😭😭 oh, james, that one hurt. so that conversation with effie where he asks her the point and she tells him and says like, just because the flower died doesn't mean it didn't bloom, like that got me. that actually made me cry, and i think it's the first thing not really involving siblings that did. and just the way he didn't want to hurt his mum because he wasn't grieving the same way... ITS SO UPSETTING :(

yeah, so james definitely isn't doing well, which became obvious with sirius. i do think it's been a common occurrence in this fic for james to, like, focus on others and hide his own hurt because he didn't want to deal with it, and it's already established that james has put a lot of himself into taking care of sirius many, many times throughout their lives in cr, so him falling back on that, added with avoiding his own problems, it was just. unhealthy. and he didn't want to change it, which was how you know he was in a really bad place.

but like, even now, there's this hope in ALL of them to get better and heal, which is important, too.

i think one thing that gets me about this is, like. ive seen it a lot in media surrounding war and stuff, dystopian stories i mean, but a lot of people who are involved in the war parts for a better world often just want to...fade into the background once it's over. they are tired and traumatized and don't have the energy to keep going, a lot of the time, and so it's like. it adds to the whole feeling of "what was the point" in the sense that, they gave so much to the war, and then by the end, they've given all they could, and they're done with giving more, which shows the horrible effects OF war. like, they fought for a better world, and then they went home, and that's all they've got. pyrrhic victory...

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-we don't know where dorcas is, and she didn't go to marlene's memorial :(
-regulus handling bartys funeral and burying him with a poem 😭
-also bartys dumb little poem from the chapter Gifts
-sirius gazing at his moon, oh i love them
-remus just sitting with him
-lily declaring war on marys fridge lmaoooo 😭
-bingley my beloved <3
-james not taking the breakup well HELP HE WAS APPALLED LMAOOOO
-regulus and remus being nosy little fuckers
-effie being The Best, as always
-regulus fussing at james because he's nervous
-james kissing regulus and being so delighted that he forgets its not their first for a moment :(oh they're so in love
-regulus choosing to do the right thing without even having to think about it, and he's proud of himself for it, he has grown SO MUCH. <3

Begin Again

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death/murder/violence
-references to past trauma
-references to past torture/gore (about riddle)
-references to past child death
-references to past war/warzones
-discussions of aquaphobia/pyrophobia
-brief mention of vomit
-depictions of grief (gentle, though, even sweet and uplifting)

yeah, im pretty sure that's it. this chapter is actually so sweet 😭 mark your calendars, how long has it been since we got a happy chapter? its rare, i know.

enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Euphemia stares down into her coffee mug, ears straining for the whirring sound of James' chair starting up on the stairs, a heavy clunk and slow glide, or the sound of Regulus' light step on the middle stair. It's a toss up whether she'll hear that or not, because Regulus is so quiet and steps so lightly that there are some mornings when he doesn't make that stair squeak like it always habitually has.

Sometimes, without meaning to, Euphemia still listens for Fleamont. He had a very specific cadence to the way he walked, or perhaps she simply heard it so much in all their years together that it became unique to her. As much as it hurts that she'll never hear it again, there's something truly lovely about that. Something truly lovely about Fleamont, always, and the memory of him.

If you asked Euphemia months ago, she would have never believed that she could live in a world without Fleamont, at least not steadily. Not without her rock. She would have pictured unending grief that ate away at her until she was nothing, which—upon reflection—was incredibly dismissive of her children, who are still here and give her more than enough

reason to get out of bed in the morning. But, when you love someone, it can feel like you'll never survive the loss of them, and then, somehow, you do.

Euphemia has survived the loss of Fleamont. She does every day, and some days, a selfish part of her wishes that she didn't. Other days, it's almost as if she hasn't lost him at all; the echoes of him are so loud that she need only close her eyes to feel him right next to her, or stand in the wind and feel it swaddle her body like his arms, and he'll be so close that she stops mourning him for a second, for just a second. Most days, though, she opens her eyes and finds herself without him, and it kills her, and she survives anyway.

In any case, with time, her grief turns gentle. It eases farther away from screaming with all that she has lost and turns towards cherishing what she still has. She looks at James and Regulus every day, and speaks to Sirius and Remus every day, and checks on Lily and Mary and that Bingley every day, and takes in the steady growth of her home every day—and she thinks *Flea, it's getting better, it's becoming a better world, you were right; look at those we love, look at where they are, look at where they're going; I know you're proud, aren't you proud?*

He does not have to be here for her to know his answer. She knows, and so, in a way, he's here anyway.

The sound of a tiny, there-and-gone creak of a stair makes Euphemia lift her head and reach for a second mug. She's pouring a second cup when Regulus pads into the kitchen. It was a beautiful thing to watch him go from moving around her house like he was terrified to take up any space to feeling at home enough to exist in all spaces, with or without James. He is such a sweet boy, and yes, yes, she has seen him murder, but that matters very little to her, overall. She doesn't pay attention to who someone is in combat, not in this world; it's who they are out of it that really reveals the core of them.

Out of combat, Regulus has been restless, and exhausted, and with Euphemia and James specifically, very sweet. Like her, his grief has turned gentle, too. He was the first person who would talk about Fleamont with her without it being this big, painful production of dumping grief at each other's feet. He let her murmur about him, small things, quiet things; he murmured back, and that's all there was. Tranquility.

She returned the favor for him, when she could. It's hard for Regulus to talk about Barty, and he never seems to have the words he wants to say, but it's clear to her that he doesn't want to

bury Barty in memories and never speak of him again, and never feel the duality of pain and joy that comes from loving someone who is lost and losing someone who was loved. It's a gentle show of inner strength that he wants to find peace with Barty's loss, and that means accepting it, and learning how to exist with it. For him, that seems to mean offering little facts about him, often stilted and awkward, occasionally humorous; it also means visible relief when anyone else talks about Barty with him, like it's confirmation that he was here, and Regulus isn't alone in keeping his memory alive. It's a difficult thing to do alone, and no one wants to, and no one should have to.

Euphemia doesn't make him. The first time she slipped up and said *'that boy of yours, Barty',* it drew a choked laugh out of Regulus, who had covered his mouth and looked genuinely alarmed by the fact that he was cracking up. It was the first time she heard him laugh after the war, and it felt good to be the person to cause it. All Regulus did was apologize at first, like mirth in the midst of grief was something to be ashamed of, and so she laughed with him until they were laughing together, because Regulus swore up and down that Barty would have found that title *hilarious.*

"Good morning, Effie," Regulus murmurs as she slides to the side so he can step up next her and make his tea as he likes. Usually black, no milk, but with a spoonful of sugar or two to take the bite out of it. A bit like him, she thinks, internally amused.

"Morning, dear," Effie greets, and then, "I'm kicking you and James out today."

Regulus' head snaps up, eyes wide. "You're—what?"

Euphemia can't stop herself from laughing at the disbelief and mild alarm in his eyes. "Oh, relax. It's only across the street, and it's not as if you two won't be over all the time as it is."

"Did we…did I do something wrong?" Regulus asks carefully.

"No, darling," Euphemia says kindly, her heart clenching as she reaches out to cup the side of his head over his hair very briefly. She's aware it's harder for him to accept parental affection, as it likely feels like a betrayal to his own parents, and even Sirius in a way. She can tell he likes it, though, at least from her. He didn't used to, so they've come a long way, and they've got much more room to grow. "You haven't done anything wrong, nor has James. It's just time, that's all."

"How do you know?" Regulus says quietly.

"Well, it's time when we decide it is, I suppose, and I know you two are here for me as much as yourselves, but mostly so I won't be alone in the house," Euphemia explains. Regulus frowns, and she smiles gently. "We have to start somewhere, Regulus. That goes for me, too."

For a bit, Regulus seems to wrestle with that, and then he mumbles, "I don't like it. I don't want you to be alone."

"Oh, I won't be. You're right across the street, remember? Sirius is only a phone call away, and he'll come home soon enough," Euphemia reminds him.

Regulus makes a noncommittal sound and drops his gaze. It's been hard for him, not having Sirius around, though he goes to desperate lengths not to show it. Euphemia sees it, how much he misses his brother, likely the same amount that Sirius misses him. He's gentle about this, too. Sad, yet accepting.

"James and I can stay," Regulus says, after a long beat. He looks up again, holding her gaze. "As long as you like, we will. You know that, don't you?"

"I know, but it can't be forever."

"It could be, if you wanted."

Euphemia chuckles. "I suppose a part of me will always want everyone I love with me at all times, but there's another part that is ready for the next step. You have a home, Regulus, and James' home will always be here, but it's with you, too. You should get to make a home together. It's a beautiful thing, you know. One of my fondest memories with Fleamont was making this house into a home."

"Didn't you live here before you and him got together?" Regulus asks curiously.

"I did, yes," Euphemia admits. "Since I was thirteen, I've lived in this house, but it never felt like a home until Fleamont and I made it into one. My parents moved out, back to my childhood home when I was eighteen, when I started mentoring. I was gone during parts of the year, and they—ah, well, they were never really fond of…the neighbors."

Regulus pauses, then his lips twitch. "Those dastardly Blacks, I'm assuming."

"Yeah, those are the ones," Euphemia says, and Regulus huffs a laugh. "In any case, Fleamont moved in, and it was truly special to simply live with him. Just me and him. I look back on those years so grateful to have had them, and I want that for you and James. You're both welcome here always, never doubt that, but it's time for you to make a home together. It's a beautiful start to building a life. I want that for all of you."

"I understand," Regulus says softly, then clears his throat and sips his tea before continuing, "but you're telling James."

Euphemia clicks her tongue and waves a hand. "Oh, he'll be fine. He has flowers to tend to over here every day anyway, so it's not like I'm shipping him off across the world or anything. He's doing better, yeah? It's time. If not now, when?"

"I suppose that's a question we're all going to have to start asking ourselves," Regulus murmurs. He stares down at his tea for a bit, then looks up at her, his gaze soft. "I, um. I never said—I never got to tell Monty that I—I loved him. I wish I did. I'll always wish I did."

"Oh, honey, he knew," Euphemia whispers. "He knows."

Regulus blinks hard and swallows harshly. "I can only hope that's true now, and I really do hope that, but it's—well, that's not the case for you. I—I can still tell you. I just—I have a hard time with—I struggle to—to say—"

"I know, dear boy, I know," Euphemia tells him, and he deflates a little, choking out a deep, shaky breath. "You have so much love in you, of course I know, and I've known for some time. I love you, too. Fleamont loves you too, still, even now."

"Thank you," Regulus whispers.

Euphemia can't resist reaching out one more time to cup his cheek, and this time, he closes his eyes and leans into her hand. She's so proud of him and knows, as if he's standing right next to her, that Fleamont is, too.

~•~

Remus can honestly say that being home has been quite the unexpected delight of his life. Truly, he had no idea just how much he wanted it until he got here, and now that he's here, it feels like his inner-child is healing a little.

Of course, it has a lot to do with memory, too. Nostalgia. Returning to the places he grew up to really reflect on how much he has grown. It helps that he's something of a local legend at the moment, while simultaneously still that troublesome Lupin boy from down the street to those who knew him when he *was* just a boy, which is admittedly sort of hilarious. He can't help but appreciate the duality, the human aspect to it, the callbacks to a life he had before he lost his freedom and the acknowledgement of the choices he made when he took freedom back for himself before he returned.

It's just—well, some people saw Remus fight in the war, and it's not quite the secret it once was just how imperative to ending the war he became. Not only that, but he was one of the ones who opened the door and escorted Dorcas out with Tom Riddle's head gripped in her hand. That's not really something people tend to forget.

It's also the fact that Remus showed up back home with one Sirius Black in tow, sticking close to him and looking at him that way he does, with those stars in his eyes, like Remus is the most wonderful thing he's ever seen. Glorious. After all this time, after all they've been through, Sirius still gazes at him like he's something fucking *glorious.* Remus isn't sure he'll ever get over that. He thinks it'll always make him feel amazing.

In any case, everyone knows Sirius, and the fact that he arrives with Remus, quite blatantly *with* Remus, has people scratching their heads in confusion and trying to figure out how the hell it even happened. They're polite enough that they mind their business, though, for the most part. No one bothers them, past extending heartfelt happiness that he's okay, that he's back, that he's here with Lyall, who has been alone for so long now.

The change of scenery is good for Sirius. He doesn't get out much at first, mostly spending his days in the house with Lyall and Remus, letting Lyall teach him recipes out of Hope's old cookbook or showing him his model ship collection that Sirius rapidly becomes obsessed with. Sirius likes to build, so it's something he loves from the moment Lyall breaks one out he never got around to doing. Remus swears they sit down at a table and build an incredibly detailed, miniature ship for over four hours. It's the calmest Remus has seen Sirius in months.

Eventually, though, Sirius does start to venture out when Remus wants to show him things. The abandoned park where he and Lily kissed the one and only time they ever did—he and Sirius sit out on the swings for nearly the whole day, smoking and talking until night creeps in and they go home. The school Remus went to—Sirius wants to break in because it's closed down for now, and Remus starts off saying no, but by the time night falls, he and Sirius are sneaking through the halls while Remus whispers stories of the memories he made there in Sirius' ear. The market—it's not what it used to be, once it shut down during the war, but people are already trying to get it going again, and Sirius blatantly likes to see Remus treated like a human being by people who know him, so he enjoys going there just to watch. The spot by the train tracks where he and Lily used to get high every year before the reaping—a lovely little patch of dandelions that Sirius likes to pluck and blow in the wind, inevitably bringing Regulus up every time, because flowers always remind him of his brother.

Being in district twelve really does help Sirius, which Remus sees more and more with each passing day. He can focus on himself here in this new environment, and he can let himself fall apart when he needs to, and then he can build himself back up. Remus watches it happen. Remus helps him, all while he's doing the very same thing himself.

The truth is, they both have things to work through. Guilt. Trauma. Grief. Fear. Nightmares. Sometimes, they don't talk about it, too exhausted to, some days worse than others. But, with rising frequency, they lean on each other. They take care of each other. They start taking in their everything one little bite at a time, chewing slowly, savoring it.

Sirius calls James every day, usually a camera call where they babble at each other on screens, and it's good for them both, Remus thinks. This separation where they're still linked,

having space and still being together. Because the calls end, and that's it. The calls end, and they have to focus on themselves rather than avoid it through one another.

Because Lily and Remus are not-so-secretly as attached to each other as Sirius and James are, Remus *also* calls Lily every day. They're more discreet about it, not practically confessing their love and trying to make out through the screen the way James and Sirius do, but it's just as good for them as well. It's healing to see Lily healing, and Mary and Bingley with her, all of them taking it one day at a time.

They're all taking it one day at a time.

In the beginning, Sirius frets about Regulus almost more than he breathes. Remus vaguely thinks of the term *helicopter parent* and very wisely does not say it to Sirius. Instead, he patiently and repeatedly talks Sirius down from boarding the first train back to district six, patiently and repeatedly reminding him that Regulus has James, Effie, Lily, and Mary and he's fine and he's alive and Sirius isn't failing him or anyone by being here and Sirius doesn't have to devote his whole life to his little brother, who is an adult and supports him doing what's best for him, which is being here, remember? Hey, remember?

Sirius remembers. He hasn't slipped away once since getting to district twelve, which is more than enough of a sign that he needed to let himself get away. It's just hard. Remus doesn't quite get it the same way, as he's an only child and doesn't have children, but the reminders do break through to Sirius eventually. It probably helps that—in the background of Sirius' calls to James—Regulus is nearly always there, often rotating between assuring Sirius he's fine in an exasperated tone, or calling Sirius an idiot while rolling his eyes.

Remus talks to Regulus frequently, too. They message each other randomly to bitch about things, or just gossip about shit in their respective districts. Remus appreciates having someone he can always complain with. In that aspect, Regulus is genuinely his favorite person, because no one quite matches his level of pettiness and rude commentary as Regulus does.

A huge step for Sirius in healing is coming to terms about what happened with Marlene. That's one of the heavier things for him to contend with. He struggles with that one the most, and confesses to Remus late one night after a very common nightmare reliving Marlene's death that he's not sure he'll ever stop feeling the guilt over her, or the pain of her loss.

Nonetheless, humans can only hold onto a weight like that for so long before they reach a breaking point, and Sirius reaches his altogether swiftly. It ends with him curled up on the cold tile in Remus' bathroom, a mess of vomit and tears, head in Remus' lap while it all spills out of him. Horrible things. The worst things Remus never wanted to hear from him. How much it hurts. How he wishes it could have been him, just so she could be here. How he always tried to look out for her, and how he failed, and how he misses her, and how he wishes he could slip away forever and never have to feel this way again.

The next morning, Remus helps him off the floor and coaxes him into the shower, moving him around like a puppet to get him clean. Sirius does not slip away, and he has to keep feeling it, and he spends three hours on the phone with James just trying to find the will to forgive himself. Sirius tries to, and maybe he gets closer to it just through the effort, just through talking about Marlene. He says once that she would give him a good wallop upside the head if she could, just for how he's acting. *She'd say 'get your shit together, Black, this is embarrassing for both of us',* Sirius had mumbled, and then he laughed until he cried. It's a turning point for him, though, because he takes the steps to build forgiveness for himself from then on.

So, all in all, they're finding their way in this world, slowly but surely, each and every single one of them. Maybe they're not where they all expected to end up, but that doesn't mean they're not where they need to be.

For Remus, his struggles have a lot to do with the war being over. Trying to feel the freedom he hasn't had in six years. Trying to figure out what he wants to do with it. Trying to figure out who he is in it. His morals haven't changed very much, like he expected them to. He still doesn't really feel the guilt for the things he has done in war the way he thinks he probably should. Maybe some people just don't, and maybe he's one of them. It's—well, he does, sometimes, but even that isn't the same as it is for others. There's still too many other horrors in his head to really leave space for the things he had to do in order to reach this point of freedom at all.

Oddly, what he did to Riddle is what makes him the most uncomfortable, and it's because he knows he didn't have to do that. Remus, Regulus, and Dorcas didn't have to take it that far; they just…wanted to. They *wanted* to hurt him. They *wanted* to torture him. They *wanted* to make him suffer, and they did. Oh, they really did, and Remus knows his motivations had very little to do with ending the war at all; it was revenge, it was cruelty, and it was not a situation thrust upon them for the sake of survival. The worst of Remus now exists not in killing Greyback, but in what he did to Riddle.

He hates that. He hates that it weighs on him, and he hates that a part of him became so twisted that he isn't sure he would go back and undo it if he was given the chance. He dreams of it, sometimes; the way Riddle screamed. They're not nightmares. Remus doesn't wake up afraid; he wakes up yearning, and then he feels sick of himself for it.

The first time Remus admits this to Sirius, and tells him exactly what he did, he is scared that Sirius won't look at him the same for it. He should have known better, because Sirius is nothing if not Remus' number one source of encouragement. That's the first time they have sex after the war, when Remus tells Sirius how he made Riddle pay for all that he'd done. It's not the response Remus is expecting, but Sirius always takes him by surprise, and Sirius genuinely can't seem to keep his hands off of him after the confession, and Remus is nothing if not a weak man for anything and all things Sirius Black.

With time, the dreams and guilt and discomfort grow less frequent for both of them, and then it's just figuring themselves out and letting themselves heal. A process. One that gets easier day after day. Remus is more settled than he's ever been, and it seems that Sirius is, too.

"Big plans today?" Lyall asks from the table, idly flipping through the paper, eyebrows raised as he reads it. That's one of the newer things; the press. Updates on the world are released to everyone these days, sent out to all who care to look. More often than not, Remus doesn't look, but Lyall always seems interested in what's going on out there. Good things, usually, or so he says. Remus decides to believe him.

"Not really," Remus muses, swiveling his spoon in his tea as he gazes down at his phone, lips curled up. James has sent him a photo of a little grasshopper he found, so green it almost blends in with the grass.

"Sirius still asleep?"

"You know he likes to sleep in, Dad."

Lyall hums, amused. "Makes that whole bit about you being the moon cuter since he prefers to be awake at night. Where did that come from, by the way? Why are you the moon?"

Remus pauses, considering the merits of telling his father that he compared the scars on his back to the craters of the moon. Hm, maybe not. "Sirius is a sap. That's all it is."

"You should appreciate that more, you know," Lyall comments as he casually flips to the next page. "It's special how he loves you, Remus. You don't find that every day."

"Yes, Dad, I'm very aware," Remus mutters, ducking his head to hide how he rolls his eyes. Lyall sings Sirius' praises *constantly,* which was sweet at first, but now Remus is a little exasperated by it. Deep down, though, Remus is ridiculously charmed by the fact that his dad approves of his boyfriend.

A knock on the front door makes Remus and Lyall look at each other, frowning. Neither of them make a move to go open the door, because they're not the sociable ones. Generally, it was always Hope who would answer the door and chat with the neighbors, carrying on conversations in the background while Lyall and Remus were grateful to avoid any social interaction whatsoever. If Sirius was awake, he'd be the one to handle it, because—like Hope—he can stand around talking to people for ages and charm them all, and he even seems to enjoy it when they don't expect anything from him.

Sirius, unfortunately, is still drooling in Remus' bed, and Lyall hastily buries his face behind the paper, making Remus stifle a groan as he plops his tea down and shuffles towards the door.

When Remus opens the door, he blinks.

Ah. Well, this is odd.

MacKenzie Barlowe, or—as he prefers—Ken. Remus really isn't expecting Ken to be standing out on his porch for a number of reasons. One, Ken is Remus' ex-boyfriend and hasn't been back to his house since they broke up after a whirlwind romance that lasted all of five months, when they were both nineteen. Two, Ken is holding puppies, and Remus can't really make sense of that, why he is, and why he's doing so while standing at Remus' front door.

Remus blinks. "Ken. Hello."

"Hiya, Remus," Ken greets sheepishly, huffing out a weak laugh and trying to rearrange the wriggling puppies in his grip. He has one in each arm. "Sorry to bother, but I was hoping I could have a word."

Remus blinks some more, still stuck on the puppy thing. They're very adorable and very small, just babies, really, and their ears are quite floppy. Ken clears his throat and blows his swooping blond hair out of his eyes, looking rather pathetic and desperate, but then, he always had that look about him.

"I'll leave the puppies out here," Ken offers hopefully, stooping over to let them down. They're on leashes, which he ties off to the rails on the porch. "Sorry, I just had to carry them up the stairs. They're suspicious of stairs."

"Right, ah, come in," Remus says, opening the door and stepping back. "Should I…bring them some water out?"

"No, it's okay. I don't plan to stay long," Ken assures him, sweeping into the house with familiarity. He smiles when he enters the kitchen. "Hey, Mr. Lupin."

"Barlowe," Lyall replies with a grunt, briefly looking up from the paper before dismissing Ken altogether. Lyall never liked Ken. Actually, Lyall never liked…any of Remus' past partners, now that Remus is thinking about it. Or, it wasn't that he didn't like them. It was more that he didn't trust them with Remus, upon reflection. So, apparently, the one Lyall trusts with his son is Sirius. Ah, yes, the murderer. *Good going, Dad,* Remus thinks, vaguely entertained by the realization. Not that Sirius is *just* a murderer, but Remus is almost positive that out of all his partners, Sirius is the only one who's killed before.

"Cuppa?" Remus offers, gesturing to the kettle.

Ken shakes his head quickly. "No, but thank you."

Remus hums and moves back over to his cup, leaning against the counter and raising his eyebrows at Ken. "So, you wanted to speak to me?"

"You and—well, both of you, really." Ken fiddles with his fingers, shifting from foot-to-foot. "Ah, basically, my dog decided to go off and get knocked up to celebrate the war being over, I reckon, because she popped out a whole litter with *no* warning. Like, I just thought she was getting fat, you know? But no, guess not, 'cause she jumped up on my bed and started *giving birth* and—I mean, do you have any idea how traumatic that was for me?" He waves a hand. "Anyway, she had twelve—twelve!—babies, Remus. *Twelve.* I've been giving them away to everyone who wants 'em, and I was hoping…"

"Oh, you—you want us to take them?" Remus asks, startled.

Ken bites his lip. "I've asked everyone else, and they're the last two. I can't take care of them, because Marsha—that's the mother pup—keeps fighting them. She's… I don't know, she's different after the war just like everyone is. No one really thinks about the animals during things like that, but it affected her, too, ya know? And—and she's a good dog, she really is, she's just not cut out to be a mother, I guess. Do you—I mean, is there any chance you want them?"

Remus immediately looks at his dad, who looks back and mutters, "Don't look at me. Get them if you want, but I'm not taking care of them. That's on you, son. It won't be my pet."

"Um, well—" Remus halts, swiveling his head as the sound of feet on the floor reaches his ears. He smiles reflexively the moment Sirius swings out of the hall from the bathroom mid-yawn, knuckling at his eyes and shuffling right towards Remus without even having to look. Precious. Just precious.

Sirius starts out smiling as he enters the room, and then he sees Ken, and his smile fades. He looks confused as to why someone is in the kitchen, eyebrows tugging together as he surveys Ken, and then—without warning—his expression goes from mild curiosity to hostile. It lasts only a split second, that flicker of danger, and then it's gone so quickly that it'd be easy to believe they imagined it. Sirius' face journey ends on neutral, but his eyes—ah. Not good.

"Sirius," Remus says slowly, "this is MacKenzie Barlowe."

"I go by Ken, though. It's nice to meet you," Ken greets, holding his hand out in offering.

Sirius slaps on a smile so brilliant that Ken gives a harsh blink, helplessly dazed by it, just the full force of it. Remus can't blame him; it's a very beautiful smile, so beautiful it could bring the world to its knees, and the most dangerous thing about it is that it's fake. Sirius can just—do that. Just whip out a smile that lovely at will. It'd be frightening if it didn't make Remus want to kiss him within an inch of his life.

"Sirius Black," Sirius greets, reaching out to shake Ken's hand, leaning in to wink and whisper, "but you knew that."

"I—yeah, hey, hi," Ken replies, stumbling over his words, so visibly flustered that Remus almost pities him. Almost.

"I'm sure you have a very good reason for being here, Low Bar, but—"

"Barlowe, actually, um—"

"Very low bar. I could trip over you," Sirius says, then laughs like that's not even the least bit insulting, and his laugh is so lovely and charming that Ken—poor Ken—laughs with him, as if the insult hasn't even registered to him. "Anyway, this can continue in just a moment, whatever reason you have to be here. Remus has to turn his attention to something more important, which is me."

Then, with that, Sirius twirls around and plucks the mug out of Remus' hands before smiling at him, warm and sweet, and reaching up to cradle his face tenderly, intimately, then kisses him. To be clear, he does not do this every morning—or, well, he does greet Remus with a kiss most of the time, but not like this, especially not in front of Lyall. Because this kiss is very deep and very long, the sort of kiss Remus can't help but fall into, his eyebrows flying up as Sirius swipes his tongue into his mouth, slow and deliberate, winding his arms around Remus' shoulders and leaning into him.

Helplessly, Remus' hands come up to land on Sirius' waist, and a distant part of his brain reminds him that his dad is sitting at the table, and they have an audience, but mostly he's way too invested in the feeling of Sirius' kissing him like it's as vital as oxygen to care about anyone or anything else. Frankly, nothing else exists other than this. It all drains away until he's caught up in it, the kiss his only focus at the moment.

And then, after a truly indecent amount of time—when it's likely uncomfortable for everyone else—Sirius peels away slowly and says, sweetly, "Good morning, moon of mine. You're glowing today, Remus. Glorious, as always. Hi."

"Hi," Remus murmurs, still a bit dazed, but his exasperation is starting to creep in. Oh, he's going to laugh so much about this later. Already, he's fighting a smile.

Sirius hums in satisfaction and pats Remus' chest before swiping his hand up and down, an unspoken sort of claiming, a gesture that quite clearly states *this is mine.* He keeps himself draped all over Remus and rests his head on his shoulder, glancing dismissively towards Ken.

Remus is bemused by his response, honestly. How could Sirius *possibly* know that Ken is his ex? Can he just fucking sense it, or something? It's baffling, but also sort of entertaining. Sirius could snap Ken's neck in the space of a blink—not that Remus would let him, but the point still stands—and yet he's just doing this? Being adorably territorial?

Glancing over at his dad, Remus finds Lyall clearly fighting for his life not to bust out laughing. He seems to find this all very amusing, just sitting back and watching like it's the most entertainment he's had in years.

Ken coughs. It's very awkward—well, it is for him. Remus, on the other hand, is so glad he stopped by. "So, about the dogs…"

"Ken wants to give me puppies," Remus explains, and he hears Sirius audibly grind his teeth. Maybe he could have phrased that better. "Ah, well, he was hoping we'd take the last two he's trying to get rid of. Interested?"

Remus expects Sirius to say no, just on principle, but he hesitates, then mumbles, "If I want them, we can get them?"

"Whatever you want, sweetheart," Remus assures him, his affection surging as Sirius' desire for puppies seems to go to war with his level of pettiness. Remus sweeps a hand up and down his back, wondering which will win.

In the end, it doesn't really surprise him that Sirius' delight with anything vaguely hinting at domesticity and peace beats out the urge to fight. He sighs and says, "Okay, I won't lie, I want them. I *love* dogs."

"Oh, thank fuck," Ken exhales all at once, deflating in instant relief. "Brilliant! Thank you, Sirius, truly. Okay, okay, so I'll take them home and bring them back tomorrow with food and their leashes and such—my little cousin will want to say bye to them, too. Is that alright? Does that work?"

"Yeah, Ken, that works," Remus says. "Thanks."

"You're a miracle, Re-Re, always have been," Ken replies, and Remus struggles not to cringe. "Alright, I'll go now. Nice to see you again, Mr. Lupin, and nice to meet you, Sirius."

Ken does not receive a response before he's out the door.

"A miracle. He called you a *miracle,* right in front of me! I'm standing right here! Hello? Can you see me? Am I invisible?" Sirius sputters, looking absolutely appalled.

Lyall immediately dissolves into laughter.

"I have killed people!" Sirius yelps. "I've killed *so many* people that I don't even know how many it's been, and he just—oh, I could have killed him *so* easily, what the fuck?!"

Lyall is wheezing.

"He's gifting you puppies and calling you a miracle—am I fucking joke to him?" Sirius demands. "Does he not know I can and *will* rip his tongue out of his head? I can do it! I—"

Lyall bangs his hand down on the table, gasping for air, laughing so hard he's in tears.

"Sirius," Remus says, biting down on the inside of cheek.

Nostrils flaring, Sirius fixes his gaze on Remus, lips pursing like he's tasting something sour. "He's trying to win you over. He comes with compliments and *puppies—"*

"It's not a competition—"

"He comes here and tries to act chummy with your dad—"

"I think he was just being polite—"

"Barlowe? *Barlowe?* What a pathetic name. Fucking low bar of a name and a low bar of a human being—"

"Well, *that's* not very polite—"

"Offering you puppies—"

"Sirius—"

"Calling you a miracle—"

"Sirius—"

"Addressing you by that stupid fucking nickname—"

Lyall is going to keel over here in a second, just from laughing so hard, and Remus is almost genuinely concerned for his health. He's an older man, quite out of breath, getting a bit red in the face. Huffing in fond exasperation, Remus reaches out to catch Sirius' arm and drag him out of the room.

Sirius comes with him willingly enough, grumbling under his breath the whole way. It seems like his jealousy is more about how offensive he finds it that Ken—or anyone—would even *attempt* anything untoward with Remus, or try to outdo him in any capacity in regards to Remus, not that Ken was doing that, necessarily, but it never takes much to send Sirius' mind in a turbulent whirlwind of turmoil. Honestly, Ken definitely *wasn't* trying to do anything untoward, or trying to compete, but Sirius has taken this personally anyway.

"How dare he? *Puppies?"* Sirius hisses as Remus shuts the door behind them. "Remus, he brought puppies!"

"He did, yes," Remus agrees. Sirius looks absolutely enraged by this, which shouldn't be as hilarious as it is. "Obviously since he brought puppies, I now have to run off with him, as he is the superior gift-giver and has won my affections once more. *That* is all it takes for me. Puppies."

Sirius looks like he wants to stomp his feet. "I know you're fucking with me to point out how stupid I'm being—"

"Mm, not stupid. Don't call yourself stupid."

"I am, though. Oh, fucking hell, that was so *stupid.* I practically tongue-fucked your mouth in front of him *and* your dad just because I saw a photo of you and Ken kissing once."

Remus has to stifle a laugh at how mortified Sirius looks, and then he doesn't hide his smile when Sirius covers his face with both hands, his blush peeking through. "Ah, so that's how you knew he was my ex…"

"M'so stupid," Sirius mumbles into his palms, then drops his hands and huffs. "He's the one, right? Who could—ah, you know. The one you stayed with just because of his…skills."

"His cock-sucking skills, you mean?" Remus asks, amused.

"Yeah, whatever, *those,"* Sirius says derisively, wrinkling his nose and somehow making it sound filthy, like something worthy of judgement, as if he's not right obsessed with the act himself. Here he stands before Remus now, his nose turned up like it's a stain upon someone's pristine image, yet Remus can so vividly recall the amount of times he's been on his knees, mouth slack with slapstick stars in his hazy eyes, enjoying himself immensely. "That's him, right?"

"Yes, but those skills alone are not enough to make any couple last, hence the reason he and I did not. Also, I just—wasn't in love with him, if I'm honest. We were a very *'this was nice while it lasted, but it was never going to last'* sort of pair," Remus reflects thoughtfully.

Sirius waves a hand carelessly. "Oh, I'm not fussed about your history, nor do I need reassurances about why you're with me and not him, and that you'll never leave me for him, or anyone else, yada yada yada. Yes, I know all of that already. My issue is that he brought you *puppies,* and he called you a *miracle,* and he has sucked your cock well enough for it to be *notable."*

"These are issues?" Remus asks, lips twitching.

"Yes," Sirius insists, eyes narrowing, "because now I have to prove I am better for you and to you than anyone else. I have to one-up the puppies, and the miracle thing, and the whole notable cock-sucking skills bit."

Remus snorts. "Sweetheart, you absolutely do not have anything to prove. You've more than —"

"No, I'm gonna," Sirius declares, and then he's dragging Remus into a dizzying kiss. Hands in Remus' hair, opening his mouth like he's going to swallow him down. Chest-to-chest, arching into Remus like he wants to stitch them together. One kiss is all it takes. One fucking kiss, and it's better than puppies and miracles and—

Ah, well, Sirius is someone to watch out for. He's not just someone who can kill; he's a tactical strategist, and he can form plans on the fly that no one sees coming. Do *not* ask Remus where his shirt goes, or how Sirius gets it off of him, because he genuinely has no idea. All he knows is that his skin is bare in the cool air, heated under Sirius' feverish hands, and Remus gets agitated about the fact that his shirt is off while Sirius' isn't. He tries to fix this problem by kissing Sirius harder, his brain quite sure that this is the solution, and much to his annoyance, it does not solve anything other than Remus' deep need to feel and hear Sirius moan into his mouth.

Eventually, though, Remus does succeed in getting Sirius' shirt off, feeling like the fucking winner of all things the moment he does and he's greeted with fading, aged marks he left behind. It's no secret that Sirius likes the hickies, but it's not just him; the truth is, the only thing Remus likes more than getting to put them there is getting to see them there.

It's easy to get lost in it, lost in Sirius, lost in kissing him. He forgets that Sirius has something to prove, just standing there for several minutes and getting to *enjoy* each second of Sirius' mouth against his, hot and wet. He takes his time mapping out the shape of Sirius, eventually giving in and slipping his arms around Sirius' shoulders, leaning into him, feeling shaky and wobbly like his knees are about to give out. Fuck, that's so embarrassing, but. Well. It is what it is, and it turns out to be a good thing, because Sirius makes a rough sound and uses his grip on Remus' waist to *lift.*

Remus starts to scramble on instinct, not at all prepared—yet Sirius just catches him under his thighs and hauls him up without any strain whatsoever, almost casually boosting him up until Remus is secure, staring down at him. Remus is left flushed and panting, legs around Sirius' waist.

The thing is, Sirius is—he's so fucking strong. Remus has known this, has had this proven over many, many times, but this is still a revelation to him. He's a bit taller than Sirius, and for a while, he was quite muscular; that's faded a bit, since the war, because apparently you lose muscle mass when you have the metabolism that he does and you're not working out every day. Remus is pretty sure it has a lot to do with the grief and the stress, too, but he's honestly a bit lanky these days. Sirius doesn't care, still seems to find him beautiful regardless, but the point is—no matter Remus' body type, Sirius has *always* been capable of handling him. Lifting him. Just—using his strength overall. Remus' mouth perhaps goes dry, his head spinning, because he can *feel* the strain of the muscles in Sirius' arms, feel the flex of them and the strong grip of his hands, and it's threatening to turn Remus' brain into soup.

"It's okay, I won't drop you," Sirius says, seemingly with complete sincerity that nearly feels out of place in this moment so strife with tension.

"Ooh, big, strong man," Remus whispers teasingly, breathless and trying to hide it, trying to act like he's not shaking from sheer adrenaline and unending *want.*

"I'm the biggest, strongest man you know," Sirius informs him with enough unshakeable confidence that Remus genuinely believes he'd be bigger and stronger than God if Remus just so happened to meet him. "Bigger and stronger is a state of mind, by the way. The only person I could think of that's bigger and stronger than me is you, maybe, but I could have my way with you, couldn't I? You'd let me, wouldn't you?"

Remus lets his fingers dive into Sirius' hair, tilting his head back, and then he tips down to kiss him. It's filthy. A naughty little reward for making Remus feel absolutely fucking insane without Remus even having to ask for it. Fuck, he's *perfect.*

"I could leave you in shambles, couldn't I? Because you're mine, and you want me to, and I'll give you anything, *anything,* you want. This, too," Sirius pants into his mouth, sounding hoarse and ragged, almost slurring like he's drunk on desire. It's a heady drug. Remus has been addicted for a long time, but Sirius is his favorite way to get high.

"Yes," Remus chokes out, mouth falling slack, eyes fluttering shut, everything in his body keening for the one holding it.

"I could fucking take you apart," Sirius whispers in Remus' ear, like it's a dirty little secret, and Remus doesn't have it in him to be ashamed of the soft *please* that tumbles out of his mouth in response, and he doesn't regret it for a second when it brings Sirius' mouth back to his like he's trying to bite into that plea and chew on it. Remus wonders what it tastes like.

A few minutes later, Remus' back is pressed into the wall, hitting with a thud. It's not hard enough to hurt, but it is enough of a collision that yet another thrill shoots through Remus. He's pinned to the wall, thighs split around Sirius, who holds him there and barely lets him catch his breath. He does let Remus sink down a little, keeping his fingers on Remus' thighs, digging into the curve to hold him up, and Remus' mind is buzzing so loud that he's actually worried they're never going to make it to the bed at this rate.

"Not like this," Remus wheezes, tossing his head back against the wall. Sirius just takes to mouthing at his throat, sucking and biting at skin. Remus' fingers tremble as he fists his hand in Sirius' hair, keeping him there. "Slow down, sweetheart. Slow down. Not like this."

Sirius presses into him harder, but he does slow down. His lips soften on Remus' neck, gentler, pressing tender kisses of apology into his pulse. It makes Remus loosen his hand, carding his fingers through his hair, a soft moan falling out against his will because it's all so good. It's so damn good.

Sirius pulls away briefly, staring at him hungrily, lips parted. "He was right. You are a miracle."

"You called me glorious first, did you know that?"

"I did?"

"Yes."

"I was right, too. You are. You're glorious: you're a miracle, Remus, and that means I'm blessed. Oh, I'm *so* fucking blessed to have you. I—I would do anything. Give you anything. Let you have anything. All this talk of everything, and I had it from the moment I met you. You're my everything."

"Sirius," Remus whispers, then shakes his head and pulls Sirius back in, their mouths meeting with an eagerness perfectly matched. Remus' chest pulses, aching with the earnest addition that Sirius has just given him.

"I love you," Sirius murmurs into his mouth. "No one is ever going to love you the way I can, the way I do, the way I always will. I'm going to take such good care of you. Can I take care of you, Remus? Please let me."

"Yeah, sweetheart. *Fuck,"* Remus agrees, his head rolling back as Sirius latches onto the underside of his chin with a rough hum of appreciation.

Remus is promptly tugged away from the wall, hauled further up again, and then carried to bed. Sirius just. He just whisks Remus off, not a falter in his stride, moving with purpose. Shit, he doesn't even stop sucking on Remus' Adam's apple as he goes. He probably feels it vibrate against his tongue when Remus moans, and the thought is dizzying.

Sirius lowers him to the bed with such care, murmuring into his skin, breathless, hands all over him and love spilling out in every touch. It's everything Remus didn't know he wanted, but fuck, he's so grateful to have it.

The truth is, anything with Sirius has always been everything.

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James watches avidly as Regulus and Lily roll around on the ground, wondering idly if he should be enjoying the sight as much as he is, but then he glances over to where he's standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Mary and finds her just as rapt as him, the same glint of appreciation in her eyes.

"This truly never gets old, does it?" James muses.

"Never," Mary agrees.

"Do you think this says anything about us?" James asks, *way* too invested in Lily rolling on top of Regulus and straddling him while he laughs underneath her. There could not be less of a spark of interest between two people, but James' brain simply does not care about that. They're very attractive, okay? He can't help it. Really, it's a harmless appreciation.

"Probably," Mary allows. She snorts. "Then again, maybe not. We *scored,* James. I mean, we *really* scored."

James hums. "Yeah, there's no denying that."

In the next moment, Regulus is the one tossing Lily down, hand flat against her sternum that rises and falls, kneeling over her in a truly provocative position for all that they'd never so much as come within spitting distance of each other in a sexual manner. James tilts his head to the side, taking it in.

"Fucking hell, we are *so* lucky," James breathes out.

Mary, who also has her head tilted, makes a small noise of gleeful agreement. Lily is the one laughing now, and she swats Regulus playfully to the side. He dumps himself on the ground next to her, splayed out. Their chests heave as they lay next to each other, then Lily says something, and they both raise their heads at the same time to look right and James and Mary, both of which hastily straighten their heads and try to look casual. By the way Regulus and Lily start laughing at them, they're not convincing enough. James' chest feels warm.

Lily and Regulus have taken to doing this now. Sparring. It's helpful for them, as it turns out, because they have the similar need to blow off steam in a safe environment with someone they don't actually want to harm. Lily had a hard time adjusting after the war, so pent up that she needed to release pressure, and Regulus knows what it is to have issues dealing with anger. He taught her the same breathing exercises that Monty taught him, but just getting to do this together has worked wonders for them, Lily especially.

"There was a reason we came over today," Mary murmurs as Lily and Regulus settle down in the yard, talking quietly now.

"Yeah?" James asks.

Mary clears her throat. "The school is opening back up soon. We're, ah, looking for…" She swallows. "Well, after everything, we're down quite a few teachers, and I was wondering if…"

James blinks and looks over at her. "You…? Me?"

"You're good with the kids, James. Always have been."

"Yeah, but I—I'm not qualified, am I?"

"Everything is so barebones now that the administration is building the syllabus for all teachers. The whole course will be set up for the terms, and once we're all settled in again, we can build our own the way we want. At this point, no one needs qualifications other than wanting to do it."

"Oh."

Mary gives him a soft smile. "You won't be the only one, if you agree. Lily has agreed to be the school nurse, and I've been talking to Remus, too. He—well, he's interested in having a career, something to call his own, you know? And he likes the idea of being a teacher, so he has a place in the school when he and Sirius come back. There's no pressure, but if you want —"

"What would I even teach?" James asks, his mouth dry and his heart thumping hard in his chest. He flexes his hand on his cane, trying to figure out if he's enticed by this or not.

"We have a few different positions open," Mary says. "I thought maybe you'd like to be in charge of fun."

James blinks again. "Fun? That's a subject?"

"It is now," Mary tells him, lips twitching. "You'd essentially be in charge of clubs and extracurricular activities, like sports and—I don't know—someone suggested chess. Just… things the kids can do to enjoy life a little more. After everything, fun is something they have to be taught, too, and honestly, James, I can't think of anyone better to teach them than you."

That nearly makes James cry. He can't help how emotional it makes him, because that's—that was always his thing, wasn't it? Enjoying life. Having fun. Hope. Trying. He was the one that beatboxed in the arena, the one who grew flowers in a world where it's much easier to die than bloom, the one who found ways to make people laugh when laughing was the hardest thing to do. It's something he's proud of, his tenacity, and he's been struggling to find that again.

He thought he lost it. He was so sure it was gone, but there's a flowerbed to his right in his backyard just beginning to grow, and there are flowers across the street in his mother's yard so close to blooming, and he laughs on the phone with Sirius, and he smiles when he rolls over to find Regulus right next to him every morning, and he hugs his mother with so much love in him that the weight of it could splinter his bones. He was trying to find his old self again and couldn't find it, and maybe he never will, but he's finding that he's still him.

All the changes, and some things never do.

Time has stopped abusing him, feeling less like a change he can't adjust to and more like a chance at better horizons. He never expected to feel hope again, but he has. He wakes up with the hope that his flowers are okay, that Sirius is okay, that everyone he loves is okay. He goes to sleep with the hope that he'll get to wake up to a new day and find what comes next.

That was out of reach to him, in his grief. He knows now that he wasn't handling it well, that he was hurting himself—and Sirius—more than he was helping, that for all he could dive in to care for others through their grief, he failed to do that for himself. He thought it, didn't he? Grief is love, and love shouldn't be done alone. Yet, when it was his turn, he couldn't find the

love through it all past the pain. It was like he was burning alive again. All he could think about was how much it hurt, and oh, oh, it really fucking hurt.

It still hurts, these days, but it's a tender soreness now. He still feels the absence of his dad more than he feels his dad at all, but that makes the past with his dad, and all those moments he does get to feel him again, so much more special.

And life goes on. Life does do that, because that's all it's guaranteed to do. All that life can throw at them, and one thing never changes about it.

It goes on, and on, and on.

People heal. The world heals. The weight of grief never lightens, but it gets easier to hold. Dead flowers find their use between the pages containing poems, and new flowers bloom. They're beautiful. They're all so beautiful.

"I, um—yeah, yeah, I want to do that," James says, exhaling all at once as something relaxes in his chest like relief. Life goes on, and time continues to flow, but he is not an unwilling victim snatched along by it. He's living. He's trying, not just for everyone else, but for himself, too.

"Lovely," Mary announces, clearly satisfied. "I was hoping to get Sirius and Regulus on board, too, but they refused."

"Did they?" James asks, startled.

Mary nods. "Yeah, apparently they have other plans. They haven't mentioned it? They're being awfully secretive about it, you know. Even Lily and Remus are in the dark."

"Regulus hasn't said anything." James shrugs. "Maybe it's, like, a sibling thing?"

"Possibly. Siblings do have their secrets."

"Mm, how is Bing Bing?"

"He's…" Mary pauses, then sighs. "Yeah, he's—he's doing better, but he's not too excited about the school opening again. He may have yelled at me about not wanting to go back since half of his friends won't be there."

James winces. "Fuck."

"It was the first time Lily scolded him," Mary whispers, glancing over at him. "Not because he was wrong to feel that way, but because of how he spoke to me. She usually stays out of it, you know, but that was a hard day for me. I—I mean, this is hard for me, the school opening again. She knows that, so she—she got a bit stern. Pretty sure it broke his heart."

Yikes, James thinks, but does not say so. That's a whole complex situation on its own, their little family dynamic. Lily and Mary are essentially raising Bingley, and that's surely a hard thing to navigate. "Did it upset you?"

"Yes and no," Mary admits. "It's…difficult. I'm his sister, so I feel the need to defend him and make sure no one scolds him who doesn't have a right to, but she—I mean, shit, James, she cooks for him and looks after him and practically tucks him into bed every night right along with me. The lines are all blurred, you know? That's what Lily says, in any case, and she's not *wrong.* He's not our kid, but…he is."

"It's a hard balance to find, I imagine."

"It is, yeah, and we're all trying to find it together. I mean, he's a teenager. You remember how hard being a teenager was."

"I do, yeah. Puberty makes us all its bitch. Is he okay now?"

"Yeah, mostly. He apologized to me, then gave Lily the cold shoulder for a few days—which I'm pretty sure broke *her* heart, honestly—and then he apologized to her, too. He's still really wary about going back to school. He's scared, and I can't blame him, and I can't—I can't fix that fear. But um, knowing you'll be there might help, so—thank you, James, really."

"You don't have to thank me, Mary, you know that," James murmurs, reaching out to take her hand and squeeze it. She squeezes back and smiles. It feels good getting to help her now, and Bingley, and just having the opportunity to help with the school; he remembers how much they helped him after his first arena, and he likes that he can return the favor, and that he can hope it will help him again.

After a few moments of calm, Mary idly muses, "You don't think Sirius and Regulus are plotting world domination or something, do you?"

James looks over at her in mild alarm, and they stare at each other for a beat, and then they both crack up until they're leaning on one another and roaring with laughter. When they finally relax again, several moments later, it's Lily and Regulus watching them with appreciation, so utterly shameless in doing so that neither makes a move to hide it.

It sticks with James, though, the curiosity surrounding whatever Regulus and Sirius intend to do with their lives. Not that they'd have to do anything, really, because it's not like the fortune that they received for being Victors just went away. They did, however, agree to stop getting payouts for it, along with all the rest of the living Victors, all of which agreed that the money should go towards better things, like rebuilding districts and helping the less fortunate. Regardless, they're all set for life with the money they have and the houses in the Victor's Villages they still own. None of them *have* to work.

But, in the same breath, people like having purpose, so it makes sense that they'd want to do *something*.

Just—what is it?

Regulus clearly knows that Mary wanted to ask James about becoming a teacher, because after Mary and Lily leave, he's the one who brings it up first with a simple, "Did you say

yes?"

"I did," James admits, kicking his feet at the counter in the kitchen with his chin resting in his hand as he watches Regulus make them a snack. Bagels. They're not an everyday thing, but they're frequent enough that James is reminded why he was Pavloved into thinking of them as his favorite. He remembers saying he hated them when he was angry at Regulus. People really do not give him the credit he deserves for being a liar when the situation calls for it.

"So, Mr. Fun, hm?" Regulus muses thoughtfully, smearing cream cheese with an elegant twist of table knife. Not a dagger, but the sight of him handling any knife of any kind still does funny things to James' stomach. "Personally, if you were my teacher, I would have skipped all your classes."

James snorts. "Bullshit. You would have failed all my classes just to keep taking them."

"I would have dropped out."

"You would have been in the front row."

"You're very cute when you're delusional," Regulus tells him flippantly, flipping the knife between his knuckles to turn it vertical and bring it up to his mouth, delicately sucking the cream cheese clean off. James is going to *die.*

"You can't pretend you don't like me anymore, Reg. That ship has sailed so far we can't even see it."

"What are you talking about? I hate you."

"You're very cute when you're delusional," James tells him.

Regulus gives him a flat stare. "I'm never delusional."

James clears his throat and straightens up in his chair, scrunching his face into a scowl. *"You're not going to make it to the end, even if it's by my hand, James. No matter how important to Sirius you are, I'll do what needs to be done. I won't hesitate."*

"Who said that? I never said that," Regulus tells him.

"You—" James sputters. "Fuck you, yes you did! You said something along those lines *multiple times!"*

"Mm, no, I don't think so," Regulus replies lazily. "I think you're wrong, is what I think, and I'm always right and never delusional, so I win. Now, shut up and eat your bagel."

"You're ridiculous."

"You're ridiculous. Eat your bagel."

"I refuse to, until you admit you were wrong," James says, which only ends with Regulus picking up the bagel and placing it directly in James' mouth.

"Spit it out, I *dare* you," Regulus warns, eyes narrowing, and James halts right in the middle of unlocking his jaws, as he was indeed about to let the bagel fall out of his mouth.

In the end, James makes a muffled noise between a huff and laugh, then reaches up to bite into the bagel and chew with his mouth wide open just to see Regulus' nose crinkle up. It's unbearable. James loves him so much.

"So," James starts a bit later when he's already finished with his bagel and Regulus is still taking delicate, polite bites because he's never lost his table manners, "Mary says you and Sirius apparently have future plans or something?"

Regulus hums, holding up a hand in front of his mouth as he chews and bobs his head. He is what James likes to think of as accidentally-adorable, where he isn't aware that he's doing it, and has no idea the effect he has on James' heart. Once he swallows, he says, "Yes, we do."

"So…what's the plan?" James asks curiously, eager to know.

Only for Regulus to say, quite bluntly, "None of your business."

"None of—" James gapes at him in disbelief, but Regulus does not appear to be joking. "What? Regulus, you and Sirius are *all* of my business!"

"Mm, what miserable business to have," Regulus muses.

"Come on, love, I'll wither away not knowing," James needles.

"Shame," is all Regulus says, and then he takes another small bite, slow-blinking at him like an unbothered cat.

James frowns at him. "You're not going to tell me?"

"There's not much to tell, really," Regulus murmurs, once he's swallowed again. "We're still working out the details, that's all. Plus—I don't know, it's just…" He trails off, then sighs and sits there in pensive silence as he finishes off his bagel, slowly. James gives him his time, waiting him out. Finally, when all Regulus has to fiddle with is the knife he used to spread cream cheese on the bagels, he speaks again. "I think we don't want to jinx it. Like, we both want to do it together, and—and stick to it until we…retire, I suppose, but we're tentative in the same way, because we want it to work out how we hope it will. And it's nothing special or spectacular—frankly, our parents would have been *appalled,* but it's our idea, you know? We talked about it. We decided to do it. We're working it out, how it'll work, and it's—it's for us. It's ours."

Ah, well, James gets that. He knows how delicate things are between Regulus and Sirius. The space has been good for both of them, which James is aware sort of stings for them, because they never wanted to *need* space. Nonetheless, the space was needed and has provided a very good foundation for them to build off of, as far as having a healthy dynamic that's better for them both. James gets that, too, in the sense that he never wanted to be away from Sirius either, but they've both been healing how they need to because of it.

Even still, Regulus gets so *sad* about Sirius sometimes. James thinks the capacity of Regulus' melancholia is a spectrum with Sirius at both ends. No one can make him sadder, and no one can soothe his sadness better. James thinks he's dead center on that spectrum, because it's with him that Regulus seems to find his peace. That's a healing thing, too, how it spits in the face of the great, big tragedy this world wanted them to be.

"Alright," James says softly. "Well, I'll just find out when he makes it back and you two get started on it, I suppose."

Regulus drops his gaze to the table. "Any word on when that'll be? Has he mentioned that to you yet?"

James' heart clenches, and he whispers, "Not yet."

"Oh." Regulus scrapes his thumb over the steel swoop-carving on the handle of the knife, then swallows. "That's okay."

"Is it?" James checks, studying him.

Regulus shrugs one shoulder and looks up. "Yeah, it's okay. We're doing okay, aren't we?"

"We are," James confirms, oddly warmed by it.

There's a strange sense of independence that comes with this, just James and Regulus left to their own devices, not having to give their attention to anyone else if they don't want to.

Sometimes, they don't. Sometimes, James and Regulus hide away in their house all alone, just them and nothing else. Sometimes, they're all that exists, the two of them shutting the door and closing the curtains on their windows, letting no one in and simply being at home together.

James loves their home, which is ironic, because he was mildly betrayed when his mum kicked him out. He did *not* want to leave her, even to go across the street, but they had a long talk and she helped him pack and she was, of course, right about literally everything she said. It is so special to have a home with Regulus. They've never done that before. It's new and exciting, and James loves everything about it.

He loves that Regulus spent nearly four hours bickering with Sirius on the phone to figure out how to uninstall the chair on the stairs in Effie's house and install it into this one. He loves that Regulus bitches at him for leaving his shoes wherever he so happens to kick them off. He loves that he wakes up earlier than Regulus most days and goes to tend to his flowers, then finds one to bring back to him every morning, a routine of seeing Regulus smile before his day even starts.

He loves that Regulus sits at his desk and pretends to ignore James watching him write his sad boy poetry, though maybe it's a little happier these days; James likes to think so. He loves that Regulus reminds him to water his flowerbeds in the yard, because he's still not used to having some back there yet. He loves that Regulus has Bellatrix's dagger displayed in a case on the wall, clean and well taken care of. He loves that he got to bring the Horcrux Hornet, because Regulus is terrible at telling him no. He loves that he has a whole collection of canes Sirius made him, and a place for his glasses on the nightstand, and a designated side of the bed always left open to him. He loves the art they have hanging up that Mary made them, and the lumpy throw pillow Lily always claims as her own when she's over, and the books Regulus reads—sometimes out loud to him—that James recognizes as his dad's.

He loves the rug in the sitting room, and the clock that ticks in the kitchen, and the orange peels they boil to make the house smell nice. He loves how warm it is here, and he loves how safe it feels here, and he loves that it *is* a home and, most of all, that he has helped make it one. Make it his, with Regulus.

"What?" Regulus murmurs, eyebrows furrowed, because James has all but melted just looking at him and thinking about it; how far they've come, how far they'll go.

"Come here, come with me," James mumbles, reaching for Regulus' hand, always so pleased when Regulus lets him have it. Their fingers still fit together. That hasn't changed either.

"The dishes, James—"

"Sod the dishes. I'll do them later."

Regulus hums out a skeptical noise but protests no further as James tugs him from the chair and right out of the kitchen, into the sitting room. James breaks away to go to the stereo, nodding towards the fireplace without meeting Regulus' eyes.

"You never do this, you know," Regulus announces when he's kneeling down in front of the fireplace and placing a couple of logs inside, starting the flames. "I've noticed that."

James' stomach squirms as he stares blankly at the stereo, just waiting to press play. He hasn't…told anyone. Sirius knows, he thinks, because of how James reacted to the explosions in the midst of taking district two, but Sirius never told anyone or made him talk about it. Too much happened for them to revisit it, and James never wanted to talk about it at all.

He doesn't know why he's so ashamed of the fear. Maybe it's because it hasn't gone away or faded in the least. Maybe it's because it's a fear no one expected him to have, least of all himself. To this day, no one knows that James remembers what it was like to burn alive, even briefly. It's not their fault; he may have waved it off and acted like it was fine, leading everyone to believe *he* was fine, and it wasn't an issue, because so many things were already an issue, and he was tired of the issues. He was tired of the pain. He was tired.

James swallows. Of course Regulus has noticed, seeing as he's very observant, especially when it comes to James and the things that hurt him. Fear hurts in its own way, and James is afraid of fire. He never gets too close to the fireplace, and he makes sure Regulus puts it out before they leave the room, so anxious about the possibility that it could blaze out of control. Even in the kitchen, James won't go too close to the stove, and he still sometimes dreams of what it was like to burn. The fear isn't as bad as it was in the war, but then again, nothing is.

"I, um." James swallows again, chewing on the inside of his lip for a moment. He hears the quiet *whoosh* of flames catching, and he squeezes his eyes shut. He loves to be warm, is the thing. He really does. It's strange how the things he loves can be right on the cusp of agony and terror, and how he doesn't love it any less. There's something beautiful about that, too, and it took him a while to see it that way. "You—do you know how you struggle with water and stuff?"

There's a beat, then Regulus says, "My aquaphobia?"

"Yeah." James takes a deep breath and swipes his thumb over the play button on the stereo. He hasn't pressed it yet. "I have struggles with—with fire. Intense heat. Explosions."

"Pyrophobia," Regulus clarifies.

"That's the word for it, I suppose," James agrees, clearing his throat as he glances over his shoulder to find Regulus looking at him, gaze sad. "When we escaped Azkaban, and I got caught in the explosion, I—I felt it. I remember it."

"You—" Regulus' expression goes slack with horror. "James, I thought you didn't. I had no idea—"

"I know," James cuts in. "I know, Reg. I—I sort of…wanted it that way. I didn't want to talk about it, honestly. Or face it. Or even—believe it, I guess. There's something almost *frustrating* about fearing the elements, isn't there?"

"Yeah, there is," Regulus agrees softly, frowning. He flicks his gaze to the fire, eyebrows furrowed. "It's—the lack of control, I think. No matter how afraid I am, it's still going to rain."

"And when we get cold, we have to build a fire," James murmurs. "It's like—I don't know, it's like these things aren't things we're meant to be afraid of, because they're helpful to survival, in their own ways. Fire keeps us warm. Rain makes things grow. It—it doesn't have to be destructive, and maybe it was never meant to be, but that's the part we were exposed to.

Because it can be destructive; you know what it is to drown, and I know what it is to burn, and it scares us."

"But…" Regulus pauses, and he gets that look on his face that he does when he's putting in the effort to be comforting, to lean into the optimism James is usually the one presenting; when he can't, Regulus tries for him, always. "But we still get to be warm and there is still growth. As afraid as we are, we still get that. No amount of fear can take that from us."

"Yeah, love, exactly," James says, lips curling up. He meets Regulus' eyes and stays there, in the safety of his gaze. Those eyes of his. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"That's okay, James," Regulus replies instantly. "Just—now that I know, you don't have to worry about it, alright? I'll start all the fires and put them all out."

"Just for me?" James asks, softening.

"Just for you." Regulus turns his gaze back to the fire. "I don't want you to be scared, but it's okay that you are. Some fears go away, and some don't, and it's not always about overcoming all of them, so don't think it's a failure if you don't, or can't. Being afraid is being human, I think."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Riddle taught me that. He never seemed more human to me than in his last moments, when he was terrified."

James gazes at him for a long moment, watching him watch the flames with a distant look in his eyes, like he's somewhere else entirely. Regulus doesn't talk about what he, Remus, and Dorcas did to Riddle. James saw his decapitated head, his empty eye-sockets, and he can take a guess at how bad it was. Frankly, James doesn't want to know the details, and perhaps that's why Regulus hasn't shared them.

Sometimes, James is struck by the violence that exists within the man he loves, and then struck twice by the violence he himself is capable of *for* the man he loves. It should sicken him, maybe, but it doesn't now any more than it did when he made his first kill. Cole, from district eight. James hasn't forgotten him. James hasn't forgotten anyone.

But Riddle… Well, James thinks it startles him to imagine Riddle with any humanity in him. He supposes that makes how he died an easier pill to swallow. Dehumanizing anyone makes their death, their fear, their pain have less of an impact, and is that not the trap many Hallows fell into when it came to the hunger games? It's strange how there's not very much distance between the Hallows and everyone who suffered at their hands; in the end, they're all human. In the end, they're all born and they all die, and everything in between is what they make it. James always cared about them. All of them. The whole world. Riddle was on the outside of that, in a way, especially seeing firsthand who he was. But, in his last moment, he was no different from the rest.

He was born, he lived, and then he died. He felt fear, and he felt pain. He was here, and he meant something to some people, and then he was gone. Strip it all down, and it's no different from anyone else. And yet, all that he did while he lived made all the difference in the world. Perhaps James would have felt sympathy for him once upon a time, but he has that in him no longer. Of all the changes he's gone through, that one isn't a change that weighs too heavy to carry.

James turns and presses play on the stereo.

There's a light glimmering in Regulus' eyes, casted in the glow of the flames they don't stand too close to, only close enough to feel the warmth from it. Not too warm, but just right. This is something James gets to have, too, in spite of his fear. The way Regulus' eyes look in firelight, so pretty and so pleased as James moves to him and draws him close.

The song from the stereo is something old, something he does not know the name of, but one that has become his favorite. A song on a disc that Regulus found in the attic of this house, covered in dust and unlabeled, likely kept by someone who lived here long ago before they were ever born. A memory of someone else's that they pull out and keep alive. Someday, generations in the future, when no one alive even remembers his name, James hopes someone will play it again, and the echo of his love will spill out with the melody.

James holds Regulus close by the fire, and they dance in the soft swaddle of a quiet world, where no one is watching.

There is a house built out of stone

Wooden floors, walls and window sills

Tables and chairs worn by all of the dust

This is a place where I don't feel alone

This is a place where I feel at home

Regulus is as relaxed as he's ever been, arms gently looped over James' shoulders, their cheeks pressed together as they sway. The steady beat of his heart knocks into James'.

'Cause, I built a home

For you

For me

Until it disappeared

From me

From you

And now, it's time to leave and turn to dust

James thinks about it a lot. How long it took to get here. So much packed into all that time between them, and yet here they are. Standing close. So close.

Out in the garden where we planted the seeds

There is a tree as old as me

Branches were sewn by the color of green

Ground had arose and passed it's knees

By the cracks of the skin I climbed to the top

I climbed the tree to see the world

When James was young, he didn't think of moments such as this. Didn't even know to hope for it. That was Regulus, wasn't it? He was the one with all that hope in him, even from the start, and James is the one learning that things can be worse than you ever feared, and better than you ever hoped.

When the gusts came around to blow me down

I held on as tightly as you held onto me

I held on as tightly as you held onto me

After everything they've been through, they made it.

And, I built a home

For you

For me

Until it disappeared

From me

From you

And now, it's time to leave and turn to dust

They made it, and it's everlasting. They didn't just make it through; they made it with careful hands of creation, love built and shaped through years, never changing, forever changing, and it is theirs. It will always be theirs, and no one can take that from them. They made it, and they were always going to, and it's only more special for all that it took to do so. That other life of theirs has nothing on this one.

For all the great, big tragedies they have experienced, that's not what they are. What they are, together, is home.

James brushes his lips over Regulus' cheek as the last croon of the song fades out, and he whispers, "Will you marry me?"

It is spoken softly beside Regulus' ear, like a secret, even though no one can overhear. James has never felt more at peace than when he says the words, and he feels so calm, so content, when Regulus eases back to gaze at him.

"We're already engaged," Regulus murmurs.

"I know," James says, and then, "but will you marry me?"

That sits between them for a long moment. Regulus' breath audibly hitches, and James waits. They haven't spoken about getting married since before the war. Regulus hasn't called him his fiancé in so long, treading carefully around the topic, because it's difficult, isn't it? It's so dreadfully difficult to continue in the aftermath of loss, and they both have people they wanted to be at their wedding that no longer can be. For that, continuation has been hard, and they've been very wary to try. It was always their decision, something they had to decide together to do when they felt it was the right time.

The truth is, there is no time where it will ever feel completely right; there is only the time they decide to do it anyway. To take the steps to do what they want in spite of those who can't be there in the flesh to witness and offer support. But they would have been supportive, James knows. Everyone who can't be there would be happy to know that it's happening, and that is a bittersweet sense of peace that emboldens James to *let* it happen. To let himself be happy. To let himself continue.

"Yes," Regulus breathes out, "I'll marry you."

"Reg," James says, breathless, hand coming up to Regulus' jaw, fingers curling to grip his chin. "Reg, love, let's get married."

"Okay," Regulus whispers, a soft laugh tumbling out of his mouth, eyes bright in the sunrise glow of the fire. He breaks out into a smile and nods vigorously. "Let's get married."

James' smile stretches so wide it hurts, and pain can be a beautiful thing, too. He's laughing, giddy and delighted, and so is Regulus. They're so happy at this moment, laughing and grinning at each other, that it's difficult for them to kiss around it, but oh do they try.

They really try.

Chapter End Notes

IM GONNA SOB THEYRE GETTING MARRIED 😭

okay, no, starting from the top!

euphemia my beloved <3 look at her go! she's doing so well!!! her and regulus are so sweet to me :(also lmaooo she absolutely had to be the one to kick them out or else they Never Would Have Left

remus!!! ahhhh, he's thriving back home, good for him, it's what he deserves. he's so happy just getting to be with sirius and his dad 😭 also not lyall looking at sirius "ive killed more people than ive smiled at" black and being like He Is Perfect For My Son. GOODBYE HES SO FUNNY I LOVE HIM.

jealous sirius my beloved <3 tho i suppose he was just more offended than jealous, which is fair. this is the man who caught a spear out of midair, the mere idea that anyone would challenge him is absolutely APPALLING to him lmaooo. he's so dramatic, i love him. also he strong 🥰 remus is so lucky.

also! puppies! sirius deserves a puppy <3 so i gave him a puppy.

james!!! ahhhhh, im so proud of him!!! look at how far he's come in this chapter 😭 like he's grown so much, i wanna hug him so bad. and he's HAPPY. also him just enjoying himself immensely watching lily and regulus spar. that's literally his dream come true, and it's what he deserves!!! and him becoming a teacher—not just him, but remus, and lily becoming a nurse—but specifically a teacher to, like, guide children into having fun and extracurricular activities and things they're excited for and happy about??? that's so special :(

also can we talk about the little complex family that is lily, mary, and bingley and how strange of a dynamic that must be to navigate? but they're doing it anyway, all of them together, and it's just. it's so healing oh i love them so much :(

oh!!! james and regulus flirting, regulus being a little shit, and the return of the bagels!!! they're so cute, i adore them. finally james talking about things he has and does struggle with, a huge step for him, because he prefers to avoid it and act like he's doing just fine, so this is good. and i think the juxtaposition of their phobias is so on brand for them, honestly.

there was a little bit of discussion on riddle and how that whole thing is viewed, and i think it's interesting how differently sirius and james handled it in regards to their fucked up boyfriends. like james just coexists with it and feels—neutral about it, almost? when at the start, violence was something he couldn't even fathom, and didn't want to. while sirius found...ah, beauty in it, you can say (to be fair, anything to do with remus us beautiful to him), when at the start he was so attuned to violence that he hated it and felt trapped by it. so like, they've all come a really long way.

and the song! it's to build a home by the cinematic orchestra, by the way! a very beautiful song imo and fitting for jegulus in this—if you'd believe it, i first heard the song in the twilight movies 😭 (breaking dawn part 2 if i remember correctly), and i fell in love with it.

ANYWAY! JEGULUS GETTING MARRIED!!! THEY'RE GONNA GET MARRIED IM GONNA CRY I LOVE THEM

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-effie not needing regulus to tell her he loves her 😭
-sirius insulting remus' ex but being so charming that the ex he insulted laughed with him at the insult
-lyall absolutely fucking LOSING IT over sirius he finds him so funny pls
-puppies!
-remus getting to share all of himself with sirius (remember when he didn't know sirius' birthday and sirius didn't know his? 😭 this is so special for them)
-sirius healing when it comes to marlene
-regulus healing when it comes to barty
-james healing when it comes to monty
-everyone healing!!!
-regulus "gaslight king" black and james "i know what you said you can't fool me just because you're cute" potter
-jegulus!!! dancing!!! by!!! a!!! fire!!!
-regulus and sirius missing each other, but also making plans together 😭

Secrets of War

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death/murder/torture/gore
-references to past children death
-references to past bombs/bomb-related deaths
-references to past war/warzones
-references to past addiction/alcoholism
-mentions of guns (none used)
-mentions of vomiting (brief)
-brief depiction of child abuse
-heavy depictions of grief
-heavy depictions of depression
-depictions of alcoholism/addiction/withdrawals
-a brief depiction of violence while under the influence (no one gets hurt)
-depictions of planning a suicide attempt (it doesn't happen)
-depictions of suicidal ideation
-depictions of survivor's guilt
-depictions of ptsd

alright, this chapter is very, very heavy in some parts, so i beg of you to please, please mind the warnings and take care of yourselves. this chapter is entirely from dorcas' pov and follows her from after the war all the way up to the place the last chapter ended on, with a definitive timeline on how she grieves and heals. it does end happy/uplifting, but it is brutal on the way to get there, so take care of yourselves!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things they don't tell you about war—some of you who survive don't really survive.

~•~

The day of Marlene's memorial is the first time Dorcas decides she's going to kill herself.

It's been in her to want to since she realized Marlene was dead, just this vague, repeated thought of *I want to be dead with you, I want to be dead too, I want to be dead instead of this, I want to be dead, I want to be dead, I want to be—*

That's the only thing she wants, but it's less of a gripping desire and more of rib-splitting desperation, like a wounded animal dragging itself away from its herd to find somewhere to die, to starve to death, to waste into nothing and take its turn as a carcass for vulture's to pick over.

Dorcas is wounded.

She didn't even know wounds could go this deep.

It feels like—it feels as if there are hooks in the palm of each hand and top of each foot, stretching her out as far as she'll go and then farther, to her limit and then beyond, leaving her suspended there with pain radiating out from the lack of reprieve in her aching muscles where she's strung up and from being pierced in her four corners. It feels like the world is trying to examine her from all angles, hold test-tubes under her dripping blood to collect samples, hum pensively and scribble on a clipboard as she whines and writhes helplessly, her pain a new discovery to be studied.

They don't get it. No one gets it. Put a microscope to it, and there is some undiscovered microorganism to watch bloom into existence. Run tests and find new words to decipher the meaning of it, all the components unknown—and ah, yes, of course the unknown is dangerous. People fear the unknown. Dorcas can't blame them. She fears her unknown, too.

Pain like this kills people.

Pain like this destroys people.

That unrelenting pressure on her chest. *I can't breathe. I can't breathe. No, I can, but it hurts to. I am breathing in razor blades, and every exhale tears me apart. Help me. Help me, please, it hurts. It's not supposed to feel like this.*

That low pit in her stomach. *I am empty. Something has been carved out of me. We must eat so we can feed our soul, and I am no longer hungry. I will pick at my food and dig through this world just to find you. I'm starved of you. I'm starving. Please. Please grant me generosity. Please find a shred of human decency. I'm starving.*

That itch under her skin. *The echo of your touch is a rash. I can feel you there. I can't feel you there. I do not know which is worse. Your hand upon me, and I ache to shed my skin like a snake, hang it up like a trophy to see the marks your fingerprints left behind. I can't stand to replace them. You make me burn. I will be ash soon.*

That absence. *Where are you? Why did you leave? Come back. Please come back, Marlene. Come back, come back, come back. Please, please, please. Darling, I'm so alone.*

There are a lot of symptoms of grief, like a sickness. A disease. Something gone wrong inside with no cure, killing you slowly. Too slowly. For Dorcas, it's not fast enough.

What Dorcas wants, more than anything, is to be dead. She doesn't care about the person who will discover her body. She doesn't care about the person who will have to inform anyone who loves her. She doesn't care about anyone who loves her. She doesn't care that this is a disease that could catch and she would be spreading it. She only cares to put herself out of her misery, nothing more than an animal with rabies, needing to be taken out back and fucking shot.

And so she is there. And so she is there, screaming for relief with no sound ever leaving her mouth. And so she is there, eyes closed, no one alive who could stop her, or save her, when the only person who could, who is dead, still somehow manages to anyway. And so she is there, and she thinks of those moments, she thinks of those memories…

"You—you go beyond this war. Whether or not you're made for it, you exist outside of it. You exist past this war. You exist for more than the war."

"You think you don't?"

"I can't remember a time that I ever did. Not until you. Do you understand? You have to make it through this war. I need you to, and so many others need you to. People need you, Marlene. But me? No one needs me."

"I do. I need you."

"That's not fair," Dorcas chokes out, rocking her head back with a gasp, resting it against the wall as she squeezes her eyes shut tighter. "You're not—you're not even here to need me."

"Maybe, but the difference is, you won't be alone when you're old. You'll have me. If I make it through this war, at least."

"You will. Just so I won't be alone."

"Oh, is that why?"

"Yes."

"Mm, motivation enough, I suppose. Although, even if I didn't, you wouldn't be alone."

"I don't care, I don't care, I don't want anyone else," Dorcas gasps, chest stuttering, hyperventilating. "I don't care about them, any of them. It's just you."

"We do need to work on that, though. Your world revolving around me, I mean. It's not healthy, you know. That's—Dorcas, that's a lot to put on one person. It can't just be me. You need more than me."

"I'm not—I swear I'm not blaming you," Dorcas whimpers, shaking her head. "It's not your fault, okay? It's not. It just hurts. It really fucking hurts. I can't—I *can't* do it—and I know you wouldn't—I *know* you'd want—"

"Even me. I wish it had been me."

"She wouldn't. Marlene wouldn't wish that, Dorcas, so you can't stay here. You can't sit here, neglect yourself, and wait to die. You have to get up."

"Stop. Please stop, don't do this to me," Dorcas says, and it falls out of her on great, heaving sobs that make her shoulders shake and her chest bow in like it's caving in. It feels that way. It feels worse than that. "Please don't put this on me. I don't want to do it, okay? Please don't make me do it."

"There was—there was a landmine—"

Dorcas groans, rocking her head back and forth against the wall, her whole body trembling as she weeps. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Marlene. I—I forgot. I didn't mean to forget. I just wanted to see you again. All I wanted—" She chokes, her face twisting up. "I didn't mean to, okay? I'm sorry. Please don't punish me with this. With living. Please. I'm sorry."

"I'd do anything for Alphard. Even live. And I did, as best as I could. I hope you find that someday."

She already has. Anything, anything, anything.

Dorcas makes a small sound in the back of her throat, the wounded animal recognizing its fate, left to a slow, painful death of starvation. The herd moves on and leaves it there to die. No predators to come by and end it before it happens naturally. Just the vultures circling. Waiting.

And so she is there, left alone with the mockery of her memories, wounded by her own mistake, burdened by the symptoms of her grief.

That gun in her hand. *Let me pull the trigger. Let me, let me, let me. Let the bullet eat through my brain the way you ate through my life, you fucking monster. I'm in love with a monster, and your most monstrous act was what you left me with.*

"I'm good with that, but the sooner we find everyone, the better I'll feel. It's not safe for Sirius and I to move through this section, but—"

"No, hey, we're handling that now. We're about to dismantle all the traps and head out. I know your current position, and if you backtrack to where Lily and I lost you and go four blocks north, the rest of us can meet you and take a straight shot to the castle."

"We can do that. We can't take the radio, though. It's about to die, I think. Will you be able to find us?"

"Yeah, I know exactly where to go. You two go ahead and wait for us there. It'll be twenty minutes, at most."

"Alright, we're leaving now. Don't be late."

"Nothing is going to stop me from getting to you, Marlene. I'll end the fucking war if that's what it takes to make it to you."

"I know you would, you fucking lunatic. I—oh, fucking hell, I love you."

"I love you, too."

Dorcas gags on her tears. Wounded, wounded, wounded. Gently, she sits the gun down on the floor with a dull clatter, drawing her legs up to her chest and bracing her empty hands

against the back of her head, clenching her fingers around her braids and tugging, hyperventilating into her knees.

The day of Marlene's memorial is the first time Dorcas decides she's going to kill herself, and it is her last, because she does not deserve the reprieve a swift death will grant her. She will die slowly, a wounded animal, the vultures circling. The monster in her memories will love her there, and Dorcas will love that monster just the same.

Just alone.

~•~

Things they don't tell you about war—the enemies look like people, and the people look like enemies.

~•~

Three months after the war finds Dorcas sitting under a bridge in the Hallow. She's been here for a while. She sleeps here. She sits here day-after-day, night-after-night, and mentally catalogues the curious way her body adjusts to the concrete beneath it, like she's never known the comfort of a home at all.

She has a routine now. Get up in the morning. Climb the incline to the back alley seven blocks south of the Dillmar Suites. Walk two blocks north, stop by the small cafe to refill her water bottle in the bathroom, buy a coffee and a muffin. Walk that final block north, four blocks south of the Dillmar Suites, sit on the curb and choke down breakfast, and wait. She never lasts long before she's up again, stopping by the cafe bathroom to get clean, then returning to her bridge.

Rinse and repeat. Do it all over again.

She's not homeless, technically. Only by choice, which possibly spits in the face of those who have been homeless, not by choice. Twelve blocks south of the Dillmar Suites is where Dorcas used to live. She could go there, sleep in a bed, use her own shower; she just doesn't. Her things are there, except she doesn't really feel like she owns anything anymore. She has paid for the place in full and can return at any time.

Instead, she does this. Instead, she makes sure no one will find her. They could, if they'd look, but maybe they're scared of what they'd find. Maybe they expect her to stop going where she does, to stop waiting, because surely she knows by now that what she's waiting for will never come, right? She knows. That's not what it's about. It's about devotion. Punishment. Stupid and relentless hope in the face of the impossible. It's about what she can't let go of. She can't let go.

Maybe they did look for her, just at the wrong time, and they don't know where to find her.

Why beneath a bridge? You want the truth? Dorcas was running on approximately three hours of sleep across three days, circling the perimeter of where Marlene died like a vulture furious there's no carcass to feast on, and she kept spreading out, going on fumes, not sure how to stop. One misstep, and she tumbled down the incline all the way to the bottom, scraped up and aching, then crawled under the bridge and stayed there, because it doesn't matter where she is. She really, truly doesn't care where she is at all.

They know her in the cafe. Know her face. Know her name. Know what she did. Because of that, they fear her. They're too scared to ask her to stop haunting the place, to stop using their establishment as a rest stop on her daily trip through her grief. But, even grieving, she has to use the bathroom, has to hydrate, has to eat, has to clean up. It's not her best; she's never been this filthy, this thin, this dried up and drained.

They know her on the street, on the sidewalks they move along, bypassing her and keeping a wide berth. A blur of faces that tilt away from her, not wanting to see. They can't bear to look at it, because they're all cowards. Dorcas glares at them, bold even now, daring them to look at what they did. She wishes they'd look back, so she'd have an excuse to speak, to start something and then finish it. The streets are empty of blood now. She'd like to flood them again.

She wants, furiously, to kill them all.

What should worry Dorcas, but doesn't, is that she doesn't trust children. The sound of them crying as their parents drag them along the sidewalk makes her tense up, makes her stare them down, waiting for the moment they'll split out of their skin and attack. They never do. They just cry.

Some of them don't. Some of them giggle and skip over the cracks in the sidewalk, splintered from explosions and filled in already, the kids only able to see it as a game and not for what it really was. They don't understand yet. They don't know that the chipped spot on the curb was a piece of shrapnel that didn't hit Marlene, when so many others did. They kick at it with tiny, light-up shoes, and sometimes they look at Dorcas with curiosity for how she guards it like a starving dog hunkered over a bone that can't satiate her hunger in the first place. *Mummy, why is that lady sitting there? Mummy, why does she look mad at me? Mummy, why is she crying?*

Nine times out of ten, *Mummy* drags her child away. Nine times out of ten, Dorcas is screaming inside her own mind for *Mummy* to run and take her child with her, and never look back, because *Mummy* and child look like targets.

The first time a child rips away from their parents, crying and running down the street towards Dorcas, and she reaches for a gun she doesn't have anymore—that's when Dorcas gets up and leaves. That's when Dorcas never goes back.

~•~

Things they don't tell you about war—for some of you, when you are done, you feel like you don't have a purpose anymore.

~•~

Molly is so happy to see her.

Dorcas jolts when Molly drags her into a hug, tensing up in her arms, everything inside her protesting it, on the defense immediately. *Don't touch me. Don't erase her touch.*

Dorcas pulls away fast, stiffly, her jaw clenched. Molly clearly notices, but she hesitates only a moment before clearing her throat and ushering her inside.

There's a baby crying, *squalling,* in the background.

"Oh, yeah, sorry about that. Bill's got a pair of lungs on him that'll make your ears bleed," Molly says with a chuckle, waving Dorcas further into the house.

Arthur is inside, trying to work a bottle into a baby's mouth, looking aggrieved and also like the happiest man alive. The baby isn't having it, kicking up a fuss and throwing around the tiniest fists Dorcas has ever seen. Red-faced with red tufts of hair poking out from the little hat on his head.

"Who was at—" Arthur stops when he looks up and sees Dorcas standing in the doorway. He blinks. "Oh. Dorcas! My goodness, where have you been? Everyone's been so—"

"Arthur," Molly cuts in.

Silence falls.

Dorcas wishes she hadn't come here. She doesn't know why she came here. She just—didn't know where else to go. She couldn't go to Pandora, who would surely call everyone, no matter how much Dorcas begged her not to. She refuses to go to Minerva and Poppy; she'd rather die.

Molly seemed like a viable option. She's in the Hallow, home again, and she's a suitable pulse of penance. Her brothers are dead, and it's Dorcas' fault. Marlene wasn't the first; she wasn't even the last. That honor goes to Albus. But Molly, well, Dorcas felt she should come here to

tell her. To come clean about Fabian and Gideon, and maybe, this time, not defend herself when Molly strangles her.

That was before Dorcas knew Molly had a baby here.

"You have a baby," Dorcas states.

Molly clears her throat. "Yeah, it came as a right shock to us, too. Didn't plan him, our Bill, and didn't even notice with the war and all. I lost weight, didn't gain it—probably from the stress—so when we found out, I was already five months along. I didn't carry to full term, though. He was premature; had him at seven months. Nearly lost him, too, but he's a fighter."

Dorcas blinks. Imagine that, coming out of a war and finding out, right after, that you're five months into a pregnancy. It's been nearly four months since the war, so Bill can't be more than two months old. Dorcas doesn't think she's ever seen a baby as small as him, and she's barely looking at him.

"Ah, well, come and see him, then," Arthur says into the silence, sitting forward and adjusting Bill in his arms, like a baby solves all the problems in the world, like new life can make up for the lives lost. He looks the picture of a proud father. "He's beautiful, isn't he?"

Dorcas shuffles closer, because it's expected of her, not because she actually wants to go. Molly shadows her, hovering, something tense radiating off of her. A mother's instinct to sense danger. Dorcas swallows and does her best to ignore it, looking down at the baby, who is not—in the grand scheme of things—beautiful at all. Bill looks like a half-smooshed potato, a red one, face contorted as he screams, both wrinkly and smooth simultaneously, eyebrows practically nonexistent, mouth too small. New life is ugly, as it turns out.

Arthur gazes upon him like he's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. So does Molly. Maybe… Well, maybe Dorcas is just judging too harshly, just too harsh inside and out and all the way around. Maybe she can't find beauty in anything anymore.

"Do you want to hold him?" Arthur offers, glancing up at her with his proud smile still firmly in place.

Molly gets visibly more tense, her shoulders going tight, her expression stiff. Those instincts. Dorcas has just swept into her house looking half-dead, having hardly spoken a word, clearly uncomfortable around her child. She's smart to be wary of Dorcas getting her hands on her baby.

Dorcas doesn't want to hold Bill. Doesn't feel gentle enough, doesn't know how to be gentle anymore, and she could cry about that, because Marlene knew what this felt like first. Marlene had to feel this *first.* It's not a good feeling, this horrible frustration with who you are, not wanting to be this way and not knowing how to be anything else. It's not a good feeling, being afraid of your own hands.

"Oh, Arthur, she's hardly gotten in the door," Molly says with a strained chuckle. She reaches out and hovers her hand over Dorcas' elbow, not touching yet somehow still managing to usher Dorcas aside, away from Bill. "Don't mind him, he tries to show off Bill to anyone who'll look. Come now, dear, you're so thin, let's get you something to eat, yeah? Why don't you stop in the bathroom, get cleaned up, hm? I should have some clothes that'll fit. Might be a bit big, but they'll do."

So, Dorcas has a shower for the first time in months. Not just stripping down in a cafe bathroom and getting clean out of a sink. It's—well, she forgot how human it makes you feel. Molly doesn't have any of the hair products she needs, but Dorcas has been neglecting her hair as it is, so she hardly cares. What Molly does have is lovely smelling body wash that Dorcas gets the insane urge to eat, because it's the best thing she's smelled in so long. For too long, the smell of smoke and blood has existed in her nose, lingering aftereffects of war.

Dorcas knows it's bad when she gets out of the shower and towels off. Layers of filth come off like skin peeling. Little rolls of softened dirt and coagulated sweat. She scrubs at it, then has to get right back in the shower. The second time works better than the first, and afterwards, she stands naked before the mirror and meets her own hollow gaze.

How anyone recognizes her these days, she doesn't know. She wishes she had it in her to be embarrassed of what's become of her, after so much neglect, but she doesn't. She just—doesn't care. Can't care. Hasn't figured out how to care.

With shaky hands, Dorcas begins to search the bathroom until she locates the scissors in the mirror-cabinet. After she closes it, she stares at her reflection, reaches up, and starts cutting.

It's normal to cut the braids. She's done it plenty of times. Cut them, then unwind them from the starts of her hair she first threaded through, from the bottom to the top. She scratches her scalp after each one and remembers how her mother used to, and how—as a child—she would laugh and whisper to her mother that nothing could ever feel as good as that does. It was one of her favorite things to do with her, so many hours spent on her hair. That stopped, soon enough.

Dorcas stares at herself and could cry, and does cry, in the end. Her hair is knotted and neglected, and she's so fucking *tired.* She picks up the scissors and wills herself to cut it. Tries to make her hand move. Begs herself. Please, please, please just let it go. It doesn't have to mean anything. Please.

"Sometimes, I look at myself and don't recognize the person staring back at me. She looks like —before. If her hair falls the right way, you can't see the scar on her neck, and she—she used to love her hair, you know. Curled it sometimes or let her cousin do some cute hairstyle, but she doesn't do that anymore. She doesn't care about it anymore. She's not even here anymore. It's just me now, and I—I want to see me. I've gone so long without seeing me."

Dorcas sits the scissors down, bracing her trembling hands on the edges of the sink and curling forward, breathing in and breathing out. She thinks, fretfully, *this is me, even this is me.* Her hair is so much a part of her she can't imagine parting with it. Hours she dedicated to it. Hours her mother did. Years she's spent growing it. Years she's spent loving it.

She doesn't recognize herself, but she knows her hair. That's her. She sees herself like this, just the most fucked up she's ever been. Her hair is a part of this, too, on the journey with her. She can't cut it. She is not Marlene.

"Do you like it?"

"That doesn't matter, for the record. It only matters that you do. But yes, I do. It suits you."

"That's good. When I die, I want to die as me."

Did she? Was it impossible for her to do anything else?

Dorcas gets that now. Her slow descent into death has taken its toll, and she reflects that. When she dies, she will do so as herself. All the knotted and neglected parts of her.

You're not dying, Dorcas had said, and oh, oh, she was wrong. So very fucking wrong and couldn't fathom it even then. So full of love, so fraught with it, standing there with Marlene under her fingers, wanting to cling. Refusing to let go. Starting the war for Marlene, Marlene, Marlene and not knowing—she didn't know, couldn't possibly know, that it was pointless.

"Survive. Survive, Marlene, and keep surviving, and don't stop surviving. Do you hear me? That's what you do. Just survive."

"That's all I ever do anyway."

"Liar," Dorcas whispers to no one. *Liar, liar, liar,* she thinks on repeat, furious with it. Furious with Marlene, most of all. She chokes on it sometimes, how much she hates her. Hates the fucking monster still stalking her from the grave.

She didn't even get a grave.

Dorcas closes her eyes.

"You can—I mean, if you want… More?"

"Mm, I always want more. Between you and me, we'll find it."

Yeah, they found it, alright. Doesn't get much more than multiple pieces, does it? Dorcas would have picked each and every piece of Marlene up just to have more of her. But no, she carried a piece of Riddle, a trophy she would have gladly tossed aside if she knew Marlene could be held instead.

Exhaling shakily, Dorcas peels her fingers away from the porcelain and straightens up. She tears a strip off her old shirt and gathers her hair into a thick, mildly lumpy knot at the back of her head, curls spilling out like volcanic eruption; she tames it by winding the strip around and securing it. She puts the scissors away and gets dressed in the clean clothes that Molly kindly left for her.

For now, that'll do.

Molly is waiting for her inside the kitchen with an entire plate of food steaming and lovely, which smells mouthwatering. It's not a whole lot, from closer inspection, which Dorcas supposes makes sense. Clearly she hasn't been eating too well; eating too much will just make her sick.

Arthur has retired somewhere, likely into a nursery, and he's taken Bill with him. Dorcas sort of saw that one coming.

"Here," Molly says, sitting a glass of juice down on the table after ushering her in a chair, starting to squeeze her shoulder and then seeming to think twice of it, retracting her hand. Against her will, Dorcas begins scarfing the food down after her first initial bite, like she's never had a meal in her life. It tastes good. It's the first time Dorcas really tastes anything, after the war. Molly watches her, for a bit, something utterly pitiful there in her gaze, and then she clears her throat and turns away. "We have a guest room if you—"

"Don't bother," Dorcas tries to say, except her mouth is full and the food gets caught in her throat, and she thinks *is this it, can this be it?* She doesn't try to swallow past it, just lets it sit there and chokes on it a little bit, wondering if it'll suffocate her. It's not killing herself if she just happens to die, is it?

She's not sure how well that argument holds up when her throat convulses instinctively, and she can breathe again, and ultimately, she's disappointed about it.

"Don't bother," Dorcas speaks again, when she can be heard. Molly glances back at her, eyebrows furrowed. "I, um. I'm actually heading out soon, so."

"Oh?" Molly asks curiously.

Dorcas nods through her next bite, swallows, then says, "Yeah, I'm leaving the Hallow. Planning to go see Cordelia. I—I guess I just wanted to stop by before I did. See how you were."

This isn't technically true. It's not even close to true. It's just words to say, maybe. Just words.

"Oh, well, that's—that's lovely," Molly says, with false brightness in her voice. "That'll be good for you—"

How do you know what's good for me?

"—seeing Cordelia—"

Why, because she's one step closer to Marlene?

"—and getting away from the Hallow—"

Don't lie, it's the most hollow place in the world, and I fit right in.

"—just to be with—"

"They're dead because of me," Dorcas cuts in, and Molly stops. Molly falls silent and stares at her. Dorcas spears a potato, eats it carelessly, swallows. It tastes bland again. She puts her fork down. "Gideon and Fabian. They're dead because of me."

Molly stands in her kitchen and, from another room, her baby cries. Molly stands in her kitchen and, from another time, her brothers were alive. Molly stands in her kitchen and, from another angle, Dorcas sits at her table.

The war is over, and when does it end?

"Riddle learned that there was a Hallow traitor of some sort, someone who helped steal things important to him, and I was the main suspect. Fabian and Gideon were on that mission to steal from him, but they weren't suspects. Because of my position in the war, Dumbledore decided I was too important to risk, but they weren't. Someone had to take the fall, and it couldn't be me, so it was them," Dorcas explains.

Molly stands in her kitchen, and she breathes. In, then out. In, then out. In…out… Her eyes drift shut. Her fingers tangle up in a tea towel, clenching, and then they release. They relax. She breathes in, she breathes out, and she sits the tea towel down. She opens her eyes and moves to sit at the table across from Dorcas, lowering herself gingerly.

Slowly, almost cautiously, Molly reaches across the table and gently covers Dorcas' hand with her own. Her hands are pink from the hot water and plump with life. Her eyes—she doesn't have eyes like her brothers, does she?

Dorcas can't remember anymore.

"Have you carried guilt for it this whole time?" Molly whispers, like that's the most tragic thing she's ever heard.

"I had to," Dorcas tells her, confused.

"Oh, Dorcas, darling," Molly says, her voice soft. Dorcas' fingers twitch beneath her hand, not prepared for the sweet brush of kindness. She wants to pull away and starts to, but Molly clamps down, holding her there. "There was a time, maybe, that I would have blamed you for that. That time has passed. Dumbledore—well, I think there's no end to what so many have blamed him for. It's easy sometimes to forget the true evil behind it all. Who killed them, really? Who?"

"Riddle," Dorcas croaks.

Molly nods. "Riddle. He alone has earned my anger, and I do not have it in me to grant even his memory the satisfaction. Fabian and Gideon are dead, and every day, I miss them. Every day, I wish they weren't. Riddle is dead, and his death doesn't change what I feel for my brothers every day. Nothing can do that. Only I can decide what to do with it, and I've decided to stop asking the questions that lead me nowhere, demanding closure for what will never truly be closed at all. I make my peace. *I* make it, Dorcas, and I've made it. They would want that for me. They would be proud of me."

Dorcas says nothing, inexplicably angry with this response. She doesn't want Molly to hold her hand. She wants Molly to break it. She wants Molly to want to, and Molly doesn't.

"Why did you tell me that?" Molly asks quietly, searching her face. "After all this time, what did you expect to happen?"

"I don't know," Dorcas replies, and it's a lie.

She expected the hand holding hers to wrap around her throat and squeeze. She expected everyone else to feel as she does, lost with nowhere to go, stuck with no way out. She expected peace to be out of reach for all those around her, just as it is for her. She expected the lack of meaning in life to extend to anybody alive, no purpose and no drive, because how do they find it? How do they have it? What does it take to get it?

"You know, we talk a lot about the war ending, but never what we'll do after."

"Maybe that's because a part of us never expected us to make it this far."

"Maybe, but we have."

"Only a bit more to go, and then what?"

Dorcas doesn't know. She didn't know then, and neither did Marlene. Both of them lost, lost, lost. Both of them struck with the alien concept of peace and no idea what to do with it. They weren't ready, and they didn't get a choice, because it was coming for them anyway. What's more terrifying than war? To them, it was always the end of it.

"I don't really know what we're supposed to do either, but it's not impossible to figure out. Between us, we can figure it out, right? Together."

"Yeah, we can figure it out together."

And what the fuck does Dorcas do with that? What does Dorcas do now? They were supposed to figure it out *together,* so how is Dorcas meant to do it alone? No one else has to. Molly didn't have to. She had Arthur, still has Arthur, and Bill as well now. Purpose and peace found in both.

Dorcas looks at Molly and thinks *I wanted you to tell me that it would have been better if they lived instead of me, if they still had a life to live, because at least they'd know how to live it.*

Dorcas looks at Molly and says, "I'm full," even though she's empty, and says, "I have to go," even though she has nowhere to be, and says, "Thanks for letting me stop by," even though she wishes she never came, and says, "Your son really is beautiful," even though nothing is anymore, not to her.

"Come visit again sometime," Molly murmurs when they're both at the door. "We—we're here for you, you know, and we do worry. All of us do. Just…don't—don't—"

"I'm not going to off myself, Molly," Dorcas snaps, her tone brutal, sneering. As if she hasn't held a gun to her head. As if she doesn't wish, every day, that she pulled the trigger.

Molly flinches, then gazes at her with pity, whispering, "Yes, well, letting yourself waste away is basically the same thing. Just take care of yourself, Dorcas, that's all I ask. That's all we want for you, all of us. Find a reason to."

There isn't one.

"Any reason at all."

It doesn't exist.

"All you have to do is look."

There's no beauty to be found in anything.

"Just try to look."

There's nothing worth looking at.

"Take care, Dorcas," Molly says softly.

"Yeah, Molly, you do the same," Dorcas mutters, and really hopes she doesn't, at least not the way Dorcas does. Molly has her peace. Molly has her purpose.

Dorcas walks away with nothing, as usual.

~•~

Things they don't tell you about war—afterwards, old pain feels new.

~•~

In the most popular graveyard in the Hallow, off in the right corner away from Gellert Grindelwald's gravestone statue, there is a marble headstone belonging to Dorcas' mother.

You wouldn't know it, just looking at it, because Dorcas has her father's last name, and her mother remarried when still pregnant with Dorcas; there had been an affair involved, or so the story goes. Dorcas' father died before she was born, and her step-father died when she was one. Dorcas' mother all but gave up on love after that, not that it was ever really about love for her in the first place. Coincidentally, Dorcas' father was a government official before his untimely demise, and Dorcas' step-father after him was the head gamemaker of the fifty-fifth hunger games. Wildly successful, if the rumors were true.

Dorcas' mother—well, she got what she wanted, by the end. The head gamemaker of the second Quarterly Memorial, the sixtieth hunger games. Dorcas, at the time, was only two years old, and her mother was a career-oriented woman who never really loved the men she married to get where she wanted to go. Nothing pays as well as being a head gamemaker, and they were set for life. Dorcas never wanted for anything.

Not one damn thing.

Not even a father, really, because she was too young to realize she even lost two, and because her mother filled that role very well on her own. Not just a mother, but a father, too. Both parents in one. A *good* parent, in the eyes of most. Dorcas was well cared for, spoiled even, and was so very loved by her mum.

People envied her when they found out who her mother was. *You mum was the head gamemaker of the Quarterly Memorial? That's so cool!* It was cool to Dorcas, too, for a while.

And then, one day, for no real rhyme or reason, Dorcas ran with all her friends to watch the new tributes come in, lost among the crowd in a wave of buzzing excitement, shrieking in delight when the train rolled in. She saw a few, more than a few, trying to pick out who her favorite would be.

Then she saw the girl. Dorcas doesn't remember her name. She didn't live past the first day, didn't live long past the very first cannon, if memory serves. That's not what sticks out in Dorcas' mind, though, even after all this time. It's the way she saw the girl through the window of the train, the girl who was the same size and same age as her, the girl whose gaze locked onto her and there—in her eyes—was pure fear.

True, undeniable terror. It had warped in Dorcas' mind that day, seeing that fear, because the light hit the window just right, and the reflection seemed to swap them until her own face was an overlayed image of the girl's, and it was like she was staring at herself. The worst part is that Dorcas was confused, because she couldn't understand what the girl was afraid of. What did she have to be afraid of?

That was the start. That was when Dorcas began to grow up. That was when Dorcas began to question everything.

"But what if it was me, Mum?!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Dorcas. You're a Hallow."

"Yes, but what if I wasn't? How would you feel?"

"Dorcas, stop this nonsense. It's an honor to be a tribute."

"Mum! How can it be? How is there honor in slaughter?!"

"Dorcas, that's enough!"

"You don't think about them? The people you helped kill?"

Dorcas will never forget the way her mother looked at her that day, when she asked that question. She'll never forget the sting in her cheek, or the ringing silence, after her mother slapped her. She'll never forget that her mother couldn't answer her question. *The people I helped kill, as you say, keep food on the table,* is all she said, and then she sent Dorcas to her room.

They never really recovered from that. It was the same fight, the same cycle, over and over. Dorcas was an ungrateful child, according to her mother. Dorcas started thinking of her mother as an irredeemable murderer, and after that, there was no going back, really. Too young then to find the nuance in it. Too young then to see her mother as a person outside of motherhood. Too young then to dig in deep and get to the root of what was wrong, the conditioning, the way the belief system was a safety net for those who didn't want to be held accountable. Dorcas hadn't done anything wrong then, not really, and she swore then that she never would.

"Look at me now, Mum," Dorcas whispers to the marble, sitting next to the grave, plucking at the blades of grass as the sun beats down against her back.

Dorcas' mother wanted her to be a gamemaker like her. A head gamemaker someday, in fact. She had dreams of Dorcas being head gamemaker for the next Quarterly Memorial, isn't that ironic? Dorcas didn't make those games. She stopped them.

Naturally, Dorcas had no desire to do that. Dorcas wanted *nothing* to do with the games, and nothing to do with her mum either. The moment she was able, she moved out and never looked back. Didn't pick up her mother's calls, didn't visit, didn't go down that road when she knew where it led. It always went to the same place. Dorcas put so much distance between herself and her mother in any way possible that, over time, no one even knew who her mother was. She used to boast about it when she was a kid, but by the time she left home, she was thankful they had different last names, so no one could ever make the connection.

As far as Dorcas was concerned, her mother was dead to her.

Dorcas, you can't keep ignoring my calls.

Dorcas, I'm your mother.

Dorcas, everything you have, I made sure you could have. How can you act like this when your life was granted to you by the very thing you turn your back on?

Dorcas, we do not have to agree on everything. You talk about their rights, and what is wrong, but this is the way it is. This is the way it has always been. Why punish me for it? I didn't create the system, my love. I just used it to my benefit, and yours.

Dorcas, baby girl, life is war. There are no good people in war. You may understand someday, but I truly hope you never do.

Dorcas, old O'Malley retired from the board and says you're his neighbor. I'd like to come see you. I'd like to see how you are. You're my daughter. I worry for you, constantly. I miss you.

Dorcas, when I get there, please open the door.

Dorcas… Dorcas, I was…

"Hi, yes, is this Dorcas Meadowes? This is the emergency department of Hallow General Hospital. It says here that you're listed as an emergency contact for a patient we just received. I'm sorry to inform you, but there's been an accident…"

And then, before Dorcas knew it, her mother really was dead. Not just to her, but to everyone. Driving to see her baby girl, the strong and independent woman she raised, driving in the rain. A current in the street caught the tire, tugged it, and she hydroplaned. The car flipped, but her last call still blinked on the dash, Dorcas' phone gone to voicemail, as always.

Dorcas… Dorcas, I was…

"What?" Dorcas mumbles. "You never did finish. Your last call, and you didn't even have the decency to finish. Why the fuck did you call at all? It's not like I ever picked up."

Dorcas… Dorcas, I was…

"Wrong," Dorcas whispers, eyes fluttering shut. "You could never see it, how wrong you were. If you could see me now… Fuck, Mum, if you could see me now, you'd—" She halts there, because in reality, she doesn't know. She opens her eyes and looks at the grass in her palm. "I think, maybe if you could have known her, and how I love her, you'd be able to see. You'd understand. I like to think you would have, anyway."

Dorcas… Dorcas, I was…

"I know," Dorcas rasps, her eyes burning. She curls her fingers around the blades of glass, crumbles them up, then lets them drift back down. "I know now, Mum. Everything that I did, just to call her mine… I did some horrible things, you know, and I—I tried to do them right. I tried to do all of it for the right reasons, but it—it all got so convoluted. You said it first, didn't you? There are no good people in war. I lived by those words, did you know that? All that you were wrong about, but that…" She gives a brittle laugh. "You were right about that."

Dorcas… Dorcas, I was…

The reason behind it all, at the start. The very thing that led Dorcas to this point. Dorcas never intended to become a stylist for the games, and that day Moody found her in the bar, she was there to stare into a glass and try not to mourn the mother who it filled her with shame to mourn at all. Moody found out who she was, who her mother was, and how it could be used. If only she wanted it. And yes, Dorcas wanted it.

Dorcas wanted it, because she thought it was right. Dorcas wanted it, because her mother wouldn't have wanted it for her. Dorcas wanted it, because maybe it could make up for how much she missed her mother, when she felt she shouldn't have. Dorcas wanted it, and Dorcas got it, and look at her now.

"I still miss you, sometimes," Dorcas confesses, lifting her gaze to the grey marble before her. "I'm not ashamed of doing that anymore. I wish I hadn't been, when you were alive. I just want—I want you to know—I mean, you can't know, not really, but—but I want you to know that I'm sorry. You were wrong, and you did wrong, but haven't we all? Maybe… Mum, maybe if I knew then what I know now…" She closes her eyes. Shakes her head. "I don't know. I don't know anything."

There are no good people in war.

"Yeah." Dorcas chokes out a laugh, a fresh wave of hot tears tumbling down her cheeks. "Yeah, Mum, that I do know, but what about out of it? It's over now. The war's over now."

But Dorcas' mother had an answer for that, too. *Dorcas, baby girl, life is war.* Yeah. Yeah, so it would seem. Life is war. Dorcas is still living, and war is still waging.

All wars end, just as all lives do. It's just not Dorcas' turn yet.

She wonders, vaguely, if her mother is at peace.

She wonders, vaguely, if her mother ever was.

~•~

Things they don't tell you about war—just because you make it out doesn't mean you'll make it anywhere.

~•~

Five months after the war finds Dorcas drunk.

She picks up her first bottle three days after arriving in district eleven. Cordelia had cried when Dorcas showed up at her door, and they were genuine tears of joy. Dorcas wondered then how long it would take before Cordelia was crying for the opposite, out of sorrow.

In the grand scheme of things, not very long at all.

Dorcas stays in district eleven for two and half months. Her first night is spent in Cordelia's house, dodging Maximus' reaching hands because he recognizes her, still, and has missed her. Riker tries to feed her all the time, always close by with a snack to offer her, because food is how he shows love. It's sweet. Dorcas wishes it mattered to her.

The next morning, Cordelia takes Dorcas to where Marlene has been memorialized. This is a mistake.

It's her old house in the Victor's Village, her name engraved on the front gate, along with her date of birth and date of death, and a quote that reads:

In Proud Memory of

The Woman Who Stood First For The Fight

Inside the house, there's no traces of Marlene at all. Cordelia tells her that she went through her things and cleaned the place out by now, everything packed up and put away. Even still, it is her home. That bed is her bed. That empty closet was once filled with her clothes. That doorway has framed her silhouette. That table is where she must have had meals. No traces of her now, but there was before.

To Dorcas, that's enough.

It's so much of enough that Dorcas moves in like she would have gladly taken up residence in Marlene's very bones, her very blood, wriggling away under her skin and making a home

there. Blown apart with it when she was blown apart, too. It would have been so easy. This, too, is so easy.

It takes Dorcas a total of two days to examine each and every inch of Marlene's old house, and on the second day, she finds Marlene's stash. Mm, bet Marlene never wanted anyone to find that. She should have hid it better, or lived to hide it again.

"Well," Dorcas mutters, sliding down the wall to plop on the floor carelessly, raising one of the bottles in an unspoken toast, "it's not like you'll get any use out of it. Here's to you, dearest. Miss you loads. Hate your fucking guts. Fuck you, Marlene McKinnnon. Fuck you, and come back."

Marlene does not, naturally, because Dorcas doesn't get nice things. She scoffs and turns the bottle up, settling into the burn of it. Swallowing fire and choking on the flames.

"Yeah, I—well, my mum helped me dry out. Dad tossed all the liquor in my house and threatened everyone who would sell me booze, so they—stopped. I still had a stash. Just one. I—I couldn't—I don't know why, but I couldn't bring myself to toss it out. I would just…go look at it and let it, like, mock me or something. Fight the temptation daily, because it's like I need something to fight."

"It's good that you asked for help, though."

"Maybe, but I—I relapsed. I still had my stash, and the night of the Quarterly Memorial announcement, I went right to it. That's when I realized I was just saving it in case I ever needed it. I was fighting, alright, just for the wrong thing."

"Never fully got rid of that stash, did you?" Dorcas mutters, running her thumb along the mouth of the bottle. Her chest is warm for the first time in a while. Alcohol warms you from the inside out; you'd think they'd mention that when explaining the dangers of it, why it's so easy to become addicted to it, why it's so simple to fall into the trap of depending on it. Dorcas hasn't been this warm in a long time. "You know, that's okay. You did your best, you did so well, and I'm still—even now, about this, I'm still proud of you."

"I'm proud of me, too."

That's the first night Dorcas gets wasted. It's not the last. She spends practically the entire two and a half months in district eleven locked in the haze of inebriation, the days running together and everything swirling down a drain and out of reach from moment-to-moment. Nothing really sticks except the flask on her hip and her weekly trip to get more drinks.

There's a man in the market who sells homemade hooch strong enough to curl the paint off the walls, and that's just about Dorcas' favorite person for a while. Cordelia lasts a total of two weeks before she's asking that man to stop selling to her, but *she's a war hero,* he says, and *she pays extremely well,* he doesn't say, and Dorcas tells her, slurred and blunt, when she finds out about it to never, ever try to control her life like that again. There might be a death threat in there somewhere, she doesn't know, but either way, Cordelia doesn't do it again.

Drinking makes everything easier. Drowns everything out. Dulls the sharp edges of the world that she can't shrink to avoid. Drinking doesn't make her shrink, really, but it does help her fail to notice how much she's bleeding.

She's not addicted. Doesn't have an addictive personality, as that saying goes, and she can quit at any time. It's not like she *needs* it, like she feels as if it'll kill her to go without it. Really, she just—doesn't want to do this shit sober. She could, she just chooses not to, and so she doesn't.

Besides, for a while, Dorcas even thinks drinking makes her a more bearable person. Someone who shows up to things. She actually gets out of bed and *socializes* when she has drinks to fall back on. She's okay to be around Maximus, but—for some reason—that never lasts long before Cordelia is putting him down for a nap. She's okay to go into the market, but—for some reason—no one will talk to her for long. Maybe the constant revisiting the war makes them uncomfortable. A lot of people don't like to talk about the war, or the fact that Dorcas' dead girlfriend stepped on a landmine, and isn't that just the dumbest fucking way to die? Anticlimactic, really.

Since everyone else are losers, and she's the only person in the world who *isn't* lame, Dorcas gets into the habit of sticking to herself. She sits on Marlene's porch, her porch, their porch, and she watches the world go by. Everyone has a terrible fashion sense, so she's mostly just muttering to herself about how style-deficient they all are. Sure, she looks like shit herself, most days, but at least she knows it. At least she knows how to look hot, if she wanted to.

Fucking hell, at least she knows how to *accessorize.* Rings, for example. Always a good addition to any outfit. Dorcas, of course, has a favorite.

The ring.

It's. Yeah, it's always there. Nestled on her pointer finger, where it used to sit before it found home on Marlene's thumb. It's. It's. Oh, it's beautiful. Sometimes, it's the only beautiful thing in this world, and out of it, just for the fact that it once carried the last of Marlene's warmth.

Anyway, after two and a half months, Cordelia has apparently had enough. She put up with it as long as she could, in her words, and she can no longer. She's a bit of a loser, too.

"You're a bit of a loser, you know," Dorcas informs her, sticking her tongue out and blowing a raspberry.

Cordelia, from where she is standing by the door, arms crossed and jaw clenched, doesn't look amused. "You can't keep doing this to yourself, Dorcas. I—I can't do it again. I can't stand by and watch someone I love destroy themselves with this shit."

"Oh, Cordie, I didn't know you felt this way," Dorcas whispers with a gasp, hand to her chest, bottle sloshing from within her grip. She looks at Cordelia from under her lashes, a tiny smile at the corners of her mouth. "Whatever would Riker say?"

"Dorcas," Cordelia snaps, her shoulders tight, her fingers gripping the inner bend of her elbows like a lifeline. "I know this seems like—like a fucking joke to you, but I—" She blows out a deep breath and grimaces. "I don't want you to come around Maximus anymore, not—not like this. Not when you're like this, and you're always like this. And—and you can't keep stumbling around the district, insulting people and their clothes, leaving messes wherever you go."

Dorcas stares at her, and she says, quietly, "You know the worst thing about you, Cordelia?"

"Dorcas—"

"It's that you look like her worst fear."

Cordelia stops and stiffens. "What?"

They both know what. It's so obvious just looking at her. She does look a bit like Marlene. Some of the same features, shared family traits, just tiny differences. Same shade of hair, same type, just worn differently. Stand them next to each other, and you'd know they were from the same family, and no one would be surprised if you assumed they were siblings.

But, in reality, Cordelia is prettier than Marlene was. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and to Dorcas, there was no one more beautiful than Marlene, but reduce them to their tiny little attributes to see how they hold up against the societal expectations for what counts as *beautiful,* and yeah, Cordelia is winning that one. Society would have picked Cordelia. She would have excelled in the games, if it had been her instead.

She looks more like Marlene's boggart than Marlene herself, and isn't that something? Imagine that. Imagine reflecting someone's worst fear. Imagine, perhaps, representing that worst fear. Marlene was terrified of it, wasn't she? Being something she wasn't. Being what everyone wanted her to be. Being what Cordelia is with her conventional beauty and her spouse and baby and little ready-made family.

It's a harsh way to learn that Marlene was utterly petrified of things that Dorcas dared to want. *Not even one kid, Marlene?* Dorcas thinks. *Would you have considered it, for me?*

No answer. She'll never have the answer and can't locate them in a memory, because they never talked about it, not once. What was there to talk about? There was a war on, and as much as Marlene loved kids, and wanted to protect them, she could hardly bear to hold a baby, let alone imagine having one.

Dorcas doesn't even know how Marlene felt about marriage.

"You remember her boggart," Dorcas mumbles, for clarification. "You're the spitting image."

"Dorcas—" Cordelia looks stricken, staring at her like she's never seen her before. "Why the *fuck* would you say that?"

"S'the truth," Dorcas replies. She shrugs. "I bet—I bet you had something to do with it, huh? Just—expectations. Be like this, Marlene. Do this, Marlene. *Don't* do that, Marlene. What went wrong, Marlene? Why can't you be something that makes us more comfortable, Marlene? We want old Marlene, Marlene, where is she? *For fuck's sake,* you couldn't figure out why she started drinking? You blamed *her* for—for—"

Cordelia balks. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm the only one—" Dorcas hiccups. "I'm the only one—"

"Oh, don't go there," Cordelia starts, her eyes flashing.

Dorcas ignores her. Hiccups again. "I'm the only one who knew her, the real her, and so I'm—I'm the only one who loved her. Really loved her. Really still love her. I'm—I'm the only—"

"You have got to *stop!"* Cordelia bursts out. "You think you're the only fucking person in this world who loved her, Dorcas? You're *not,* and wouldn't that be the saddest thing in the world, if it were true? She had friends. She had family. All of us loved her; all of us still do. It's *not* just you."

"It feels like—it feels like jus' me," Dorcas confesses with a frown, her eyebrows furrowed as she looks at her hands. Like this, drunk as she is, the outline of a bottle against her palm doesn't feel that much different than a gun. Maybe she can put the bottle to her head and pull the trigger.

"Because you're letting it consume your whole life. Because you're letting it consume *you* whole," Cordelia snaps. "You walk around like you're the only person who feels this way

when you're not. Do you think you're the only person who's hurt? But we—we push through it, we push through the pain, and we pick ourselves back up, and we move the fuck on."

Dorcas laughs, her eyes burning, and she laughs so she won't cry, and maybe, already, she is doing both. "Yeah, yeah, okay, real fuckin' easy for you to say. You've got it made, don't you? Got the bouncing baby boy to try for and the spouse to cry to, and what—what do I have? *What* do I have, Cordelia?! Don't you get it?! I didn't just lose Marlene; I lost my entire fucking *future!* You've got a baby and a spouse and a place to call home, but I lost that. I lost *everything!"*

"A baby and a spouse is *not* everything!" Cordelia shouts, and she releases a sound of frustration when Dorcas scoffs, a noise that's partially a sob. "No, no, it *isn't,* Dorcas. The measure of worth in a life is not found in parenthood or marriage. No one has to have those things to have a life worth living!"

"Says someone with a baby and a spouse!"

"And how many people have lost their babies, their spouses, their homes and every fucking thing else?! And yet, they keep going, they keep pushing, because they *have* to! Maybe you're not used to it as a Hallow, but for everyone else, that's just a regular damn Monday! *Welcome to our world!"*

Dorcas snarls and stumbles to her feet, bracing against the wall as the world she's been welcomed to sways and dips all around her. For a moment, things look like wax melting, her surroundings dripping down to nowhere. She breathes hard, chest heaving, clinging to her bottle and glaring at Cordelia through bleary eyes. If—if she squints, it's almost—almost—

"Maybe not, okay?" Dorcas chokes out. "Maybe that's not all life's about. But I—I wanted it, ya know? With her, I wanted it, and that's gone now. She's gone now, Cordie. She's gone, and she's never coming back, and what do I have?"

Cordelia's face softens, not in a sweet way, but in a sad one. There's a tragedy there in the fractures of her expression, and it hurts to see. "I know you wanted it with her, and I know she's gone, and I know that you have—" Her words seem to stick, and she swallows harshly. "You have *so much,* Dorcas. You have the same exact thing that I do, that all the living do, and what Marlene no longer does. *Opportunity."*

"Cordelia—"

"Babe, you've got to live your life. You've been trying to lay down and die, not even survive, but you've got to *live.* You want to get married and have kids? Then—then get the fuck up, get your shit together, and let yourself have it."

"No, *no,"* Dorcas sputters, utterly aghast. "It's—no. What's wrong with you? There will never be anyone else. It's just her."

"Then call yourself a widow, adopt, and tell your kids about the mother they never got to meet," Cordelia says. "I can't tell you *how* to live your life, but dammit, you've got to live it. You can't keep going like this. You're going to destroy yourself."

"Let me," Dorcas grits out.

"Not here," Cordelia replies coldly. "Not in this house."

Dorcas garbles out a high-pitched sound of disbelief. "You can't make me go. Fuck you, Cordelia. *Fuck you."*

"You will not disrespect Marlene this way. I won't fucking stand for it. I *won't,"* Cordelia says, her voice firm, and her shoulders back, chin tilted up.

It's the wrong thing to say. Disrespect? *Disrespect?* Dorcas isn't disrespecting Marlene, or her memory. She's the only fucking person who honors her. Everyone else just carries on, everyone else succumbs to the allure of peace, everyone else forgets to need her now that she's gone—everyone else, except Dorcas. She's the one who clings. She's the one who single-handedly keeps Marlene alive, by never letting go of her death. No one needed her the way Dorcas did, that much is clear.

And Dorcas hates them. All of them. Everyone who claims to have lost her, who dares to pretend it hurts, because if it really did, if it hurt like this, they'd be in the same state as she is. They don't deserve Marlene. They never deserved her. How dare they just *move on?* How can the world keep turning for them? How can they just—keep living? Here Dorcas is, dying in slow motion, and no one else is bold enough to join her.

That's true disrespect, the way Cordelia laughs when Maximus comes running towards her with a beaming smile, and the way Riker's eyes go soft with love when Cordelia leans in to kiss his cheek, and the way parents hold their children, and families patch themselves together around the empty spaces left behind, instead of falling into them like early graves, and the way lovers find comfort in each other as if that can fill the void grief opens up inside you, tearing you asunder.

Dorcas wobbles on her feet, more furious than she's ever been, and she screams at Cordelia, shouts something at her, but whatever it was is lost among the sound of shattered glass from where Dorcas flings the bottle at her. Due to the skewed depth perception, Dorcas misses, but only by inches. The bottle hits the wall next to Cordelia, falling to pieces as the liquor splashes out and stains the wall, dripping down.

Cordelia flinches back and to the side, instinctively holding her arm up, but she's unharmed. It's just an immediate response, and then the one right after has Cordelia lowering her arm and slowly turning her head to stare at Dorcas, who stares defiantly back. Something sharp glints in Cordelia's eyes, and she exhales harshly, hands balling into fists.

In the next second, Cordelia is marching across the room to fist the front of Dorcas' shirt, then slamming her back into the wall. Dorcas gasps, tripping over her own feet, slumping and unable to get her footing, dazed and drunk and not really prepared for this at all. She doesn't see it coming. Somehow, after all the fighting, she doesn't see it coming.

"You are well on the way to ruining your fucking life, Dorcas, and you will *not* use Marlene as an excuse!" Cordelia hisses, shaking her there against the wall, rattling her frame. "I *know* losing her knocked you down, okay? I know! I loved her, too, and *I still fucking do!* But you have to stand up! Get *up!"*

"And when it's you, your lovers, your friends, your family, your kids—what will you do? Will you stand up then? You would, wouldn't you? So stand up now! Stand the fuck up! Get up!"

"It's me," Dorcas gasps out. "It wasn't supposed to be me. It wasn't supposed to happen to me. I'm a Hallow."

"You're *human,"* Cordelia snaps. "It happens to all of us."

Dorcas whimpers, quietly, and turns her face away. Squeezes her eyes shut. *Marlene first. Fuck everything else.* Takes a deep breath. Tries not to vomit. *I'm sorry, but it's her. I love you—I do love you, Lily, and you will always, always, always have a part of me, okay? But it's her. It's Marlene.* Feels every dreadful beat of her heart. Suffers the turn of her stomach. *Yes, all of it, because I'm so fucking selfish, so fucking entitled, so fucking crazy in love with you that I can't bear the thought of losing you!* Can't believe she's alive. Can't understand how she managed to survive it, this loss, or how she's supposed to keep doing so. *A toxic waste type of love.* What does she do? What can she do? *I love you so much that I think, if I lost you, I would set the whole world on fire.* Let it burn. Please just let her burn. *I love all of you, Marlene.* She loved her so much. She still does. *I love all of you, and more.*

"You're not ready to be here," Cordelia says, shaking her to get her to look again, to focus. "You're not ready, Dorcas, and it's killing you. If you can't do it—"

"I won't do it," Dorcas whispers. "I can, but I won't."

Cordelia drops her hands from her and steps back, holding her gaze. "Then get out. Get your things, and get out of Marlene's house, because you're not staying here to do this to her memory. I won't allow it. You can either leave by your own choice, or I can drag you out. Which is it?"

Dorcas looks at her, gazes at her with a pang in her chest, and she croaks, "Now you don't look like her worst fear. Like this, you just look like her."

"Maybe that's because you believe, deep down, that everything I'm saying to you is what she'd say if she could," Cordelia murmurs, her shoulders slumping.

"But she can't," Dorcas says softly, "so I guess we'll never know."

The only thing Dorcas takes, when she goes, is herself and Marlene's old flask, full to the brim.

~•~

Things they don't tell you about war—you hope the people you fought with get better, even if you're not sure you ever will.

~•~

"Come on, Kingsley, dance with me."

At the name and the low, smooth, *familiar* chuckle that follows it, Dorcas turns to lean against the bar and seek out the source, and what do ya know? It's Kingsley and—

Dorcas squints. Who is that?

It takes her a second.

Oh, right! Sundry. That Sundry Casselberry, the last remaining Casselberry alive, if she remembers it right. The rest were all killed. Dorcas is pretty sure she's at least partially, if not mostly, responsible for that, but she can't be expected to keep track of all this shit, can she? She's responsible in varying degrees for a lot of things. It's a lot to keep up with.

Sundry looks good under the pulsating lights of the club, all glittery and glowing, every inch of a Hallow who's hot and knows how to be, and oh, *oh,* they're clearly trying. Every single signal they're throwing off screams it's for Kingsley, and poor Kingsley—poor *Kingsley* would have to be an idiot to miss it, even with him trying so hard not to look.

"Come on, Kingsley, don't you wanna dance with me?" Sundry asks, the picture of temptation all the way down to how they gently, gingerly rest their hand on his arm.

Kingsley's in a black shirt. It's tight. It makes it easy to see how he has to take a deep breath the split second Sundry touches him. A steadying breath, and his voice is still a little unsteady when he weakly says, "Dancing isn't really—my thing, Sundry. Um. You go, though. I'll… watch out for you."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, the club doesn't need someone watching the perimeter," Sundry says, exasperated. "It's perfectly safe here." Kingsley ducks his head, rubs the back of his neck, and Dorcas sees Sundry's face soften. Their hand slides down, tentatively slipping into his hand. It makes his whole body freeze. "You can let go for a bit, is all I'm saying. Just for one night, you can let go. We can. It's okay."

Predictably—to Dorcas, at least—Kingsley lets go of Sundry's hand, rocking back as he blows out a deep breath. Dorcas sees the side of his face as he grimaces when Sundry's face falls, and she sees the way his fingers twitch before he can't seem to stop himself from flexing his hand. She bets if she could see the heart in his chest, it'd be beating as hard as it bleeds.

"Go dance, Sundry," is all Kingsley says, in the end.

That's not all Sundry has to say, though. They step closer, jaw locked, eyes blazing. "I see the way you look at me."

"Sundry—"

"I watch you hold yourself back every day."

"Sundry—"

"I know you want me."

"Sundry!" Kingsley snaps, his voice harsh enough that Sundry does back down, but only a little bit.

"It eats you alive," Sundry grits out. "Can you even imagine what that feels like? And, you know, I don't want to hate her, your *Sybill,* but you make damn sure I do."

Kingsley visibly tenses. "Don't. Sundry, *don't."*

"Right, I forgot. Don't speak the sacred name of the woman you lost. Got it." Sundry turns around, then releases a harsh laugh and pivots right back. "I know I'll never be her, but what you don't ever seem to understand is that I don't want to be. I'm not trying to be. And, eventually, before you know it, I'll stop trying anything at all. I can't keep doing this, Kingsley."

"Go dance, Sundry," Kingsley murmurs, after a long stretch of silence. He sounds exhausted. His hand has come up to fiddle with his earring. Dorcas remembers piercing it for him.

Sundry's eyes flash. "Yeah, alright, I *will."*

And then, with that, Sundry swivels on the spot and marches away. Goes right to the crowd of writhing bodies, and it takes barely any time at all for them to find a body that's more than happy to wind around them. Chest-to-back, hands on hips and in places bordering on public indecency. A statement more than anything, and Kingsley gets it loud and clear. He watches, the muscle in his jaw twitching, lips thinned out.

Dorcas slips further down the bar, a drink in hand, and casually says, "Talk about a kick in the teeth, huh?"

Kingsley blinks, his head whipping towards her. He stares, and then he blurts out, "Dorcas! Shit. It's been—"

He stops. She wonders if he knows how long it's been. She does. Going on eight months after the war now, and the last time they spoke, they were sitting around a table in the castle, yelling at each other. He said she was losing it.

He was right.

"Hey, King," Dorcas greets, lips twitching faintly. He smiles a little, like a reflex, and she's grateful he doesn't try to hug her. They were friends longer than they were grieving, and maybe that lingers more than grief ever could.

"I—did not expect to see you here," Kingsley admits on a deep exhale. He keeps blinking at her, like maybe she's an illusion.

Dorcas chuckles. "I could say the same to you. What the hell are you doing in the Hallow?"

"I, um—I never left," Kingsley says, sounding sheepish about it. He tugs on his earring some more before seeming to force himself to drop his hand. "I mean, I do leave to go visit Alice from time-to-time. They're in nine with Emmeline, for now."

"For now?" Dorcas raises her eyebrows. Kingsley winces a little. "Oh, they're not doing well, huh?"

"In my personal opinion, no," Kingsley mutters, then clears his throat and shrugs. "Well, they're *okay,* overall. Just not…you know. But that's not my business."

"Mm," Dorcas hums. "They'll be alright. You make it through a war, you can make it through any relationship bumps." She takes a swallow of her drink, then sighs. "What about anyone else? You keep up with anyone else?"

Kingsley purses his lips. "I go out and get drinks with Rodolphus sometimes. He's here in the Hallow, too. Stays with Pandora and someone else. Their partner, I think. I don't really know all the details. Oh, and Molly's pregnant again."

Dorcas squints. "Didn't she just…?"

"Yup."

"Damn, Arthur."

Kingsley laughs, low and smooth. "Yeah, that sums it up."

"What about Lily?" Dorcas asks. "You ever talk to Lily?"

"Ah." Kingsley's laughter fades immediately. "No, um, not… No. I mean, I saw her at some funerals when they were still going on, but not since then."

"Was she…?" Dorcas stops. She can feel Kingsley looking at the side of her face, studying her. "Just—how was she?"

"Well, it was funerals."

"Right. Fair enough. Did she—was she with…Mary?"

"Yeah," Kingsley says quietly, "she was with Mary."

Dorcas clears her throat. "That's good. That's—good, for her. Really good." After a beat, Dorcas downs the rest of her drink and gives a silly little laugh. "Well, uh, you—have you ever heard the saying? Hitching your wagon to the wrong horse?"

"Yes," Kingsley murmurs.

"Ta-da!" Dorcas sing-songs, lifting her glass. She snorts and leans back, raising her eyebrows at him. "I definitely hitched my wagon to the wrong horse, and so did you. Sucks, right?"

Kingsley stares at her for a long moment, and then he deflates all at once, dragging a hand over his face. "Fuck, it really fucking sucks, Dorcas."

Dorcas fiddles with her empty glass between her hands, heaving a sigh. "I hitched my wagon to the wrong horse, and the other horse ran away and found a new home. Not that I could have expected anything different, really."

"Do you regret it, then?" Kingsley asks quietly. "Hitching to the horse that you did?"

"Sometimes," Dorcas admits, feeling it tear into her, that ugly truth that hurts to say as much as it hurts to exist with it. She blows out a deep breath, swallowing harshly. "Only because the horse gave out before we made it home, though. Not because I wish I had a different horse. If—even if I could go back, I wouldn't—I *couldn't* do it any differently, despite ending up here. It was that horse. It had to be that horse."

"Yeah," Kingsley rasps. "Yeah, I—I get that."

"Better watch out, King," Dorcas murmurs, nodding towards the dance floor, where Sundry is pressed close to someone, head tipped back as lips travel along their neck. "The horse you chose to hitch your wagon to may have given out, and the one you're ashamed to want after hasn't run away just yet, but if you're not careful, it'll take someone else for a ride. Then you'll be just like me, stuck in a wagon with nowhere to go."

Kingsley follows her gaze and inhales sharply, going tense all over in that way he does. He looks—jealous. Yeah, jealous is the word, but there's something underneath that. Defeat, almost. Resignation. A self-imposed restraint. It's sad.

"That's about as different from Sybill as you can get," Dorcas muses, tilting her head, and it's true. Sundry is a Hallow, and there's something—interesting there, something that likely adds to Kingsley's reasons to hold himself back, just that they were the Hallow responsible for a lot of death in the war, the one Kingsley was fighting in, at that point, more for Sybill's memory than anything else. Does falling in love with Sundry smear Sybill's memory? Even if it did, what can he do about it? It's too late, isn't it? Look at him. Sundry was right; it's eating him alive that he dared to love after loss, and not just anyone, but them. What a hard pill to swallow. She doesn't envy him.

"They never do or say anything like Sybill would have," Kingsley mutters, gaze locked on them as they dance, dance, dance. "I wasn't supposed to—I didn't mean to—" His nostrils flare, that muscle in his jaw flexing again. "I didn't know it would happen. They just—didn't go away. It—it was hard for them after they lost their family, and I guess I…comforted them, somehow. Because I looked like I knew what I was doing, but I didn't, really. And then, when things finally calmed down, they were so fucking difficult to get rid of. I mean, I tried. I *did* try to tell them to go away, but it was like kicking a fucking dog, Dorcas, I'm not even kidding."

"You always were a secret softie," Dorcas teases lightly.

"Yeah, well, that was my downfall in the end," Kingsley grumbles, giving her a dry look before going right back to scowling out at Sundry. "I didn't even notice, at first. That was on me. I should have—I guess I just thought it was fucking impossible, so it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. So what if they crawled into bed with me when they were having nightmares? So what if they talked to me, told me things, opened up to me—and so what if I did it in return? So what if they made me laugh sometimes, and made the effort to? So what if it went from me just indulging them to wanting to give them whatever they wanted, anything, everything—except that one thing? So what? Because it wasn't supposed to matter, because it wasn't supposed to be possible, but it happens. Dorcas, it happens. You think it won't, that it can't, but it can, and then—then—fuck, it's wrong, isn't it? I can't *have* it."

"You know, Kingsley, that horse you hitched your wagon to, the wrong one—it doesn't care where or how you hitch it next. It can't care," Dorcas says, holding his gaze. "It's dead."

"I—" Kingsley opens and closes his mouth, staring at her, utterly stricken. Gobsmacked, even. "Fucking hell, that's—"

"The only other horse I could ever imagine picking ran away and found a new home. I don't even know if I'll ever see it again, because I spooked it." Dorcas straightens up and plunks her glass down. "You? You're lucky. The only other horse you want happens to want the wagon, so don't be a little bitch about it. Hitch the fucking wagon, Kingsley."

Kingsley stares at her, wide-eyed, and chokes out, "Sybill—"

"—is dead, Sybill is *dead,* and she's going to stay that way no matter what you do." Dorcas reaches out, clasps Kingsley by the shoulder, and gives him a little push. "So, go dance."

"But I—I don't know *how—"*

"Then *learn.* Let Sundry teach you."

"Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck,"* Kingsley chants, sounding slightly more hysterical with each step he takes farther away from Dorcas and closer to Sundry, but he's going. He is going.

Dorcas turns slightly and tosses her hand up at the bartender, exchanging a nod for another drink. By the time she has it in hand, after paying and tipping, Dorcas swivels back with her full glass to lazily scan the dance floor.

There he is, the last place Dorcas would ever expect to find him, but she never expected him to want an earring either. Some people do the unexpected for love, and for Kingsley, now, that's dancing. Under his hands, Sundry glitters, and Sundry glows, and maybe Sybill would be jealous if she were here, or maybe she would be happy, but the point is, she can't be here, so living around what she would be doesn't work.

It's funny, almost, watching Kingsley and Sundry dance. At some point, it doesn't seem to matter to either of them that he doesn't know how. All they seem to care about is every point of where they touch, where they're close, where it's just them and there's no room for anyone between them.

Not even a ghost.

Dorcas watches them for a bit, and drinks, and drinks some more—and, when someone asks her to dance, even though she knows how to, she always says no.

No one can get closer to her than Marlene's ghost, and so she remains there, with no horse to hitch her wagon to.

Hey, at least someone gets to go home.

~•~

Things they don't tell you about war—why you're at war.

~•~

They never find her. Maybe they didn't know to look. Maybe they knew she didn't want to be found. Maybe they knew that they'd have to wait for her to come to them.

Ten months after the war, Dorcas goes to them.

There's no catalyst to it, no major event that leads her there, no turning point or epiphany that rearranges what she feels and how she thinks. Marlene doesn't come to her in a dream and tell her to live. There's no new woman she accidentally falls in love with, or an almost lover waiting for her. A switch doesn't flip inside, and the better world doesn't call to her, and the drinks don't stop keeping her warm.

None of that is what pushes Dorcas to ask for help. Maybe, in the end, it's the absence of it.

It's raining when Minerva answers the door.

Dorcas stands on her stoop, sopping wet, drunk and swaying as the tears mix with the rain, and she looks Minerva dead in the eye and says, "I'm here to ruin your fucking life."

And Minerva lets her in anyway.

It's not a pretty process, and Dorcas regrets it every day, at least until she doesn't. But, before that, she's a lump in Poppy and Minerva's guest room. She spends three days drying out, and on the other side of the withdrawals is when she can admit, internally, that she does, in fact, have a problem. She really did think that she didn't. Turns out, that's a common misconception many addicts have.

The worst part is, she walked right into the problem with all the boldness of a person who believed it couldn't touch her, couldn't ensnare her, like since one thing in her life was the worst it could ever be, she could never experience anything else. She can. Yeah, she definitely can.

It works both ways, even if she doesn't know it just yet. The best she ever felt when Marlene was alive can be found again, in various other ways. Small ways, even. The sound of Poppy scolding Minerva for staying up too late, and Minerva's low hum of warm amusement in response, before she claims that she's a nocturnal creature. The smell of Minerva's tea, steaming by Dorcas' bedside every morning without fail. The soft touch of Minerva's hand against her forehead when she's sweating the alcohol out and lost in delirium, so sure that it's her mother there to comfort her, and the way it's true when that should be impossible. The sight of Poppy's smile as she asks her what hair products she needs, so Poppy can go get it for her, to have it on hand. The taste of toothpaste after she's done throwing up, everything in her finally getting out, leaving her simultaneously hollow and cleansed, ready to take more in.

Before that, though, Dorcas puts them through the paces. Minerva, mostly. Dorcas showed up to ruin her life, she said, and she damn well does her best to. She's grouchy, and awful, and mean. She says things no human being should ever say to another. She lashes out, and fights, just to push and push and push until Minerva finally puts her flat on her back, just like Dorcas always knew she could. She hates her. She absolutely, unequivocally hates her with everything she has in her.

It takes only a week before Dorcas collapses in her arms, drags them both to the floor, and sobs. *I miss her, I miss her, I miss her,* she cries. *I wait, and she doesn't come. I look, and I can't find her anywhere.* It's as much of a fight as it is an embrace, because it hurts, and so Dorcas wants Minerva to hurt; because it feels good to be held, and so Minerva doesn't let go.

After the denial, there was anger. After that, there was bargaining. After that, there's depression. That one's rough. Dorcas has never experienced anything like it before, the sheer exhaustion of it. How empty it feels. Lying in bed with no motivation to move. Staring at the ceiling with no thoughts. Starting to stink when showers aren't just a chore, but a whole fucking mountain to climb, and she's at the very bottom with no strength in her to take the first step.

Depression turns everything grey. Dull. It's all so dull. There's not even any pain. There's nothing, really. It doesn't hurt to breathe, and she doesn't miss Marlene, and she's too tired to speak or eat or move. It comes, and she doesn't think it'll pass.

It's not something that just *passes.* She needs help with this, too. She needs Poppy to take her hand and coax her out of bed, leading her into the bathroom where a warm bath is waiting. It's the first time Dorcas thinks of Regulus in a long time, and there's a twinge of guilt for that.

But Dorcas has her bath, and again, she remembers how human it makes you feel. And, the next day, Minerva won't leave her alone until she gets up and goes for a walk with her. Outside in the sunshine, among the breeze, that's a place she feels small and human, but in a good way. When she gets back, she's worn out, and she crawls right back in bed. And, the next day, Poppy and Minerva herald her up to make breakfast with them, and eating something you've made holds its own charm, but not the same charm that exists in watching people you love eat what you've made with them. That day, she doesn't go back to bed until the moon is out.

Healing isn't linear. Some days are harder than others. Some days, she doesn't get out of bed no matter what Poppy and Minerva do. Other days, she's out of bed before they are, out on the front step smoking as kids across the street giggle, a sound that—after all this time—makes her lips curl up. On her best days, she can let herself take a deep breath and feel the sun on her face. On her worst, she wants to start a war.

Denial, anger, bargaining, and depression don't really stop, but when the acceptance hits, they get more spaced apart. They get repetitive, even, to the point that she learns how to navigate them and take them day-by-day. They feel different when paired with the acceptance that never leaves her.

Her moment of acceptance, in the end, is as bold as the rest of her, but to no one except her. She turns over in bed one night and reaches out to the empty spot next to her, knowing that nothing is waiting at the end of her fingertips. And she asks herself, then, what was the point of the war?

She doesn't know, and she thinks, maybe, no one does, and she thinks, maybe, it's a question she'll never have an answer to, a question she has to let go of, because the point of the war has to matter less than the fact that it ended.

It ended, and now, finally, Dorcas lets herself begin.

~•~

Things they don't tell you about war—the will to survive is not the will to live, but when you're ready, you can have both.

~•~

Eleven months after the war is first time Dorcas goes to make amends with someone, and it ends in a drink thrown in her face, which she takes with grace, if she does say so herself. A fight doesn't break out, and no one ends up dead, so really, she considers that personal growth.

"I am *so* sorry," Kingsley says with a grimace, staring after Sundry as they march out the bar, slamming the door as they go. Kingsley sheepishly offers Dorcas a napkin. "They're, ah… Well, I'll—I'll talk to them. It's just—hard."

Dorcas wipes her face clean with a sigh and says, "Speaking from experience, King?"

"Dorcas—"

"You should call her. Or go visit. Or just—"

"Dorcas—"

"If you hate Lily, you have to hate me, too."

Kingsley blows out a deep breath. "I don't hate Lily, alright? I don't. It's just not something I can get past, but it's not festering either. I wish her well. I hope she has a wonderful life, but I just can't be in it. Frankly, Dorcas, I don't particularly want to see you that much."

"Well, damn, tell a girl how you really feel."

"Sorry. I wish you well, too, if that helps."

"It was war, Kingsley. It wasn't fair, not to any of us. I can't fault you for how you live after, in the endeavor to be happy and comfortable. If we don't bring you peace, then you have to do what you have to do. Like me—I had to do that."

"Get a drink thrown in your face?"

"Ha ha," Dorcas says flatly, still dabbing at the front of her shirt with the napkin. "No, not that. I mean, I sort of expected that, or something even worse. But I had to at least try."

"Yeah, I get that." Kingsley's face softens. "If they're ever at a place where they're ready for you to try again, I'll call you."

"If *you're* ever at a place to let me or Lily try, don't hesitate to call and let us. You know we always will," Dorcas murmurs.

"I know. Maybe one day that'll be enough."

"And, if it's not, that's okay, too."

"Thanks, Meadowes," Kingsley says softly.

Dorcas gives him a small smile. "Take care of yourself, King."

The next time Dorcas goes to make amends, it goes much better for her. It's the first time she leaves the Hallow after Cordelia essentially kicked her out of district eleven. She isn't going back to district eleven, though, not just yet. She has two stops, and her first is district six.

It's like following a bread trail to find Lily. First, she stops by Effie's, who looks absolutely delighted to see her and draws her into a hug before Dorcas can even really say hello. That makes her feel oddly guilty, but Effie doesn't miss a beat with her, as if Dorcas didn't basically disappear for nearly a year without a word to practically anyone, as if she didn't go off the deep end for a bit. Effie tells her, when she asks, that she thinks Lily is at Regulus and James', and so that's where Dorcas goes next, but Lily isn't there either. Regulus is, though.

"You just missed her," Regulus says the moment he opens the door, not startled to find her on the other side at all.

"How the hell did you know I was here?" Dorcas asks.

Regulus arches an eyebrow and says, brattily, "Effie has this thing called a phone, which allows two people to communicate across distances. I rather thought you'd know all about that, since Hallows were the only ones with them for a while."

"Ah, the real reason for the war. Fighting for the freedom for all to have access to technology," Dorcas says, just as brattily.

"Well, people will use any excuse, won't they?" Regulus retorts, which surprises her. Most people are uncomfortable at any mention of the war.

Dorcas purses her lips. "You know, maybe this makes me a bitch, but I wasn't actually planning to apologize to you."

"Good, don't. Moments of emotion make me uncomfortable," Regulus tells her, wrinkling his nose. "And, frankly, you don't have shit to apologize for."

"I mean, I sort of went insane and treated everyone like shit after my girlfriend died, so…"

"You weren't exactly the picture of sane *before,* and if I lost James, I would have needed to be locked away. I'd either kill everyone else, or kill myself, so if you ask me, you handled yourself quite well, all things considered."

"You don't know how I handled myself at all."

"I don't need to. You're here now, and you look good. That tells me all I need to know."

"You know, I appreciate that," Dorcas muses.

Regulus chuckles, and then he's smiling, a full smile that Dorcas has never seen on his face before. As if she didn't walk out of his life, and every life, including her own, for the last year, he says, "James and I recently agreed to get married, like planning the wedding and

such. You'll be in my lineup. James can't have you, which he's been pouting about, but he's not the best at multitasking when it comes to fighting. He's throwing his whole lot in with claiming Sirius."

"I'm—in the wedding?" Dorcas asks.

"Obviously."

"Oh, *obviously.* You couldn't have known I'd be back in time."

"No," Regulus agrees with a shrug, "but I hoped."

Dorcas' heart clenches. "Thank you, for hoping."

Regulus' face softens, a bit, and then he murmurs, "Lily went home before Effie reached out. Here, I'll give you directions."

Because word apparently travels fast around here—and this is the district of the loyal—Lily doesn't look at all surprised to find Dorcas at her door, when Dorcas makes it there.

For a long beat, they just stare at each other. She's Dorcas' last stop before heading to district twelve, and what a view to send her off on. Lily looks really fucking good, healthy and flushed, practically glowing. She looks *happy.*

"Let me guess," Dorcas says wryly, "Remus told you?"

"I actually have a groupchat with Regulus and Remus. Regulus told us at the same time," Lily explains, then breaks out into a grin when Dorcas snorts. Surprisingly, with no wariness, Lily opens the door wider, her gaze sparkling, and she says, "Get in here, Meadowes."

Dorcas knocked on the door, and as easy as that, Lily lets her in. The house is bright and warm, and also *cluttered.* Bingley is in the sitting room, sprawled upside down on the couch with his head hanging over the cushions towards the floor, his phone pressed to his ear and what sounds like a very intense debate about the solar system spilling from his mouth.

"Don't mind the mess, Bingley is working on this project for when school starts back. It's like a soft-opening to get them used to the idea," Lily says as they move through the room, stepping over glitter pens and styrofoam balls. Lily picks up one and throws it at Bingley's head, making him sputter. "Oi, be polite. I know you saw Dorcas come in. Say hi."

Bingley sighs and rolls his eyes. "Hold on, Xac, just—no, no, I'm *not* wrong! Just—oh, piss off, hold on." He covers the phone and flashes Dorcas a broad smile. "Hi, Dorcas. Glad you're alive and stuff." With that, he goes right back to his phone. "Okay, I'm back. Pluto was a fucking planet!"

"You know, he's not wrong," Dorcas mutters as she follows Lily further through the house, towards the sounds of sizzling in the kitchen. "It *was* classified as a planet once."

"Yeah, I think Xac knows that, but she likes to wind him up," Lily says with a chuckle. "He'll be more talkative over dinner. You're staying for dinner, right? Mary's making…" She trails off as they enter the kitchen, where Mary is bobbing up and down at the stove, singing under her breath as she pushes food around in a pan. "Mary, what are you making?"

"Stir-fry," Mary chirps, glancing back at them with a smile. "I have veggies, chicken, and some potatoes."

Lily heads towards the fridge, pausing long enough to peer over Mary's shoulder in the pan. She makes a soft *ooh* noise of approval and smacks a kiss to Mary's cheek. "That does look good. How'd you sear the chicken like that?"

"A magician never reveals their secrets," Mary teases, then laughs when Lily huffs at her and grips her hips, whispering in her ear, then pretends to bite it. They sway together, laughing, and Dorcas feels this bittersweet twist in her chest. It's not quite jealousy, but there is a yearning there. Maybe not for Lily. Maybe just for someone to laugh at the stove with.

Dorcas sits at the table and looks down at her hands, swiveling the ring around her finger, lost in a wistful haze for a while, at least until Lily comes back to sit at the table with her, sliding a glass of water to her with a warm smile.

"You look—really fucking good, Dorcas," Lily murmurs, and Dorcas wishes she wouldn't say such things, all while running her gaze over her in blatant appreciation.

"Thank you," Dorcas replies, taking a swallow of the water, which is chilled from the fridge. It's good, refreshing, almost like a shock to the system that briefly clears her head.

The thing is, Dorcas doesn't think she's ever going to be able to love anyone after Marlene. She's thought about it, really sat down and let herself ruminate on whether or not she'd ever have love again, and it's ironic, almost, how badly she didn't want to be like Dumbledore, didn't want to end up like him, and that's exactly what she's done. In this regard, she relates to him the most. His lover died because of him, and whether he was ever with others or not, he never did *love* again. Never wanted to, never tried to, never could. That was the love of his life, and that was it. Simple as that.

Dorcas is in the same situation, essentially. She wants to live, and she wants to love, but in this aspect—romance—she feels quite content with being finished. Marlene was the love of her life, and that's it. Simple as that. She'll never love another.

But, with Lily, it's different. She loved Lily before Marlene ever came along. She could love her again, still does love her, even now, because Lily does—and will always—have a part of her. Dorcas wouldn't be able to love her the same, though, as she did Marlene, or as she did before Marlene. It would never be the same. It would never be fully, completely untouched by grief, or a yearning for someone else, not for either of them.

Not that Lily would run off with her or anything. In fact, Dorcas knows Lily wouldn't, and she knows it would break Lily's heart to have to tell her no. If Dorcas was selfish, she would ask anyway, and make Lily break both of their hearts. It's not the same as Lily telling her she's loved when she and Marlene were on outs, just needing to let go and move on; it's very different, because Lily is so obviously happy with Mary; she has a lovely home, and a family, and life of her own she'll never turn her back on, one that it would be disrespectful for Dorcas to ever, ever ask her to.

So, Dorcas won't ask. But Dorcas isn't a good person, even now, and she wants to. A part of her wants to, despite knowing neither of them would be completely happy if Lily agreed, and that neither of them would be completely happy if Lily didn't.

And so, Dorcas won't ask. It's not about being a good person; it's about trying to be, no matter the difficulty, so she swallows the question and lets it sit in her chest, a warm ember always flickering that she'll never see catch flame again. She doesn't need to burn to be alive. Being warm is more than enough.

She will be in Lily's life, and that's more than enough. She will see Lily be happy, and that's more than enough. She will make sure Lily never knows that Dorcas looks at her now and thinks *before this life, it could have been us; maybe in some other life, it is.* And that's more than enough.

"I'm glad you came by, you know," Lily murmurs, reaching out to cover her hand on the table, gazing at her gently. Like a friend would. Like someone who loves her would. "I knew you'd show up eventually."

"Regulus said something like that," Dorcas tells her with a huff of laughter. "He said he just —hoped."

"Well, we all did, I suppose. Me the most, though, I promise."

"Really?"

"Yeah, 'course. Why wouldn't I?"

Dorcas coughs. "I… Well, Lily, I shot at you."

"A warning shot," Lily says. "You missed anyway. Although, you did fuck up my hearing a bit. I can't hear the best out that ear now."

"That was fucked up," Dorcas mumbles. "I'm sorry."

"I got over it." Lily shrugs. "Besides, it's not like I didn't get it, yeah? I know how—"

Dorcas lifts a hand, sighing. "Yeah, I've gotten the same reply out of Poppy and Minerva. Blah blah blah, your girlfriend just died, blah blah blah, we're all crazy just like you, blah blah blah, your grief is valid and you're forgiven and we love you."

"Blah blah blah," Lily adds on, grinning as Dorcas snorts. "I mean, I suppose there's not much to say, then."

"No, there is. I—scared you," Dorcas tells her, and Lily drops her gaze. Dorcas squeezes her hand to seek it out again and catch it, holding it. "You were scared of me, Lily."

"I was scared of everything. It wasn't about you, so much as…all of it. Anyone could have done that to me in that moment, even fucking *Remus,* and I would have been scared. It was the trauma, Dorcas, not you."

"But I'm the one who did it to you. I instigated it. I—shot at you not even a fucking week after a war. I *triggered* you, and you're never—you'll never fully trust that I won't again, and you'll always associate that with me, and you'll—"

"Okay, one," Lily cuts in, "I'm going to need you to dial it back on assuming what *I'm* going to do or feel. And two, whatever soft, scared little lamb you've painted me as post-war because of how I reacted when you *did* shoot at me needs to go. I am not her. If you raised a gun at me now, I'd knock you the fuck out, or I'd shoot you first, and we both know *I* don't miss."

"Don't flirt, Evans," Dorcas says, cracking a weak smile as a pressure lifts off her chest, just hearing Lily contradict what Dorcas feared the most: that Lily would always be afraid of her after what she did. "Your girlfriend's right there, you know."

"Her girlfriend is listening and finds all that she just said wildly attractive," Mary announces lightly. "Keep reminding people how good of a shot you are, lover, it's sexy."

"I thought my ego was too big?" Lily teases.

"Well, when you're right, you're right," Mary replies with a shrug, throwing them a wink over her shoulder. "As long as you don't forget how good of a shot *I* am."

"Couldn't possibly," Lily says. "I have the scar to prove it."

Dorcas chuckles and draws her hand back from Lily's, who is grinning rather goofily, like it pleases her to no end that Mary shot her once. They're very well-suited, there's no denying that. "Listen, I'd love to stay for dinner, but is there any way we can do a raincheck, maybe? I —I do intend to come back around, and Regulus is likely going to bully me into getting a phone, so I'll be in touch before I come visit again, but I actually have a train to catch."

"Where are you headed?" Lily asks.

"District twelve to see Sirius, and then eleven," Dorcas says, taking a deep breath. "Ah, I've been staying with Minerva and Poppy, and they're doing a lot of great work in the Hallow, but the world is still recovering in certain aspects after the war. It's hard to get orphans adopted from the Hallow, so they've been trying to set up orphanages in the districts to help. I, um. I'm planning to run one out of the Victor's Village, including Marlene's old place, as long as Cordelia is alright with it."

"Shit, Dorcas, that's amazing," Lily blurts out, her eyes widening. "You know we'd love to help, if you ever need anything. Don't hesitate to call, and *don't* be a stranger."

"I won't," Dorcas promises. "Walk me out, yeah?"

"Yeah, of course," Lily agrees, springing up to do just that.

Lily walks her all the way to the door and out of it, closing it gently. There, secluded, Lily draws Dorcas into her arms and holds her for a very long time. Dorcas squeezes her eyes shut and tucks her face into Lily's shoulder, pretending for one moment that this is a life they could have found a happy ending together in, holding her for the entirety of this as if Lily is hers. And then she lets her go, because Lily has found her happy ending, and Dorcas is still making her own.

"I'm happy for you, you know," Dorcas whispers as Lily pulls back, searching her face. Dorcas swallows harshly and gives her a watery smile. "You've done really good for yourself, Red. You deserve it, all of it, and thank you for letting me be a part of it, even after everything. That means a lot to me."

Lily's hand comes up to cradle her cheek, and she whispers back, just as tenderly, *"You* mean a lot to me, Dorcas. To all of us. I love you, okay? Don't ever forget that."

"I love you, too," Dorcas says, and she tries to keep her voice level, but it cracks right in half.

"I know." Lily sniffs hard, her lips trembling, tears there in her eyes, and she nods. Both of her hands cradle Dorcas' face, and she huffs out a hoarse laugh, still nodding. "I know."

And that's more than enough.

Next stop is district twelve, bypassing eleven first, which puts a deep hook of yearning in Dorcas' chest, but not yet. Not yet, she has to do this first. Sirius first.

Sirius, as it turns out, doesn't live too far from the station, so she makes it there faster than she actually wants to. She feels like she needs to prepare herself, and she's not at all prepared when she's in front of the door. And yet, she still knocks.

Remus is the one who opens the door, and he doesn't look the least bit surprised to see her. He runs his gaze over her, sharp and assessing, and his voice is clipped when he says, "Sirius is out on the back porch."

Dorcas doesn't know what to say to that.

Remus looks at her for a long beat, a protective glint there in his eyes that says a lot of things. It says *don't hurt him.* It says *you don't know what he's been through.* It says *you can ruin him with one wrong word, and I'd sooner kill you than let you.* It says *you would do the same, if roles were reversed.* It says *he's happy, we're happy, don't you dare fucking ruin it.*

Dorcas sighs and says, "I just want to see him. That's it."

They both know—they all know, really—that it's more than that, but that seems to appease him and make it clear that she has good intentions. The mistrust is fair, and it's not like Remus has ever hid how much he cares for Sirius. Dorcas thinks that, if the roles *had* been reversed, Remus would have started a war for Sirius, too.

Remus does let her in, leading her through the house. It's not the houses she's used to, outside of the ones she saw in district eleven. The houses that seemed so small and compact, run down from the outside in, and she didn't know that they could be this warm. Size doesn't make a home, though, and Dorcas knows that now after spending a year in so many places and feeling like nothing would ever be home to her again. The closest she got was Marlene's home, but she wasn't ready yet. She's still not ready; she has to do this first.

Sirius is sitting in the steps when she pushes through the screen door. There's a dog next to him that he's petting over and over, restlessly, and it growls at her as soon as she comes out. Sirius makes a stern *shht* noise, and the dog instantly stops and settles down, laying its head over in his lap.

"Sorry," Sirius mumbles, darting his gaze to her, a little wide-eyed. "She won't bite, I swear. She just knows I'm stressed, is all. I mean, she probably *would* bite if I was attacked, but—well, obviously it's fine. It's fine. Ah, the—you can sit, if you want. She really won't bite."

Dorcas eases forward tentatively, coming closer and holding the back of her hand out for the dog to sniff. Dorcas had a dog once, but her mother got rid of it as a punishment after one of their fights. She holds still and waits, and the dog turns out to be quite sweet, in the end. She nudges under Dorcas' hand, licks it, then plops her head back in Sirius' lap. Dorcas cracks a smile and sits down, taking a deep breath.

"You look lovely," Sirius comments quietly. "I like your hair."

Dorcas smiles, slightly. She also likes her hair. Faux crochet locs with silver ornaments she used to wear on her braids. A little bit of old and a little bit of new. Endings and beginnings, because endings *are* beginnings.

"Thanks," Dorcas murmurs. "You look good."

Sirius gives a low chuckle and says, "When do I not?" After a beat, he grimaces and coughs. "Sorry, that was—I get like this sometimes, when I'm nervous. Still, um, good at putting on a show, I guess. The Hallow Heartthrob, ya know? Not—I didn't mean because you're a Hallow, it's just like a defense mechanism or something, I only meant—"

"Sirius, it's okay," Dorcas cuts in, and he shuts up. She takes a deep breath. "It's—it really is okay. You don't have to be nervous. It's just me."

"I—I don't really know what that entails anymore…"

"Yeah, that's…fair. What I mean to say is that who I was when I treated you—and everyone else—the way I did after Marlene died isn't the person I want to be. I accepted her, alright? I had to so I could leave her behind, but I *am* leaving her behind."

"Oh," Sirius says softly. He studies her for a long moment, his eyebrows furrowed. "You know, uh, Marlene—she kind of said something like that before she—"

Dorcas' heart practically skips a beat. It leaves her a little lightheaded, just how desperate she is to know, but she forces herself to breathe, and she forces herself not to claw at him and shake him and try to empty him out, all that he has of Marlene, just to take it herself. She asks him for it, asks him to share, because he's him and he will. "What did she say?"

"When you accept yourself for who you are, you open yourself up to who you will be. We can't find peace with ourselves if we can't accept that we evolve," Sirius quotes slowly, with care, like he's trying his very best to remember and get it right.

"Yeah," Dorcas whispers, blinking harshly against the stinging in her eyes. "Yes, that. Exactly that."

"Please don't cry," Sirius whispers. "I don't mean to make you cry. I wanted to get this right with, not fuck it up. I'm sor—"

"No, no, don't apologize. Please don't." Dorcas swipes hastily at her cheeks and exhales a harsh breath. "They're good tears. I *love* getting to know anything about Marlene, Sirius, I really do. I always want more of her, even now. But that's not—it's not why I'm here. She's not why I'm here."

"No?"

"No, I'm here because I think I helped add to any guilt you may have felt. I—was harsh with you, and I said things, and I thought worse things, because I wasn't at a place to tell you it wasn't your fault, or to care about your own grief over the volume of mine. And I—I lied to you, to all of you, in the past, then used you like a weapon, no different from any other Hallows. For that, for all of that, *I'm* sorry."

Sirius stares at her for a long time, running his hand over his dog's head, through her fur, idly now. It takes him a while, and then he says, "I was going to be guilty no matter what you did or didn't say, Dorcas. I think I will always have this hollow sort of guilt in me, and I—live with that the only way I know how. I just—I think, like you, I've chosen to continue. I'm not upset with you for how you acted in grief; as if anyone else in this damn world is any better, or could have done better, in your shoes. And now, with you here, I'm just thankful."

"Thankful?" Dorcas murmurs.

"Thankful you're here." Sirius lifts his hand away from his dog and takes her hand. She lets him. "Thankful you've continued."

Then, with that, Sirius lifts her hand and kisses it tenderly, in the Hallow sign of admiration. It's enough to bring tears to her eyes, and she lets them go, lets them fall, lets herself feel. When he goes to drop her hand, she fumbles for his and brings it to her mouth, kissing the back of his knuckles and then the inside of his hand, where he held the ring, then buries her face there in his palm and lets the tears run their course.

He didn't have to bring the ring that rests on her thumb back to her. He didn't have to do that, wounded and wracked with grief, in the aftermath of having to see things that would drive lesser men insane. He didn't have to, and he did it anyway.

"Thank you," Dorcas chokes out. "Thank you for bringing me the ring. Thank you for being here. I'm—I'm so thankful you're here. I'm so proud of you for continuing. She would be so—just *so* proud of you, Sirius."

"She'd be proud of you, too. She'd be proud of all of us," Sirius croaks, and Dorcas hiccups a sob, nodding into his hand. His other hand reaches for her, tugging on her arm, and she falls into him as much as she can with a dog nestled in between.

Dorcas laughs, once she's not crying anymore, and Sirius laughs with her. Sometimes, healing can be so sudden and bright that it's exhilarating, like something snapping back into place. It hurts for that moment, then the ache fades, what was out of place is working again, and it feels *good.* It's reprieve.

"Sorry for, ah, crying all over your dog," Dorcas mumbles.

"Oh, Stella is used to it," Sirius tells her, grinning. "I do it all the time. You can, too. Anytime. You're welcome anytime."

"I *will* hold you to that," Dorcas warns. "I miss my friends."

"Well, we're here," Sirius murmurs, his smile softening.

"I miss her, too," Dorcas admits with a deep breath. "Every day I do. We—we talked about figuring life out together after the war, and I never really expected to have to do it without her, but I—I want to do it, even though she isn't here. What hurts the most, now, is knowing she never even got to try."

"No, Dorcas, she did," Sirius breathes out, surging forward to take her hand again. "I—you said you want more of her, that you love getting more, and I—I want to give you this, but I don't want you to be hurt by it more than you find joy in it, because as much as it hurts that it couldn't be, it's such a beautiful thing that she got to feel, such a beautiful thing how she loved you. I want it to make you feel loved, not hurt."

"You—yes, you can tell me," Dorcas says, just as breathless as him, clinging to his hand now, her heart pounding. "If it hurts, then it hurts. It all hurts anyway, and I'm—I'm still going. I'm still going, and I want more. Please tell me."

"Marlene was going to propose," Sirius whispers, and Dorcas' whole world comes crumbling down around her in an instant, with one sentence, five words, and past-tense. He holds her hand, thumb pressing into her ring. "She—she wanted to do something flashy and—and bold, just for you. And she said she wanted—she told me she was going to propose after the war, once everything settled, and she was going to do it with the ring. She was so—Dorcas, she was so happy about it, about you and a future with you, and she wanted to try. She did."

Dorcas feels like she can fold in half, and so she does, a bit. Her ears are ringing, and Sirius is still babbling, growing more anxious as she erupts all over again, chest heaving on deep gasping sobs. The fingers on her free hand tangle in Stella's fur, holding on for dear life, and there's Stella's cold, wet nose pressed to the crook of her neck, the background buzz of Sirius' voice in her head, fading in and out.

Marlene was going to propose. She was going to—

Yes, Dorcas thinks, screaming it on the inside of her head like a demand more than an answer. Yes, yes, *yes,* she'll marry Marlene. Of course she'll marry Marlene. It's not even a question. Dorcas didn't need anything bold; she would have said yes if Marlene passed her a note; she's saying yes when Marlene is dead. Yes, yes, yes.

A hand presses flat to her back, and Stella whines in her ear, and Dorcas breathes. Dorcas breathes and thinks it again, *yes,* and breathes some more, just to think, *but I can't,* and breathes some more, to suffer through the thought, *I would have married you, if I could have, but now I can't. Darling, I'm so sorry I can't.*

Because she can't. That's the reality. The reality of it is, Dorcas can't marry Marlene, because Marlene is dead, and Marlene is never making it four blocks north of the Dillmar Suites, and Marlene is never making it through that fucking war.

And the war ended.

And Dorcas is here.

And Dorcas continues.

Sucking in a deep inhale, hitched and bordering on a broken whimper, Dorcas builds the world back up around her. Feels the fur between her fingers and the cold nose against her throat. Listens to Sirius' hand across the fabric of her shirt as he rubs her back. Tastes her own tears and the sunshine in the air. Smells the wood dust of the porch and the fresh scent of grass out past it. Opens her eyes and looks out through the blur of her vision to see the future she could have had turned into streams of light-confetti as the horizon creeps down past the trees, leaving her only with here and now.

Here and now, Dorcas breathes, and she straightens up through the pressure on her chest, the weight of it enough to crush her, but she picks herself back up and doesn't let it suffocate her. Finds the beauty in it, in Marlene, in the more of her that Dorcas now has. She was going to try to figure it out. She was making a plan. She was going to propose, and she had hopes, and she wanted to *live;* she really did, and that's—it's so painful, but so fucking special. That's important, because she was so used to death, to dying, and only surviving, but she finally knew what it was to want to live. To really, really live.

Dorcas wants to live, too. She is living. She's going to keep living, and she'll make her plans, and she'll figure it out. And, every single day, she will find more of Marlene everywhere she goes, in the friends she holds onto, in the birds that fly and the children that laugh and the ring on her finger.

"Okay," Dorcas croaks, nodding, and then she laughs. It's a soft laugh. Gentle. Tender. Happy. "Yeah, that is exciting. Thank you, Sirius." She looks over at him, taking a deep breath in and letting it out. "Thank you for telling me that. If—if you wanted to—you don't have to, but if you wanted to talk about her, even before I knew her, I'd be happy to hear all of it."

"I'd really love to," Sirius murmurs, sincere about it, and so that's exactly what he does. He talks, and gives her more of Marlene, and Dorcas sits with him to listen.

Later—hours later—when Dorcas leaves his house, she pauses on her journey to her next destination to slip the ring off and slide it on her left hand, fourth down from her thumb.

Dorcas goes to catch a train with a ring finger occupied and a blooming peace settling in her bones. She takes the ride with a gentle kind of quiet, lips curled up as she leans her head against the cool plane of glass and thinks about how all that she has lost is closer to her when she lets herself have what remains. Most of all, a life she wants to live.

Opportunity.

When Cordelia answers the door to find Dorcas waiting on the other side later that evening, she inhales sharply, eyes going shiny. A beat, and she says, "You're home."

"I'm home," Dorcas agrees.

"Are you ready to be?" Cordelia asks, with the background soundtrack of Maximus laughing with Riker from within the house, and Marlene's home ready to be filled with children she can keep safe, until they have a home of their own.

"Yeah," Dorcas says boldly, "I'm ready."

Chapter End Notes

this is honestly one of the roughest chapters, in my opinion. THE roughest chapter, if you ask me. i did a lot of research on veterans and their experiences in war, as well as the aftermath, which was...genuinely scarring, i will say, but it was necessary to really get a feel for how it reflects on war-related content. i wanted to at least slightly accurate depict it, and do these characters justice, and i hope i did that.

one of the big things with dorcas was that she was a hallow, and part of how hard it was for her to handle this grief had to do with that, which you see when she says "im a hallow, it wasn't supposed to be me" and i think that really encapsulates how a lot of the hallows felt, even subconsciously.

another part of grief is clinging to it, and feeling anger at those who don't do it the same way. like, grief is ugly. it's harsh. it's brutal. it's not always tears and hugs and hope, and i think a lot of people were angry at dorcas for the fact that it wasn't that, but that's not...real, not for everyone. it was implemented from the very beginning that dorcas would lose it if marlene died; there was no illusion about that, and i wasn't going to build that up and then just. not have it be what it was.

dorcas' mother provides this depth to dorcas that was always there, but we just didn't know WHY. we never saw how she reached the point that she did. when she was first introduced, one of the first thing she says is that those in the hallow are asleep, and she wants to wake them up. why? her mother. we see her close with minerva and idolizing her as a hallow in the order. why? because minerva is what she wanted her mother to be. she never talks about her past or her family. why? because she was ashamed of it.

and so, now, on the other side of the war, all of her feelings for her mother are so complex. no mother figure has ever not let her down (minerva included) and this shaped her into someone who prioritized war and rebellion and then what she thought was right, only to not really know what was right at all, and feel as if she didn't do the right thing either.

she had so much guilt and pain over marlene's death that she couldn't carry on past it for a long time, and she struggled to cope. like i said, it's brutal.

and there's a variety here, too. like you've got kingsley and his situation with sundry, finding love after sybill, and letting himself accept it. letting himself live a life that's comfortable/happy for him. and like, is it fair that he can't really work past things with lily—and even dorcas—despite knowing they're not at fault? idk, but it is what it is. and then there's sundry, who can't get past dorcas' involvement in their family dying, even

though through that, dorcas—and the rest that were there—saved a lot of lives. is that fair? that's the thing, there's a lot of grey area and complexities. it's not black and white, and i really like showing that. it's never as simple and cut and dry as we want it to be, which fucking sucks sometimes, but that's just how it is, and we continue anyway.

dorcas and lily in this fic are absolutely tragic to me. it's bittersweet, and it was definitely something hard to navigate, because they do love each other. they do break my heart, though. ive seen some stuff about people saying that dorlily should have been endgame and i think a lot of that comes from people who haven't experienced a love they knew wouldn't last, no matter how much love was involved, or maybe it comes from the place of whittling relationships down to love only and not effort. or maybe it's just because it's fucking sad as hell that they were an almost, and that's all they'll ever get to be. but the brutal truth is, lily was always going to find peace with mary, not dorcas. she put in the effort with mary, who put in the effort BACK, and they never let the war come between them. so yes, lily loves dorcas and always will, just as dorcas loves lily and always will, but just as marlene was it for dorcas, mary is it for lily. dorcas and lily were never going to find a happy ending together, not romantically at least. but they're still in each other's lives, and they still love each other, and that—to me—is more special than them trying to make something work that, in the end, simply wouldn't.

anyway, ive been babbling. there's a lot to dorcas' character, and she genuinely is so special to me, and this entire story. despite everything, her happy ending isn't out of reach. she may not have gotten it how she expected to, but she's making it. i love her <3

The Wedding

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-brief references to past child abuse
-mentions/depictions of aquaphobia
-references to past death/murder
-mentions of blood (no one bleeds)
-semi-explicit sex (it's...a bit heavier than usual, and you absolutely know what's happening, even if it's not describing every little detail)
-knife kink??? (no one is cut or hurt in any capacity)

yeah, uh, this chapter is, like, almost entirely devoid of angst by MY standards, so. enjoy 🥰

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius tries to keep his hands from shaking as he sits the phone down, the screen black where he clicked it off after ending the call with James. Exhaling explosively, Sirius reaches out and puts his hand on Stella's back, swiping gently over her fur. Her tail thumps against the bed.

"They're getting married, Stella," Sirius whispers, and she lifts her head to start licking his wrist. He takes a deep breath in, and then it comes out on a quiet, muffled sob.

It's stupid to cry about this. He already *knew* James and Regulus were engaged and would one day get married, so he finds it ridiculous that he's weeping about it now. The worst part is that it's not entirely happy weeping. It should be. He hates that it's not, because it definitely should be.

It's just… Well, Sirius is here. He's here and they're there, and they're planning their wedding, and Sirius *misses* them. He's so homesick all of a sudden, a deep well of longing bubbling up within him until it overflows.

Sirius does not regret coming to district twelve. He does not regret that he has spent nearly ten months here. It's been almost a whole year since the war ended. Regulus and James want to get married in May, only two months away. They'll have two months to plan, to get everything set up and all the invitations sent out, and then they'll be married. They've been talking to Sirius about it through a screen plenty, but the more they do, the more it starts to feel like not enough.

Stella clambers up to wriggle into his lap, whining softly, trying to lick the tears off his face. She's ridiculously in tune with his emotions, even more so than him, he thinks. She can tell when he's having a bad day even before he can, most of the time. Remus calls her Sirius' emotional support animal, which honestly has a lot of truth to it.

Stella and Styx—her brother—have been members of the Lupin household ever since Low Bar dropped them off, and Sirius was *not* joking when he said he loves dogs. He always wanted one when he was a kid, though it was never feasible, so he naturally fell in love with the two puppies the moment he officially met them. But Stella—she's his. She's the one he really bonded with, and he's the one she chose as her own.

Styx has a preference towards Lyall, who pretends that he doesn't like the dog at all, but Sirius has caught Lyall with Styx up in his chair many times, or sneaking Styx food when he thinks no one is looking, and Styx always ends up in Lyall's room to sleep, so Lyall isn't fooling Sirius in the least.

Stella stays with Sirius. Remus too, technically, but they all know Sirius is her favorite. She likes Remus, loves him even, and Remus adores her just as much; it's just that, maybe, in the grand scheme of things, Sirius is the one who needed her more. She's helpful, not just for companionship and love, but also because she can sense Sirius having nightmares and wakes him up before *he* even realizes he's having them. She does it for Remus, too, which makes Sirius think she's their own little miracle. She can tell when Sirius is feeling really bad and knows to come make him feel better, just by being with him. Genuinely, she has enriched his life in so many ways.

"I don't know why I'm crying," Sirius chokes out, tucking his face down against her head, waiting for the tears to pass.

But, well, Sirius does know. James and Regulus are entering new stages in their lives, and Sirius is missing it, and he misses them. He misses Effie. He misses his home. He wants to go

home and has no idea if he's ready to. He has made all these plans and set up his life for what it'll look like with Remus when they get back there, and he's scared to return.

District twelve is his safety net, really. He has healed here, has taken care of himself separate from anyone else, has found a sense of peace with who he is and what he wants out of life, and he needed to be here to do it. The idea of leaving scares him, because what if it falls apart? What if he does?

It's all about taking that leap. Can he? Should he? Is he ready to? Will he be able to pick himself back up if he lands badly? Is he going to land badly? Hasn't he made sure he won't?

The most terrifying question—what if it's not the same?

What if none of it is the same? What if leaving took things from him that he'll always have to miss? What if Regulus is better off with him gone? What if he and James don't breathe in sync anymore? What if home doesn't feel like home?

What if, what if, what if.

"Sirius?" Remus asks, and Sirius groans, face buried into Stella's scruff, wishing Remus had stayed in the shower a little longer, just so Sirius had more time to get his shit together. "Sirius, what's wrong? Hey—hey, sweetheart, what's—"

"Reggie and James are getting married," Sirius practically wails, very dramatically, like it's the end of the world or something. He lifts his head to find Remus rather confused.

"Um, haven't they…always been? Like, for a while?" Remus asks cautiously.

Sirius huffs at him, his eyes swollen and teary. "Yes, but like, *actually* getting married. They're planning now, Remus! The wedding will be in May!"

"Yes, I know. It's lovely," Remus says, smiling, and then he looks alarmed when Sirius goes right back to crying, because it *is* lovely, isn't it? It's so lovely, and Sirius is *so* happy for them, and so fucking upset that he wasn't there to throw them a proper engagement party. "Or…not. Not lovely? Sirius, please, I need some sort of guidance here."

What comes out next is a small and defeated, "I miss them."

"Oh," Remus replies softly. A few beats pass, and then Remus moves over to sit down next to him on the bed. Stella does a sweet little crawl so she can lie half in his lap as well as Sirius', her tail flying as Remus distractedly pets her head. Sirius gets it; he feels just as happy when he gets to be all over Remus. "I see. Right. You miss them. You want to go home."

Sirius looks at him helplessly, because yes he does, and he's scared to, and what about Remus? What about Remus' home? What about what Remus wants?

Remus' face softens. Of course he knows Sirius' concerns, just that easily. "Sweetheart, I was always going back with you. It was just a matter of when."

"Do you want to, though?" Sirius croaks.

"Dad's been dropping hints for me to kick rocks for the last few weeks," Remus says wryly, rolling his eyes. "We spend so much time together, and then we start…"

Sirius politely keeps quiet, because he wasn't going to mention it. Remus is a very, very headstrong person; Lyall is clearly where he got it from. The first time they fought was mildly traumatizing for Sirius, who had never heard Remus slam a door or put that much bass in his voice before. He'd also never heard Lyall yell, and something about parents yelling doesn't really go over well with Sirius, understandably, so he learned to dip out at the first signs of them starting to argue, which they do now. It's—well, Remus says it's a good thing, actually, just that they feel comfortable enough *to* argue.

Apparently, arguing is sort of normal for them, and it doesn't indicate that they're going to harm one another. Sirius wasn't aware that parents and children could argue without it getting physical, because it's not like he ever argued with Effie and Monty, so he genuinely had no

idea, considering any time he argued with his parents before his first arena, they put their hands on him in some way or another, even just to shove him. The first time Remus and Lyall fought, Sirius was so tense, inwardly calculating the easiest way to knock Lyall the fuck out, because he'd never stand by and let anyone harm Remus.

In the end, that was not necessary, and their argument didn't change very much overall. They grunted at each other and made petty comments for about a day, and then the very next one, they were making each other smile. Remus admitted to finding relief in that, in the way they could fight and still find forgiveness. He said it was important to him.

In the same breath, Remus has also explained that they drive each other mad sometimes. Sirius gets it, sort of. He knows better than most that no one can infuriate you like family, even more so when you're dreadfully similar. Remus and Lyall? For all their differences, they have a lot of similarities, too. And so they clash sometimes. And so they argue. And so they forgive each other. And so there is love there, between them, always.

"Dad's been talking about nests and how birds have to learn to fly and such," Remus continues, "which means he's ready for me to stop fussing at him for what he eats and for being too active with his hip, and he also wants to be able to sleep in his chair half the day without being woken up, things like that. I get it. I'd definitely like to live in a house where we can fuck without worrying about my dad overhearing."

Sirius' face explodes with reflexive heat, just from the crude way Remus words it—he's so filthy—and also from the truth to it. Sirius has never been quiet during sex, and this has led to Remus having to cover his mouth to muffle his moans many times, which honestly makes Sirius lose his brain a bit and ends with him either crying or getting *louder,* so the chances that Lyall has heard them is very high. And mortifying as hell. Sirius has no idea how he looks that man in the eye, ever.

"The plan was always to go back to district six with you, and Dad knows that. He knows I'll come around to visit, probably bring you with me, and I'm as happy with that arrangement as he is. Honestly, I—well, he *and* I sort of assumed I'd have left sooner," Remus explains, rolling his shoulders in a shrug.

"But—okay, yes, but do you *want* to leave?" Sirius insists.

Remus pauses, then nods. "Yeah, as long as you're ready to. I want—I mean, I'm—I'm excited about working at the school, yeah? And having a house with you. Our own house…"

Sirius can tell by the look on Remus' face that he really *does* want this. He looks like he's having a blissful daydream, smiling unconsciously as he goes there, lost in whatever he's picturing. Sirius imagines it's their plan for everything that they had. A homely little home with a porch-swing under the stars. Sirius is homesick for that, too.

"The thing is, I don't know if I'm ready," Sirius confesses.

Remus blinks like he's being smacked down to earth. He looks at Sirius, pats Stella's head, and says, "Well, that's okay. We don't have to go until you're ready."

"No, I mean…I *really* don't know," Sirius admits, stressed, his voice strained. "I want to, okay? I—oh, fuck, I really want to. But is it time? Am I—can I handle it? Will I—will we—will everyone be okay when I do? What if—"

"Sirius, you're working yourself up," Remus cuts in, eyebrows raised, and Sirius deflates. "You're going to be worried about these things until you get back, and then you'll get back and find you had nothing to worry about, and—no matter what else—you'll have me with you. You want to go, right?"

Sirius swallows, then nods and whispers, "Yes."

"Alright." Remus smiles at him. "So, we'll go."

~•~

Ten months after his departure—a year after the war—is when Sirius comes home. He brings a storm with him when he does.

Regulus doesn't like the rain, mostly. Doesn't like to be out in it. Doesn't like the puddles it leaves behind, or how *wet* every single fucking thing is after, or how it can start with no warning like an aerial attack—that's how it feels, to him, like death from above—and go from calm to absolutely *ridiculous* in mere seconds. How does it do that? Why does it do that?

Regulus' favorite way to…weather the storms, or brave the rain, as those sayings go, are from within a very safe, very *dry* location. Inside, under a roof. Untouchable. It's not—it doesn't scare him, just hearing the rain, as long as he knows he's not going to be caught by any of it. In fact, as long as he's sure that he doesn't have to be in it, he almost thinks of it as peaceful.

James does, too. James—well, he likes the idea that a steady build-up of exposure can help with the fear, at least a little. He also likes the idea that he's making Regulus feel safe when it rains, even though he hasn't said it. He doesn't have to say it. Regulus knows he gets a sense of fulfillment from protecting the people he loves. Comforting them. Taking care of them. James just wants to hold him, and help him, and love him.

It's sweet, really. Gag-worthy, but sweet.

So, sometimes, when it's raining, Regulus perches on the edge of the bed by the window, and watches. Bare feet against the bedframe, arms draped over the side of his legs, fingers locked around his own ankles and his chin resting on his knee. He watches little streams of rain slip down the window pane, and he watches the blur of the ruthless downpour fall in a grey slash across the sky, and he basks in his lack of fear, from here.

James, naturally, is touching him. He almost always is, when Regulus isn't angry at him about something probably stupid, glaring and hissing and ready to claw his fucking face off if he comes too close. That's not entirely a joke; he has, at least once, thought of ripping James' face off in his anger, because a prick like him didn't deserve a beautiful face like that. James is a brave soul and usually just—touches him anyway; it's slow, coaxing touches like he can evaporate all of Regulus' anger and upset with a brush of his fingers. Usually, he can. It's amazing and baffling in equal measure, how James is magic.

At the moment, James is sprawled out on the bed behind him, propped up on his elbow and only getting closer. He's inching right up to him like he has to sneak to do it, questing hands trying to leave no path to track. It started out innocently enough—it usually does—but the more skin James has felt, the more skin that he wants. Regulus isn't wearing a shirt. James is dragging his hand down the curve of his spine, gently.

"Reg," James mumbles, a very specific note in his tone that is very, very familiar. Regulus has heard it a lot, many times, that suggestive cadence to it. Sensual. Seductive.

"Hm?" Regulus hums, gaze locked on the window, lips curling up as James finally sneaks right where he was always trying to go. Right up against him. Pushing himself up to let them touch. Predictably, his mouth grazes Regulus' shoulder.

"Watching the rain?" James murmurs, his hand flat against Regulus' back slowly sliding around, following along his ribs, making it to his chest and easing down.

Regulus' eyes drift shut. "Yeah, I'm watching the rain."

"Bad out there," James comments, lazily, and pushes his hand flat against Regulus' front to get him to ease back, unfurl from where he has collapsed on himself, open up and leave himself open, like a flower blooms. James grows the prettiest flowers.

"Mhm," Regulus hums, head rolling until, finally, it settles against James' shoulder. It leaves him all kinds of open and vulnerable, but that's okay. The rain can't touch him.

James' mouth has noticed all the open space of Regulus' shoulder and throat, and seems quite content to explore it, as if there's an inch of Regulus' body James doesn't know by now. Regulus' hands remain on the edge of the bed, useless, and he's getting restless, so his fingers are starting to twist in the sheets. James has stubble that genuinely drives Regulus fucking insane, that scrape-and-drag that's almost a burn, and his mouth is busy, busy, busy on his skin.

"So beautiful," James whispers dreamily, sounding awed as he drags his mouth along the scar that arcs over Regulus' neck, one he's long since stopped being ashamed of. James uses his scars like a guideline, never shying away from them, never wary to kiss them the same way he kisses the unmarred spaces in between. "You're so fucking beautiful, love."

Regulus is getting really, really warm. And tingly. And floaty. And maybe a bit carried away. So, it's truly like a slap in the face when his eyes open slowly, and he catches sight of the forms darting through the rain, across the street.

Even this far, through the storm, Regulus knows the shape of his brother like he knows his own heart beating in his chest.

Predictably, all of Regulus' rising desire shrivels up in him and dies on the spot—brothers have that effect—and Regulus would smack the shit out of Sirius for interrupting if he could reach him right now, because he just *knows* what was about to happen was going to be so, so fucking good. Damn him.

Instead, Regulus huffs out a startled, "Sirius."

James pauses, lifts his head, and awkwardly says, "Um."

"No, James, *Sirius,"* Regulus insists, shooting forward to stumble out of bed and out of James' arms so fast that James falls forward and faceplants the bed. Regulus ignores him in favor of reaching the window and squinting out past the rain, watching—yes, yup, that's definitely Sirius diving into Effie's house with Remus right on his heels. The door shuts, and Regulus shakes his head in disbelief, because Sirius never said he was coming home. "James, Sirius is here."

"What?" James tumbles out of bed to join Regulus at the window, except he has missed Sirius and Remus entirely, which leaves him awkwardly peering out at nothing. He clears his throat. "Okay, um, I think—well, maybe missing your brother has gone a bit too far if you're starting to hallucinate, *especially* while we're—"

Regulus rolls his eyes, *hard,* and swivels away from the window to grab the first piece of clothing he comes across, which just so happens to be James' pullover, as warm on the inside as James is, warm against his skin and slipping down over his knuckles a bit. James makes a small noise of appreciation at the sight, briefly, then yelps when Regulus starts for the door.

"Hey, *hey,* where are you going?" James calls after him.

Regulus is already out of the room and darting down the stairs, practically taking them two at a time without much thought. There's not much thought in this at all, past the fact that Sirius is across the street, and Regulus hasn't seen him in ten months except through a screen.

Which—that's fine. That's *okay,* really, because Regulus has been fine without him. He didn't think he would be, and then he was. It was—good, even, in a way that hurt as much as it helped. Just to know that they could, all because they had to, even if they didn't want to. Same with James, too.

Sirius has always sort of been a fixed point for both of them, because no matter what they were, Sirius was always going to be Regulus' brother and James' best friend, set in stone and unshakable. There was no way around that, and they never really had a relationship *outside* of that, or knew they needed one, but this has been—it's been good for them, more than any of them could have imagined it would be.

Still, Sirius is here, and so naturally Regulus is going to see him. Why wouldn't he? Why the hell didn't Sirius say he was coming back to district six? That fucking idiot—

"Regulus, *Regulus,* wait," James blurts out, following him as swiftly as he can down the steps, cursing as he goes. "Just—"

Regulus ignores him, because he isn't stopping, can't fathom a reason why he should or why he ever would, and then he's moving for the door, staring to pull it open, and—

The door slams shut in front of him before it even fully opens, James practically crushing him against it, releasing an incredulous huff of air when Regulus makes a reflexive sound of protest into the wood, his cheek smooshed against it, and he's reacting on instinct to throw his elbow back, which makes James grunt and double-down, pressing in harder.

"Reg, love, it's *raining,"* James reminds him, and Regulus goes still, blinking in surprise.

"Oh," Regulus says. "Right."

"Let's just wait for him. You know he'll be over soon, if he actually is here," James replies, which tells Regulus that he doesn't quite believe that Sirius *is* back, but he does have a point about Sirius showing up soon enough, so Regulus decides to make him eat his words.

James does indeed eat his words when, less than twenty minutes later, Sirius is barreling in through their door.

It's easy in a way Regulus didn't know it could be, when Sirius gets back. He shows up in their house with dripping hair and rain-damp clothes, breathless and delighted to see them again past a screen, drenched in something Regulus fears the most, and Regulus hugs him anyway. Maybe the storm that coats his skin should tarnish his return, but Regulus finds that it doesn't, that maybe nothing in this world can. There is just his brother, too excited to see them to dry off first.

James cries, of course. Regulus refuses to. Sirius is all lit up and settled into his own skin, an extension of them and yet entirely his own. He is Regulus' big brother, he is James' best friend, but first, he is Sirius. That's new, and that's better.

It's the happiest Regulus thinks he's ever seen Sirius, just to be home, and feel at home close to them again, and have Remus with him. Like all the pieces are finally clicking into place.

Effie cooks a huge meal and demands everyone to come to hers to eat together, which no one protests. Lily, Mary, and Bingley are there, Remus laughing each time Lily throws peas at Sirius and James in rotation when Effie isn't looking. There is a dog there, Stella, lying under the table at Sirius' feet and oh so gently lapping up the little pieces he sneaks her, which Regulus intends to scold him for, then forces himself not to, because their parents are dead, and most parts of them aren't worth keeping alive. James retaliates for the pea-throwing and gets caught by Effie, who tells him he *needs* to eat his peas, like he's a child instead of an adult, and James pouts as if he is.

That night, Regulus helps Effie clean up with Mary and Bingley, while Remus and Lily sit out on the front steps and smoke together, and Sirius and James end up one room over, talking more quietly than Regulus has ever known them to.

Regulus doesn't mean to overhear them, but he steps out to ask James if he wants to take any leftovers across the street, only to hear Sirius murmuring, "I'm sorry I took so long."

And James says, softly, "There's no such thing. You took all the time you needed. I'm proud of you for that."

There's a certain level of quiet maturity there in the way they speak to each other, so much unwavering respect in how they address each other, and Regulus has never heard that between them before, not really. Maybe it's not something they show to others, and Regulus doesn't think it's for him, so he silently backs out of the room and tells Effie they'll be happy to eat the leftovers for breakfast. James won't mind. It makes Effie smile.

Regulus doesn't get a moment alone with Sirius that night, not once, and that's okay. He doesn't need it, really. Doesn't need to check that he and Sirius are alright, because he knows they are. Doesn't need his undivided attention, because he knows Sirius cares. Doesn't need reassurances and platitudes that Sirius missed him, because he knows he did.

There's a hug when he returns, and there's a hug on the doorstep when Regulus and James leave to go home, after Lily already has with Mary and Bingley. Sirius holds him tight for a moment, ruffles his hair, and then lets him go.

And life goes on.

The school opens back up in the district with a depleted amount in attendance, but there are still some children to be taught, to look after, to help grow. Regulus thinks it's really beautiful, in a way, that this is how most of them have chosen to help build the better world, not putting their efforts into the power that exists now in place of the power they eradicated, but throwing all their energy into the future generations, the bright minds who will know the before and contribute better to the after than they ever could.

James loves his job. It lights up his entire life and often is his favorite topic to come home yammering about. He oversees *fun,* which Regulus agrees is fitting for him. The perfect person in this world to extend hope, to encourage laughter, to remind those who have forgotten the beauty in simply trying.

He has a little sports club and creates games for kids to play, and he puts together a book club, but his favorite—rather predictably—is the gardening the school cleared him to do with the students. They plant flowers and food they'll get to take home to their families, and they water them and some kids name them silly things, and some uproot them too early and have to start all over, but after everything these kids have been through, perhaps the chance to make things grow and see life bloom under their hands can only be soothing.

Regulus hasn't thrown his lot in with the future, though, because he—doesn't have to. They're in good hands as it is, and he doesn't even like kids. (This is a lie. The first time James asks him to write flashcards for his students with little gardening facts, because his handwriting is prettier, Regulus stays up all night doing it, and he color-codes them, then threatens to go to the school and stuff James in a locker in front of all his students when he coos at him and calls him adorable for putting so much effort into it.) In any case, Regulus—and Sirius—have something else in mind.

The last time Regulus was in district six's forge, he was being run right back out by Barty's dad, who did *not* appreciate the fact that Regulus was hanging around his son. Thought he was a bad influence. Thought he was a delinquent. Thought he was the one encouraging Barty to act out.

None of this was true.

Regulus wasn't a bad influence on Barty. He wasn't really an influence on him at all, because Barty was the sort of person who needed no outside guidance into being a bit insane. There was nothing Regulus could have done to make Barty worse; he managed that just fine on his own, and his dad had the audacity to blame Regulus for it. And, for the record, Regulus was never a delinquent. He just sat in his house writing sad poetry and never wanted to go anywhere or do anything; the idea that *he* was the one getting Barty into trouble is laughable. But, in fairness, Regulus did encourage Barty to act out. Or, no, he simply stood by Barty no matter what he did.

When Barty didn't want to work, Regulus gave him money. When Barty wanted to fuck strangers, Regulus told him to have fun. When Barty wanted to try drugs, Regulus let him take as much as he wanted. When Barty wanted to fight, Regulus showed him how to throw a punch. Regulus, in every sense, was the least and most impactful person in Barty's life, never one to tell him how he should live it, just the person who stuck by him from the moment he walked into it to the moment it ended. That was their thing. Consistency.

Being back in the forge is strange. Barty hated it here, but he also grew up here. His dad practically lived here, and Barty's initials are carved into the underside of the desk in the front. Barty once kissed him out by the back door, stomping out in a fit of fury after yelling at his dad, then pushing Regulus up against the wall to make him swallow all of his anger, and Regulus probably should have gagged on it, could have with all the anger he carried for his own parents at the time, and Sirius, but he just bit Barty's lip hard enough to make it bleed and told him to grow up. Barty laughed and swore he never would. Turned out to be right, in the end.

The worst part, now, is that Regulus doesn't know how Barty would feel about *this*. About what Regulus is doing. Maybe he'd like it. Find it funny. Maybe he'd even be touched. Maybe, from wherever he is, he's groaning in despair and yelling at Regulus to just burn the damn place down. Regulus doesn't know, but what he does know is that living solely for the dead doesn't allow for much room to live at all.

At some point, you do have to pick yourself back up and live for yourself, and accept that those that are gone are gone, and appreciate the impact that they had while they were here, along with the impact they'll always have because they were.

It's strange to think about, but Regulus has had a lot of people impact his life now, hasn't he? He never would have imagined that at the start, all the way back to two days after his twenty-fifth birthday, what was supposed to be his last reaping. He was so close to avoiding all this pain, but he was also so fucking close to missing out on some of the best people he's ever known. Pandora, Dorcas, Remus, Evan, just to name a few. He's lost so much, but thinking about it now, he had to gain all that he did to lose all that he has. Losing is a part of loving, but the love of it all makes it hard to regret what he got to have, even for a short time.

Regulus sits on that epiphany, basking in it, because it's true. All the pain he has felt, and still feels, and will always feel—he would not erase even an ounce of it if it cost him the chance to love and be loved. In this world, if they go hand-in-hand, if they have to, then he would not give up either.

He keeps all of it. He keeps everything and anything he gets to have, and keeps all that he has lost.

And he lives, and lives, and lives.

So, when Sirius stands beside him and asks if he's really sure about this, Regulus looks around the forge and says, "Yes."

"You know you'll basically be my assistant forever, right?" Sirius teases, raising his eyebrows at him.

"No, absolutely not. I'm the owner," Regulus retorts, because he did indeed buy the forge. "I'm literally your boss."

"Oh, so you *do* tell jokes these days? You waited for me to leave and started practicing, clearly, because that's absolutely the most hilarious thing you've ever said."

"This is probably a bad idea. At some point, I'm going to be tempted to push you in an oven or stab you with one of these weird tools. No one would blame me, you know."

"You don't even know how to turn the ovens on."

"But I do know how to stab."

Sirius snorts. "No touching the tools until you can name them. That's rule number one."

"You're not making the rules here," Regulus sputters.

"Rule number two," Sirius continues blithely, "Stella is allowed inside at all times. Rule number three—"

"You're not making the rules!"

"Rule number three, it's okay if we hate it, and we can stop at any time. No pressure, yeah?"

At this, Regulus pauses, staring at Sirius for a beat. It was a big thing for them to agree to do this. A commitment, in a way, to go into business together, technically.

Sirius is a builder across multiple mediums, including blacksmithing, just good at creating things in general. Regulus doesn't have the same talent, but he couldn't imagine letting anyone else buy this place and take it over. Barty hated it, yes, but it has Barty all over it. Originally, Regulus thought about tearing the place down, or repurposing it, but then Sirius made the wistful comment on the phone that it'd be a shame for all that's inside to go to waste, and Regulus…

Well, if Regulus could let anyone inside, it'd be Sirius. No one quite takes the sting out of things like Sirius manages to, and it doesn't hurt so much to be here with him. So, they talked about it, talked about how much their parents would have hated it, and they tentatively came up with a plan.

This plan consists of, essentially, working together until they retire. Sirius said he'd teach Regulus how to do everything in the forge, but Regulus will be handling the finances and what commissions they get. It was a choice they made to work together, and spend time together, a choice that neither of them could have imagined making three years ago. Or ten.

Because they really, *really* want it to work out, and they really, *really* want to have something that's theirs, that they do together, there is this natural inclination in both of them terrified of fucking up, wary of failure, because it could feel like letting each other down. So, to say this now, to agree that there isn't pressure and they can simply try, it's good.

The worst part about Sirius being gone, for Regulus, was learning that it was the best thing for both of them. Not just Sirius, but Regulus, too.

He missed him, and knew that he did, which was starkly different from missing Sirius for ten years and not even realizing that's what he was feeling. It didn't make him angry. It made him sad, mostly, but in a gentle way; a happy way, almost. Because he was proud of them. Proud of himself and Sirius for doing it, because it needed to be done.

But, honestly, something hurt and small in Regulus was whining the entire time Sirius was gone, which has finally, thankfully shut the hell up. It's *embarrassing.* The pain of it is so fucking embarrassing now, especially with how simple things have been since Sirius has gotten back. It's like none of them have missed a beat, like the war never dug claws in and ripped them apart, as if the distance never even existed.

It did. The distance existed, and through that, they know just how important it is to close it, and keep it closed. The forge is a good way to help with that, but it's not the only way. The health of their relationship does not hinge on this, but rather on the effort they put in. After all this time, it's almost easy. Maybe, after everything, it was always going to be.

Me and you, Regulus thinks, and doesn't have to say it, because they know. If they know nothing else, they know that.

"That's the only valid rule," Regulus murmurs.

"Rule number four," Sirius begins with a grin, and Regulus reaches out to stiff-arm him directly into a wall. Sirius grunts when he lands, then huffs an incredulous laugh, staring at him in sheer disbelief. "You just broke rule number four."

"Which is?" Regulus asks, arching an eyebrow.

"Don't be a little shit," Sirius replies.

"Yeah, well, that's on you. I don't go around making rules for you that I know you can't help but break. Imagine the rule: *don't be an idiot.* That's just setting you up for failure."

"You know, Reggie, *I* know how to turn on the ovens."

They stare at each other for a beat, and the second Sirius' foot twitches, Regulus takes off running. Sirius curses, then cackles, then takes off after him. Really, the worry they have for this working out is all for naught.

They're going to be just fine.

Regulus thinks, considering the chaos and laughter unleashed within the building, Barty would hate this place a whole lot less if he could be here to see it now.

Strangely enough, even though he can't, Regulus is sure Barty is happy for him anyway.

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Sirius has only ever seen James and Regulus fight once, back when the Quarterly Memorial came and Regulus broke his promise to James. To be clear, it was fucking awful.

This? This is brilliant.

"He's my *best friend,"* James bursts out, eyes flinty in the way Sirius has only ever seen them get for Regulus. No one in this world has ever, ever, *ever* riled him up like this *except* Regulus.

"He's my *brother,* you fucking nitwit!" Regulus snaps back. In turn, *anyone* can piss Regulus off; most people do, in fact, because he thinks he's surrounded by idiots. But no one has ever, ever, *ever* softened him *except* James.

Just…not at the moment. Not about this.

Sirius is having a great time.

"You don't even like him that much!" James sputters, which is fair. Brothers rarely do, on the surface, but that's not really the important bit about being brothers.

"So?" Regulus retorts, not even denying it, which is objectively hilarious. As a brother, he gets it, though. Liking each other is not a requirement for brotherhood, that's for sure.

"So, you should at least *like* your best man!" James declares, waving his hands around like Regulus is mental. Sirius gets that, too. Regulus *is* mental. Regulus opens his mouth, and James slices his hand through the air, talking over him. "No. *No,* Regulus. I'm not backing down about this. I'm *not.* You can have anything, *anything,* you want, but I'm putting my foot down about this. The only thing I was *ever* sure of about my wedding was that Sirius would be my best man."

"Hate to break it to you, but so was I!" Regulus hisses. "And who the fuck do you think you are? *Putting your foot down.* Oh, everyone make way, James Potter has spoken. Fuck *off."*

Remus coughs into his fist, and Sirius elbows him discreetly in the side. It's *not* funny, or it shouldn't be, but—well, okay, it is a little bit. Regulus is probably the only person who can trivialize James in any capacity. Make him more human, rather than just the embodiment of sunshine and all the best things in this world, which is ironic, because Sirius is also pretty sure that no one quite adores James the way Regulus does.

James is visibly frustrated. He looks like he wants to wring Regulus' neck. "If anyone has earned the right—"

"Earned?" Regulus cuts in, eyebrows flying up. "Oh? *Oh?"*

"Yes, dammit, *earned!"* James very nearly stomps his foot. His eyes are narrowed. He is indeed not backing down about this. Sirius admires his bravery, honestly. "What have I asked for, Regulus? In any of this, what have I *not* compromised on? I've earned the right to be stubborn about this *one thing."*

"You haven't asked for anything because all you want is to marry me! That's it! You *said* that!"

"It's true! That and this! That's all I want!"

"Well, you're not getting this," Regulus bites out. "You get me. Is that not enough for you?"

"He's good at this," Remus whispers in Sirius' ear.

"Yeah, it's because he's a prick," Sirius whispers back.

"Are you ever going to intervene?"

"Are you joking? This is the most entertained I've ever been. Remus, they're fighting over me. I'm *thriving."*

James points at Regulus. "Don't do that. Don't you dare start with that—that emotional manipulation shit. I know what you're doing. I *know* you, and it's not going to work."

"So, you're set on this?" Regulus asks sharply. "Stealing my brother away from me. That's the hill you'll die on."

"What—"

"And you will die, to be clear. I'll kill you there myself."

"Oh, *please,"* James scoffs, rolling his eyes. "One, I'm not stealing your brother away from you, and you know it. Two, who the fuck else would be my best man, hm? Who? Go on."

"Oh, you want to go there?!" Regulus shouts. "What about me? Yeah, didn't think about that, did you? *My* best friend is dead. Oh, and so is Barty. Who do I have, James? Hm?"

"I—oh, that's—that's not *fair,"* James whines. "You can't bring up dead people! That's a low blow!"

"Welcome to my world," Regulus says snidely. "Face it, James, my whole life is tragic and all my friends are dead, so if *anyone* has earned this *one thing,* it's me. It's absolutely me. He's my brother! Why is this even an argument?!"

"Why are you so—so fucking—"

"What? What am I, baby? Go on, say something you'll regret."

"You do this *every time.* It's like you *want* me to be mean."

"You don't have it in you."

"See?!" James shouts, gesturing frantically at him, looking over at Sirius and Remus, and looking like he wants to rip his hair out. "Do you see what he does? He makes me fucking crazy!"

"You're the one marrying him," Sirius points out.

"I—" James opens and closes his mouth, then deflates when he seems to realize that he has no argument against that. "Yeah, okay, I am, and I'm happy to, but—"

"But?" Regulus yelps, eyes widening. "There should be no *but.* That should have been the end of the sentence. You mean to tell me that your desire to marry me is dependent on Sirius being your best man?"

"That's not even close to what I said."

"You insinuated it!"

"Oh, don't even try it! You said you'd leave me at the altar if Sirius wasn't there!" James argues.

Regulus narrows his eyes dangerously. "So, what, you won't marry me if Sirius isn't your best man?"

"That's not even close to what I said!" James bellows, apparently reaching the end of his rope. "Wanting Sirius to be my best man has nothing to do with our marriage, okay? I want to marry you so badly I can't fucking see straight, and I would do it with *no one* there, but I want him there as my best man to support me in marrying the love of my life, who just so happens to be his brother. I want him to stand right behind me where he can look over my shoulder and see how happy I make you and know, really *know,* that I'm going to take care of you."

"James—"

"He's *mine,"* James cuts in with finality, allowing no further arguments. "I'm not looking back on my wedding day with any regrets, and I would regret that he wasn't my best man."

"If I can't have him, *you* sure as shit can't," Regulus declares bluntly, because he'll argue until he dies. "Absolutely *not.* It's not happening a second time. You already got him once—"

"We aren't competing!"

"We've been competing since you and your stupid smile showed up at the door! Fuck, *fuck,* I fucking *hate* you! I *knew.* I knew the moment Sirius told me about his *stupid* new best friend that you'd be a fucking problem!"

"You're the one marrying me," James reminds him.

"I'm *aware,"* Regulus hisses, looking very much like he wants to stab something. "Oh, I'm so mad. I'm *so* mad I love you."

"Well," James grumbles, "too bad. You do, so."

"You know what? No, this is—it's ridiculous. Seniority takes this one. I had him *first.* Literally since birth."

"Until you were ten, then I came along and shared him with you for five, *then* you all but gave him to me for ten, and we've been sharing him ever since, so really, we're even."

"Okay, well, why would you even bring that up?" Regulus asks, his shoulders slumping, face falling. "Why would you—"

James points at him vigorously. "Emotional manipulation!"

"No, you just hurt my feelings."

"Bullshit. If I did, you'd never admit it."

"I try to share my feelings, and you disregard them, James? Is that what you do? You just *ignore* me?"

"He's *so* dramatic," Remus whispers, sounding impressed.

"Yeah, he gets it honest," Sirius whispers back.

Remus sighs and mutters, "How long are you going to let them go in circles about this? Haven't you had enough?"

"It's so much fun, though," Sirius complains.

"Sirius," Remus says, giving him a *look.*

"What? I'm human. I like to feel loved and appreciated, too," Sirius grumbles. Remus continues to *look* at him, so Sirius sighs and rolls his eyes before clapping his hands to his thighs and pushing to his feet. "Alright, alright, *enough!"*

"You stay out of this," Regulus snaps.

"I won't, because you're both dumb," Sirius informs them, ignoring their looks of affront. "I have the answer."

"Neither of us get you," Regulus says. "Seems fair. Actually, can we just kick you out of the wedding?"

Sirius ignores that, too. "You *both* get me. James, your mum is walking you down the aisle, right?"

"Yeah, of course," James says, blinking.

"And Regulus, who's walking you down the aisle?"

"No one. I don't have anyone."

Sirius swats him upside the head. "Idiot. *I* am, obviously."

Regulus rubs the side of his head with a frown. "Usually, it's parents who do that, *idiot."*

"Close enough," Sirius replies, arching an eyebrow at him and daring him to argue. Wisely, he does not. "So, James walks out first with Effie, no best man. I walk out, hand Regulus off first, then boom, James has a best man. We're all winners."

"That's actually really sweet," James whispers.

"It's—" Regulus violently clears his throat, trying to cover the emotion in it. "Yeah, that's—an acceptable compromise." He blinks really hard, visibly trying with all his might not to cry, and Sirius feels his chest clench to know how much that means to him. It's not about wanting Sirius to be his best man, really. He just wants Sirius *with him* in some capacity, in his corner, making sure he feels how important he is to him. How important they are to each other, as brothers.

"So, we're good? Everyone's good? Did I solve the great debate that you two have been going on and on about?" Sirius asks.

"It's fine," Regulus says blandly, then shoots James a look. "See? I *can* compromise." A pause. "Okay, so you get Sirius. I'll call Pandora and ask her in Sirius' place, for me. That's fine, but Remus is in my lineup."

James balks. "What?! No! He *saved my life!"*

"Okay, and?" Regulus arches an eyebrow. "He—"

"No!" Remus bolts up from his chair, waving his hands, looking ready to murder them both. "No, *no,* absolutely not. There will be no arguing over me. Either flip a coin or I won't be up there for either of you!"

"Remus," James starts.

"No," Remus snaps, eyes narrowed. "You two are *exhausting,* you know that? I'm not listening to you fight about this, going around in circles like—like—" He waves his hands around in a grand show of frustration. "Just flip a fucking coin!"

Regulus and James share a look, then glance at Remus, who looks like he's about to explode. Sirius reaches out and gently strokes Remus' back, admittedly lost in little fantasies about how he can help Remus work off some of this tension later.

"This is so stupid," Regulus grumbles, as a coin is produced to be flipped. "I have the worst fucking luck."

"So you don't consider yourself lucky to be marrying me?" James asks softly, lips tipping down.

Regulus squints at him, then hisses, *"Emotional manipulation!"* A smile plays at the corners of James' mouth, and Sirius stifles a laugh as Regulus whips around to face Remus. "Flip the fucking coin. Do it."

Remus does, and it goes up. While it's still in the air, James and Regulus both call it. As it turns out, James is just as good as Regulus when he wants to be, and Regulus really might be a prophet of some sort, because the coin is up, and when it finally comes down, the lucky winner isn't him.

~•~

Regulus has to drop Sirius off in district one on the way to the Hallow, but it is nice to stop in and see family. That's not a sentiment he ever thought he'd relate to, but stranger things have happened. This isn't so strange, when the family is Narcissa, Andromeda, and Nymphadora.

"Don't *call* me Nymphadora!" This is followed by a stomped foot, a red face, and a deadly look that tends to run in the family.

Sirius is clearly struggling not to laugh as he asks, "Well, what would you have me call you, then?"

"Tonks, I go by Tonks now, and I *won't* be your flower girl either—" This last part is directed at Regulus, paired with a very stern glare, "—because I'm no girl, so you'll just have to find someone else!"

"Oh, well forgive me for implying you had to be a girl to toss flowers at my wedding," Regulus murmurs, darting a glance at Andromeda, who looks amused. "I'd still like it to be you, if that's something you want to do."

Tonks pauses, then mumbles, "I won't wear a dress."

"That's fine. You don't have to."

"I go by they and them now."

"That's lovely."

"And you can't call me Nymphadora."

"Tonks it is," Regulus says, and Sirius nods along.

"Okay, well, that's fine, then," Tonks declares, breaking out into a smile before they skip off with a shriek. "Aunt Cissa, Aunt Cissa, I'm gonna be in Reggie's wedding!"

Andromeda shakes her head in clear fondness, watching her child dart out the room. "It's fairly recent, this new change with them, and the name. Suppose you were all right; even my own child despises their name. Was it that bad?"

Sirius and Regulus pointedly stay silent.

"Well, they chose to go by Tonks," Andy continues, her face softening. "They said it was partially to still feel connected to their dad. It was hard for them, this change, because they struggled with Ted not getting to be here for it."

"It seems to make them happy, though," Sirius murmurs.

Andy hums. "Oh, yeah, they're very happy, especially here. They love it in district one, loves school, loves the new place. It's good for us, you know? Being here, I mean."

"I get it," Sirius says. "Some of us needed a fresh start. No shame in it. Do you think you'll ever return home, though?"

"I doubt it," Andromeda admits, glancing at the door with a smile. "We've sort of made a life here now, all of us."

"Cissa pregnant yet?" Sirius asks.

"Trying, but it's not taking. She's determined to use Lucius', ah, assistance—something about the importance of raising a child, not a Victor." Andromeda sighs. "I don't know how long it's going to take, or how many times she'll try. She's already lost one, but she's determined to do it this way."

This doesn't surprise Regulus. Stubbornness runs in the family, too. Narcissa won't quit until she has no choice, and from what he's heard, she has plenty of Lucius' assistance to keep her trying for at least a fucking decade.

"In any case," Andy continues, turning to smile at Regulus, her gaze warmer than he's seen it in some time, "thank you for this. For letting Tonks be in your wedding. That means a lot to them, more than you'll know. They miss you—both of you."

"Is that your way of telling us to come around more?" Regulus asks, mildly amused.

Andromeda snorts. "Personally, it's enough just to see you two through a screen, but Tonks isn't going to complain if you two actually come to visit."

"Cissa might, though," Regulus points out.

"Only for show," Andy replies, then shrugs. "Besides, she doesn't even live here. She has her own house here with Alecto, and anyway, it's not like she can tell me who can and can't be in *my* house."

Regulus clears his throat. "I just—don't want to cause issues."

"Between me and my sister?" Andromeda laughs. "You can't. We're solid. I mean, I planned out her murder in vivid detail last week when she stole my shoes, but we're solid."

"She's mad because I wore them better," Narcissa announces as she sweeps into the room, holding Tonks' hand and letting herself be led in. Narcissa raises her eyebrows at Sirius, who mirrors the look, and then they share a quick grin. It's gone from Narcissa's face when she sits at the table, looking at Regulus as she holds a chair steady for Tonks to climb into. "I want to know the details about the wedding."

"You do?" Regulus blinks.

Narcissa arches an eyebrow. "I love weddings. Mine was grand, you know. We had five chandeliers."

"I won't have *one* chandelier."

"Good, you don't deserve them, but tell me you'll have centerpieces for the table at the very least."

Sirius coughs around a laugh. "Oh, Reggie has it all down to the finest detail. Only thing he'll let James handle is the flowers, which James is fine with, but everything else? He's making sure it's all perfect."

"I hope you trip on your way down the aisle," Narcissa tells Regulus.

"I hope you have a baby, and I hope it's the ugliest, snottiest, brattiest little shit that ever graced this earth," Regulus snips.

"Impossible," Narcissa retorts, hand to her chest. *"I* will be their mother, so they will be, at the very least, quite beautiful."

"And the rest?"

"Well, no one's perfect."

Sirius roars with laughter while Andromeda raises her glass in a toast, as if to agree. Narcissa chuckles, mindlessly sweeping her hand over Tonks' hair, and she looks at Regulus with no extra warmth that she lost when she found out he murdered her sister, but her eyes aren't entirely devoid of warmth either. Regulus will take it. For him, that's enough.

So, until he has to leave, Regulus sits right there with family to tell them about his wedding. And, before he goes, they listen.

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Aberforth isn't expecting the boy to be in his office.

It's a bit like a slap to the face to walk in and find him there, sitting in one of the chairs and looking rather bored, chin propped on his fist. He looks older—it's been a year now, hasn't it? Still a boy, though, at least to Aberforth.

The last time Aberforth properly saw him, Regulus was knocking him flat on his back. They haven't spoken or interacted since. Oh, this doesn't bode well.

"The hell do you want?" Aberforth grunts as he sweeps past him to plop down behind his desk.

"Cheerful as ever," Regulus notes dryly. "Hello to you, too. Nice setup you've got here, by the way. I've only heard good things about you and how you're helping the whole world."

Aberforth narrows his eyes at the boy. It's not like him to beat around the bush; he's always appreciated getting right to the point, a very direct person, which Aberforth has always rather liked about him. "Skip the pleasantries, boy, and tell me what you want. What are you doing here?"

"I want you to officiate my wedding," Regulus says.

"No," Aberforth replies.

Regulus purses his lips, clearly displeased by this response. A beat, and then he says, "I know you can. You used to be a Mayor, so you—"

"It's not about capability," Aberforth cuts in. "I can. I just won't."

"Why?" Regulus asks.

"Why do you want me to?" Aberforth retorts bluntly.

"Because I just do," Regulus snaps. "There are very few people I'd trust to be at my wedding, so my options are limited."

"Okay, well, that's not good enough for me," Aberforth tells him unapologetically. "I can recommend—"

"No," Regulus cuts in. "It has to be you."

"Well, it won't be me, and you're not getting your damn way, so either suck it up and accept someone else, or just don't get married," Aberforth says harshly. "Either way, it's not my problem. Take my recommendations, or don't, and get the hell out of my office."

"It can't be anyone else, and I *am* getting married, so *you* suck it up and put aside your spite for one damn day to officiate a fucking wedding. I am not my brother, and I didn't kill yours. I'm not going to take responsibility for his choices, no more than he should mine, and you don't get to blame me for them."

"Look, I don't particularly like you either—"

"I don't *care,"* Regulus interrupts sharply. "I don't care if you hate me and my brother, and I don't care if the last thing in this world you want to do is go back to district six, and I don't particularly care whether or not you actually give a shit that James and I are getting married. That's not the *point.* You are the only person who—" He stops, nostrils flaring, then exhales harshly. "You got it, okay? You said it in the meeting, before everything happened, that Albus didn't know just how long James and I loved each other, and that we never did it for defiance, but *you* knew. You saw it, all of it, and you cared. So, it has to be you. It can't be anyone else, because no one else can prove they respect it for what it is, but you already *did."*

Dammit.

Fucking dammit. This kid. This rude, demanding, unrepentant boy. The mess of it is, Aberforth does like the boy, likes him a hell of a lot more than he likes most people, and hell of a lot more than ever liked his brother. Aberforth just might be one of the few people in this world—maybe the only one—who preferred Regulus to Sirius even when they were just dumb little shits building snow forts that blocked the sidewalks, which Aberforth had to shovel out the way, grunting and grumbling under his breath the whole time. Maybe it was because Regulus reminded him of Ariana, and himself; maybe it was because Sirius reminded him of Albus. He doesn't know what it was, but Aberforth has found himself thankful many times since Albus died that it was Sirius who gave the killing blow, not Regulus. It's easier to hate Sirius.

For Aberforth, hating Regulus isn't quite working out. He *doesn't* particularly care that the boy is getting married, and Aberforth had no urge to even attend the damn wedding, but then the boy showed up to demand he *officiate* it. The impulse to do so now, just because it matters that much, just because he matters that much to someone, still, to someone alive…it's strong. The impulse is really strong, except Sirius will be there, and Aberforth swore to never go back to district six until he was a pile of ashes. He won't, not even for the boy, arguably the last person in this world Aberforth even cares about on a personal level, and that's a bit of a stretch as it is.

"This is very important to me," Regulus says stiffly. "So, if you would please set aside your pride, along with your many other grievances with me and my brother, I'd appreciate it."

"Do you realize how selfish it is to ask this of me?"

"I don't care about that either. You know, some would see it as an honor. Do you know how many people would kill to get the chance?"

"So, ask *them,"* Aberforth grits out.

"I don't want them," Regulus declares simply. "I want you."

Aberforth heaves a deep sigh, shaking his head and glancing off to the side, only to grimace when he sees Ariana's portrait. He feels the judgment in her gaze, or merely her presence, and perhaps even Albus'. He can feel it like they're personally urging him. *Don't do it like last time, Abby. Don't cling to your pride. Don't watch wood.* Yes, alright, shut the hell up.

"If," Aberforth starts, and Regulus' eyes instantly light up like he is a little kid, just a boy, "and I do mean this, *if* your brother so much as speaks to me—"

"He won't," Regulus blurts out, sitting ramrod straight in his chair. "It's my day. He won't fuck it up, I swear."

"Boy—"

"You don't have to do anything but officiate the wedding. That's *it.* You can stay out the way, show up, then leave as soon as you're done. You don't have to talk to anyone, or go anywhere, or you can go to the tree while everyone else is at the wedding, just—just *whatever* you want to do, it's fine. I'm not—I don't want to make you uncomfortable, alright? That's not what I'm trying to do, but I—I always imagined that the mayor of district six would officiate my wedding with James, even when I was just ten years old, and you're the only Mayor I've ever known. So, even before I knew a damn thing about you, it was always you. And, knowing what I *do,* now, I'm only more convinced it still has to be."

"Alright, *alright,"* Aberforth grunts, grimacing at the truly ridiculous amount of warm-and-fuzzies implied with all of that. The boy is usually better about keeping that shit to himself, unlike his over-emotional brother. Makes sense why Aberforth prefers him. "Fine, I'll—stop in to officiate your wedding, but I'm doing that and nothing else. I'm doing it on one condition, you hear me?"

"Okay," Regulus says, eyes narrowing again.

"I'm old. I'm probably gonna die in the next fifteen years or so, if I'm lucky," Aberforth announces with a grunt, and he appreciates that the boy doesn't protest, or try to deny it, or even seem to care very much. He only blinks and, after a moment of hesitation, nods. "I don't have kids, never cared to have a spouse, and all my family is dead. I don't much care what

happens to my property or possessions after I'm gone, but I need someone to carry out my last wishes for my burial."

"The tree," Regulus murmurs.

Aberforth nods. "I want to be cremated, then buried with Albus and Ariana. Think you can handle that?"

"You—me?" Regulus blinks again, this time with mild alarm, visibly startled. "Wait, you're putting *me* in your will? No, that's too much. I don't want your stuff, or to deal with all that shit. It's stressful. Pick someone else."

"How bad do you want me to officiate your wedding?" Aberforth asks, eyebrows raised.

Regulus holds his hand out immediately. "I'd be happy to bury you. You have yourself a deal."

Aberforth chuckles, helplessly, and reaches out to shake his hand.

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The wedding creeps up on them. It's—not supposed to. Regulus has all of this under control, planned out down to the finest detail, and he keeps James very up to date, so there is absolutely no reason that it should be the least bit startling when it's only right around the corner.

Pandora cries when Regulus asks her if she'll be his best man—or best of honor, as she rather swiftly decides on, for a title. Regulus says if it wasn't going to be Sirius, it had to be her, and James thinks he gets that. Pandora, Pandora, Pandora. She's always been there for them. She's one of the few people in this world that Regulus ever willingly handed his dagger off to. Someone who has altered his life, and someone he has been open and honest with, and someone he unquestionably loves.

With Pandora, in Regulus' lineup, he has Rodolphus, Dorcas, and Lily. James has Sirius, Remus, Mary, and Bingley. It's funny, really, how they bickered over people, and it worked out to be even on each side anyway. More than that, the truth is, they know it doesn't matter which side anyone stands on; this is not a fight, it's union, and everyone standing up there with them, on *either* side, supports it. Supports them.

People start showing up from all over, those that are early to help with putting it all together. Pandora and Sirius separate James and Regulus for a night, competing for which group can have the most fun. Pandora apparently gets Regulus *roaringly* drunk to the point that he's giggly and sweet, so much so that he sneaks out of his own party to go crash James', coaxing him away while everyone else frantically searches the district for them, but he and James are too busy riding the train in their locked compartment where they take the time to, ah, christen every single stop along the way, *including* the Hallow. They never leave the train, too caught up in each other, and they're both hungover when they do the following walk of shame after arriving home. James has to suffer Sirius scolding him for leaving without even fucking notifying anyone.

Dorcas arrives in a flurry of activity and fabric, never once telling them that she would be designing what they'd wear to their wedding, and seemingly appalled that they would dare to wear anything else. She tells them that she is their stylist, *always* that, and they can't argue. They don't even want to. The outfits are lovely and bold, James in a suit-dress that has a train, the skirt flaring at his hips; Regulus in a corset-vest with a cape that goes off into a train the same length as James'.

Every single little thing is going just as Regulus planned, right down to the flower arch that's meant to frame them at the altar, a large project James has been working on rather studiously and can't shut up about. Regulus has listened to him list the flowers and what they represent, paired with what they mean; those that are for peace and remembrance, and the one that means *forever mine* , all these fun little facts that generally don't really stick out to Regulus, because for him, it's as simple as *ooh, pretty flower.*

However, the details matter to James, so Regulus listens dutifully, generous with his attention no matter what else he's doing, and for how seriously he listens to the things James is passionate about, James always ends up feeling like he has to kiss Regulus, or he'll just fucking *die.* There's something about someone you love caring about your passions just because you do; it makes James melt with this overwhelming surge of affection. He can barely stand it, most days. Feels like he'll suffocate from it, and so he turns to kissing Regulus like that'll help him catch his breath. Spoiler alert, it does not. It leaves him breathless every time, and yet, and yet.

They do a lot of that, in the lead up to the wedding. Kissing. Short kisses. Long kisses. Light kisses. Deep kisses. A kiss in passing, and a kiss that stops them right in their tracks. A kiss in the middle of laughter, and a kiss mid-argument so intense that a kiss doesn't make sense. They kiss so much that James is pretty sure he knows Regulus' mouth better than his own, and it's this relentless, unending sort of hunger for each other that they can't shake themselves free of. Not that they're trying very hard, to be fair. James is nowhere near starved of Regulus, but he knew what it was to be; you can't put someone who knows what it is to be hungry in a buffet and not expect them to eat.

So, perhaps this is why the wedding creeps up on James. Too busy with flowers, and kissing, and letting Regulus handle all the plans. Then, naturally, life throws a curveball at them; or maybe it's better to say Sirius does, because he does something Regulus could never have planned for, or James for that matter.

"Stay right here. Do *not* move," Sirius orders, after dragging James and Regulus out of their house, only to take them across the street—not to go inside, but to go to the backyard. He holds his hands up to them, then whips around and dives into his shed that's really still his, even if half the things inside have been moved into the forge now.

James glances over at Regulus, who is—as usual—scowling. He was in the middle of working out some sort of shift in the schedule, and he's clearly agitated that Sirius has pulled him away from what he was doing. James is just about the only person he'll tolerate pulling him away from anything, likely because James is pulling him somewhere private so they can shut the rest of the world out and get lost in each other.

"Sirius, hurry the fuck up!" Regulus snaps.

"Don't rush me!" Sirius retorts from inside, his voice muffled, but his excitement palpable. "James, entertain him, will you?"

James breaks out into a grin. "Yeah, okay!"

"That is *not* what I meant," Sirius complains when he steps back out of the shed five minutes later to find James heartily making out with Regulus, hands in his hair, wrapped all around

him, the whole shebang. "For fuck's sake, will you two cut it out? I'm not joking! I want to show you something!"

"You *said* for me to entertain him," James counters, burying his smile against Regulus' cheek, so pleased to be there.

"I meant for you to shut him up!"

"I *did.* This is my favorite way to shut him up."

Sirius makes a noise of agitation while Regulus laughs at him, just as pleased as James is. "Oh, whatever. Just—come in here. If you two can stop sucking face long enough to let me show you this, I'd appreciate it."

"Later," Regulus whispers in James' ear, much to James' delight, then he pulls away, less to James' delight. "Alright, what is it, and why is it in a shed?"

"Okay, so!" Sirius perks up, back to excitement all over again as he leads them into the shed. They don't go far. He stops almost instantly and waves them over to something tall and wide under a sheet. "I thought, since you're getting married in three days, I'd go ahead and give this to both of you. I may have—I mean, I know no one likes remembering the arenas, but—well, just take a look."

Three days rings in James' ears for a second. He knows he's getting married in three days, yet it still manages to steal his breath. Time is so… It's difficult, for James, to measure it or feel it the way others do. *Three days* is a concept that only exists in snapshots, a whole lifetime between one *three days* and the next, yet a mere blink. It feels like just yesterday that they were dancing by a fire and agreeing to *get* married, so getting married as soon as three days feels fucking surreal. Like a dream, one that was out of reach for so long that, with it so close, it hardly even feels possible.

Someday, possibly as soon as three days, James will feel as if he's been married to Regulus for ten years. Someday, possibly ten years down the road, James will feel as if he's three days

away from marrying the man he loves. There is no rush, and there is no wait. Either way, they're making it down that aisle to each other eventually.

James isn't ever going to know their anniversary, but Regulus won't hesitate to remind him, and in the end, that's all that matters. If the seasons won't tell James, or his glasses, or his cane, then someone who loves him will.

What more does he need?

"Can I…?" James checks as he steps up and reaches out to the sheet, waiting to pull it off. The shed is Sirius', always has been, and no one goes in it. No one touches his things without express permission. It's just a respect thing, a boundary, because building is so very important to him.

"Yeah, go ahead. It's yours and Regulus'," Sirius whispers, nodding. "I made it for both of you."

After a beat, James tugs on the sheet, letting it drip down and pool on the floor, revealing what's underneath. The first thing that James registers is the wood, a rich mahogany that James recognizes easily, considering it's what a few of the canes Sirius has built him are made out of.

James blinks. A bookshelf. One taller than him, the top shelf just within his reach, closed off with a carved roof that's engraved with quite possibly the most detailed flowers James has ever seen. Each shelf has dividers on a track, showing that they can slide or be removed entirely. The whole thing is smooth and shiny, blatantly luxurious, and very well-crafted. It's clear that the crafter put a lot of love into this.

It takes James a second. Maybe three. Maybe ten.

And then—

"We have a bookshelf. Sirius built us a bookshelf, and you have the top shelves because you're taller, and I have the lower shelves because I keep all my journals on the very bottom."

James feels a lump form in his throat. He can't help it, the rush of emotion that crashes through him. *You know that other life? The one where we could have been happy together? Where we're not a great, big tragedy?* James had said. *Tell me something about it,* James had said. Regulus did, Regulus told him about this, and so much more. All these things—all of them left to another life, not this one, because they didn't get it in this one.

They were wrong. They were so fucking wrong.

Regulus has drifted forward, eyes wide with child-like wonder, something so painfully innocent there in his expression. His fingers run across the wood tenderly, with care, and his voice is so soft when he whispers, "This is beautiful, Sirius. How long have you been working on this?"

"Ah, well, I actually started it after your first arena, when we all got back," Sirius murmurs.

"We weren't together then," James croaks, staring at him with his eyes stinging. "Regulus and I—we weren't together, and we didn't even know if we would be, but this—it's our bookshelf. The one—it's the one we talked about in the arena, isn't it?"

"It is," Sirius confirms.

Regulus glances back at him. "You didn't know we'd get together. You didn't know we'd end up here."

Sirius gives a small shrug and smiles. "Yeah, I did."

James is—crying. Stupidly, happily, helplessly. Crying and laughing and existing in this one moment, along with every other moment in his life, and all those he hasn't made it to yet. So

much love threaded throughout each one that it's easy to get lost in, but that's okay; they're all good places to be.

Regulus is so enthralled with the bookshelf that James is the one who gets to Sirius first, nearly tackling him to the floor, breathing in and out of time with him. Sirius holds him, and laughs, and rocks in place with him.

"Thank you," James chokes out, for so much, for so many things. For the breath in and out of their lungs. For leaving and for coming back. For loving them all and for saving them all; he saved them all, they all saved each other, and they got here. Here they are. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

It's here, like this, with Sirius holding onto him and Regulus tracing their bookshelf behind him with awe that James realizes why he was wrong to ever think there was a change he could go through that would ever cost him the things that can never be taken from him. Things change, and time warps with it, just as they do, but life—all lives are what they make it.

That other life is this one. This life is that one. All their lives have even a split second of joy, and hope, and effort. It doesn't matter what life it is; James knows that, in every single one, they have so much love to give, and so much love granted to them. Even if for only a moment, and that one moment can make any life worth living. Despite all the grief. Despite all the pain. Despite all the loss. Because there's love. Because there's a bookshelf. They do get it. They have it. They *make* it, and people who love them help make it, too.

Sometimes, it takes a village. Sometimes, it takes a war.

All it takes, in the end, is time.

~•~

Regulus has an ever-growing dagger collection, and Sirius is almost mostly to blame for this, because Sirius will make him daggers in the forge when he wants to try a technique he never has before, or use new materials, or just keep his hands busy between projects when no one

has requested chairs for their patio, or new hinges for their doors, or all the odds and ins that people can think of when placing orders.

Of course, Regulus has *the* dagger. Bellatrix's dagger, the one that killed or hurt a lot of people, including Tom Riddle and Albus Dumbledore. Regulus keeps it well-maintained, as well as put up in a display case on the wall, separate from the rest of his collection. The rest are now in his desk drawers, replacing where all his journals used to be, because now those reside on the bookshelf in their living room downstairs.

Regulus has cleaning kits, as well as dagger sleeves, and okay, so *maybe* he has a tiny obsession with them. It's not even that much different from his love of flowers, except for how one is rather cute while the other is…ah, quite dangerous, actually. In any case, Regulus has reached a point in his life where he doesn't sleep with a dagger under his pillow or in his hand—it would make James uncomfortable, surely, so Regulus has made sure not to—and he's even okay with not carrying a dagger on him at all times. He does, however, have targets set up in the backyard (not close to James' flowerbeds), and he regularly goes out to toss daggers at them when the urge strikes, which it does often. And, if he's not writing at his desk, he's almost always just sitting there, going through the whole process of cleaning and sharpening and maintaining his collection.

He tries not to do this around James, if he can help it, because he gets it. He really does get why James would have discomfort around daggers. For fuck's sake, he was *stabbed.* And just how many times did Regulus put a dagger to his throat? He hasn't done it since—fuck, the first arena? Why wouldn't daggers just be a reminder of that, of how harsh Regulus was then, of all the pain and trauma James experienced *in* the arena?

So, he's been careful, and it's usually something he does when James is at the school, working. Today, however, due to the ever-growing collection Regulus has decided to blame Sirius for, there's a slight miscalculation in how long it's going to take to maintain them. This is partially just because it's almost a meditative state for Regulus, something calm and repetitive that he could easily do in his sleep. With his wedding coming up tomorrow, it's a good way for him to unwind.

He maybe gets a bit caught up—which *is* Sirius' fault for giving him so many daggers in the first place—and this means he's still right in the middle of it, lost in a peaceful little trance, when James comes stumbling into their room, already chattering away about his day.

Very swiftly, James' chatter comes to a halt, and Regulus feels oddly as if he's been caught doing something he shouldn't. It's the notable silence, breaths held, and Regulus is *ashamed.* Oh, for fuck's sake, he's acting like he's carrying on a fucking affair behind his fiance's back —with *daggers.*

This is so stupid.

Regulus clears his throat and begins putting each dagger in their special-made holster. "How was your day, James?"

"Good," James says faintly, "and getting better…"

"Right, well, just—just give me a moment, and I'll finish up here, and we can—"

"No! No, hey, no rush."

"Won't take long," Regulus assures him, struggling not to groan when James hurries over to the bed, sitting on the edge of it and watching him avidly. "Really, James, I'm putting them away. Nothing to worry about. You can go on downstairs, and I'll meet you there in…five minutes, tops."

"I'd rather stay, thanks," James counters swiftly, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Regulus picks up his pace, mildly agitated that he's careless under the scrutiny, opening drawers to dump the sheathed blades in with none of his usual organization. James makes a small sound. "Wait, but you're—oh, you're putting them away."

"Yes, obviously," Regulus snaps, trying not to get frustrated with him, or maybe the whole situation, but he can't help it.

He doesn't blame James. Of course he doesn't, and he'd never be angry at him for what he's afraid of, but it does sting a little that he'd ever feel worried around *Regulus.* There are times that Regulus is in the bathroom while James is in the shower, because they're having a

conversation or because he's brushing his teeth or just to look at James while he's naked and wet (truly a sight to behold, just as an aside), but he's never scared that James is going to drag him into the shower or anything. And, really, if Regulus was afraid of flowers, he wouldn't go linger around James while he's tending to them.

This is one of Regulus' hobbies. They're getting married, so they have to find some sort of compromise, right? Regulus is more than willing to keep the daggers away from James, and has been out of simple courtesy, but James is making that a little difficult by placing himself around them on his own.

"You missed one," James mumbles after Regulus has slammed all his drawers shut and stood up.

Sure enough, there's a lone dagger towards the corner of the desk farthest from them, and the holster for it seems to have gotten lost. Huffing, Regulus picks it up with the intention to toss it in a drawer and deal with it later, stretching over his chair to grab it, and then he has it, and then James has him.

"Shit—James!" Regulus blurts out, possibly yelping a little as James tugs on him recklessly, pulling him back and off balance. Regulus stumbles, holding the dagger up high, away from them both, as James pulls him close. "The—"

"I missed you, love," James cuts in, grinning as he hooks his hand behind Regulus' knee, outright urging him into his lap. With one hand in the air and the other barely keeping his balance on James' shoulder, it's difficult to pull away—not that Regulus is trying very hard, honestly, because the way James is looking at him—ah, yes, Regulus knows that look. "We're getting married tomorrow. Let's celebrate."

"Yes, okay, just—" Regulus hisses between his teeth, eyes flying wide as James wraps both arms around him and falls back, tipping them both on the bed. "James!"

"It's okay, I've got you, come here."

"No, I know, but I have—I still have—"

"Yeah, there you go, put your leg there."

"Wait, fuck, I need to—"

In all the maneuvering to get on the bed properly, James never once gets hurt, because Regulus is keeping the dagger away from him, despite how difficult he's making it. James doesn't seem to care about the potential danger, rather caught up in helping Regulus straddle him, getting them situated, then surging up to capture Regulus' mouth with his own.

The moment James kisses him, Regulus wants, desperately, to pour all of himself into James, and doesn't even care if he's poison. James would take him gladly, he knows. Would take all of him, all the best and worst, and still be ready for more of either. Regulus can be anything as long as James is kissing him, touching him, and he's often nothing but a buzzing conduit of sheer want. Overcome with it. Gagging on it. Drowning in it, and happy to.

It's easy, as always, to get lost in James. So easy. It's so fucking easy that Regulus can't understand how they weren't doing it their whole lives. Why did they hold themselves back? Oh, take Regulus back to any point in time, and if only he had this treasure trove of touch to call his own, there would have been no room to believe tragedy could ever leave its mark.

James' palm is warm and cane-callused against the side of his neck, and Regulus wants to crawl into him. Loves him madly, wildly, passionately. He feels—oh, he *feels.* Nothing makes him feel the way James does, as much as James does, all lit up from the inside out with so much sensation and emotion like it all comes across more felt and louder with James there to translate it through him, and to him.

Regulus is sure he was born just to belong to James.

Regulus also is sure that nothing can be as important as being with James right now, so he fumbles the dagger and loses it under the pillow somewhere and, frankly, can't be bothered to find it again, or even care. He's immediately focused only on James, and nothing else in this world matters.

With care, Regulus peels James out of his shirt, dragging over his head, the both of them so caught up that they don't care that his glasses get lost along the way. Regulus groans like a man in a drought as he runs his hands over James' chest, just feeling him, adoring every inch. James cups the back of his neck and drags him back into a kiss, obsessed with his mouth as he usually is. Regulus fuels his obsession, biting his bottom lip hard enough that he moans, because that's how he likes it. He likes being caught between Regulus' teeth, and Regulus wants nothing more to keep him there.

Nonetheless, Regulus is not deterred, because his main goal now is getting James naked. James isn't very cooperative, far too busy trying to kiss, kiss, kiss and touch, touch, touch and more, more, more to really help Regulus fight with his pants. This is okay, because Regulus is a very good fighter and needs no assistance when he's this focused and determined. He can manage well enough on his own, and does.

James seems to pick up on the fact that he's stripped down while Regulus is woefully overdressed, and usually, he would complain about this—Regulus knows, he has before—but he gets preoccupied by watching Regulus lean over to slap frantically at the only drawer on the desk they both know and go into, one without a dagger, too full of what they need for sex, if they even make it this far at all. The plan becomes ever so much clearer, and James' eyes light up.

The thing is, most of the time, they don't even make it past hands and mouths. They're so greedy when they get started, and so easily caught up in one another, that it generally takes proper planning and genuine effort to go any further. When they do, it's Regulus more often than not that splays out and lets James take him apart, because James likes to make him squirm and likes to break past all his little barriers to see him stripped down to his most base responses, and Regulus—well, he likes to squirm and likes letting go for a bit.

But, of course, they've had sex in all ways, different ways, different positions. Everything James has done to and with Regulus, Regulus has done to and with James. It's not that James doesn't like it in reverse, because he does; it's just that he takes great pleasure in giving great pleasure, and he *really* enjoys the sounds Regulus makes when he's fucking him.

Regulus knows this, because James has told him, shamelessly, because James has exactly zero shame about—anything, pretty much. He's very at home in his body, coexisting with his desire with no trouble, and Regulus feels more comfortable just because of that. James has also made it very clear that he *does* like to be fucked, but good luck beating him to the punch, because he tends to get overeager. Regulus usually lets him, because it's not like they're not feeling good no matter what they do, but today, he reminds James that he's faster.

"Ooh, you're going to realign my *spiiine,"* James sing-songs, sounding utterly delighted before he laughs like there's a joke Regulus doesn't know. He's an idiot, truly. "I wonder if you could break me clean in half. Can you break me clean in half? Be a love and break me clean in half."

"You're so stupid," Regulus says.

"Yes, but I'm *your* stupid," James tells him, grinning.

"Unfortunately," Regulus mutters, like he wouldn't die before ever giving him up, as if he's not swift in sitting himself on the bed between James' legs. He has to fumble for a pillow for James' injured leg, letting him adjust it to where it won't hurt, and then they're off to the races, as that saying goes.

Regulus takes his time. He likes to when they're doing this, because the possessive part of his brain thinks they should just stay like this forever. James under him, chanting his name like a prayer, because that's all he knows. Like this, Regulus makes sure he is the only thing James knows, or feels, or thinks about. Him. Just him. It's intoxicating.

After, when James is at the point of begging—Regulus wants to give him everything, when he begs—that's when Regulus finally shuffles back to start peeling out of his clothes, and the redistribution of weight from the dip of the bed shows that taking the pillow he did for James' leg was the wrong choice, because the dagger proceeds to slide down the bed and comes to a halt right next to them.

James' hazy eyes latch onto it.

James' hazy eyes do not waver from it.

"Shit, sorry," Regulus blurts out with a wince, hastily kicking out of the rest of his clothes and shifting around to settle between James' legs, hoping to gather his attention away from the dagger with—well, him. And sex. Regulus and sex are shiny topics for James, so it

usually works, but the damn dagger apparently shines brighter, because James is still looking at it when Regulus leans over him. "James."

"Yeah?" James breathes out.

"Look at me, it's fine," Regulus murmurs, tilting his head to kiss him—and yes, that will always shine brightest, Regulus thinks. James sinks into that at the same time Regulus sinks into him, and the dagger has to become inconsequential then, surely, because James is clutching at him and sighing into his mouth and arching and *Regulus* forgets all about the dagger, but he forgets everything, to be honest. The whole world whites out, and it's just James, just the warmth of him.

But. Well, apparently not. *Apparently,* James can't forget the dagger, because when Regulus breaks the kiss and shifts to get situated, starting off slow and gentle as James deserves, James cranes his head to look at the dagger again. Keeps looking at it, mouth parted, eyes wide like he's seeing in an array of different dimensions as Regulus moves.

Yeah, no, James isn't letting the dagger go.

Regulus stops. James does look at him then, confused and mildly betrayed, a protest already on his lips. Regulus sighs and reaches out to grab the dagger, instinctively flipping it between his fingers as he always does, while saying, "Okay, I'm going to drop this on the floor so you don't have to worry—"

"Wait, fuck, *please* wait," James chokes out, his hand snapping out with a startlingly firm grip to catch Regulus' wrist where he was hovering his hand over the side of the bed.

"James?" Regulus asks, blinking. He's wary, but also very out of sorts at the moment, struggling to concentrate when all he wants to do is move his hips again.

"Can you—would you—" James stops. He swallows thickly, then licks his lips, a quick nervous tick that ends with a deep breath of courage. He folds his uninjured leg behind Regulus' waist, tugging at him to pull him in, and Regulus is lost in the thrill of sensation,

everything between his ears turning to static, so it's not his fault that he misses James easing his hand through the air, guiding it where he wants it to go.

James is more devious than *anyone* realizes, because Regulus doesn't even know how he ends up where he does. Hand on the bed by James' head, his hips flush against him, hovering over him with his last hand tucked under James' chin, where James put it, the dagger nestled right against his throat.

Regulus *watches* James' pupils grow until they're blown.

"Oh, you're joking," Regulus says, mouth dropping open.

"Not in the slightest," James replies, chest heaving.

"But—" Regulus gapes at him. "But you've been *stabbed."*

"I know, I know, I wish it had been by you," James practically whimpers, tilting his head back. "Can you just—love, *please—"*

Regulus blinks. A lot. He really thought—he actually thought that James was traumatized by the daggers, a bit. Sure, James has made comments here and there, but Regulus thought they were jokes. Okay. Okay, so—clearly, they were not.

This works out, though. It's honestly rather convenient, because Regulus is great with daggers. He knows how to handle them. Sure, he can do this. Easy, no problem.

"Yes, just—hey, focus on me for a second. Listen. Are you listening?" Regulus waits for James to blink some of the fog out of his eyes before giving a careful nod. "I'm not going to cut you. I have issues with blood, you know that."

"Okay. Okay, that's okay. This is—just this is good. It's good. Anything," James croaks, his voice strained.

"I have to focus and pay attention, so you can't touch me, or I'll get too distracted. Hands on the headboard."

"Oh, I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you so much."

"Don't let go, James. I mean it."

"I love you so fucking much. Oh, I—"

Regulus shuts him up after that. He—well, there's no other way to put it. He fucks James with a dagger to his throat, and really, considering all they've been through, perhaps it shouldn't be as good as it is. Or, considering how they started out before their first games, and through them, perhaps it was inevitable that they'd end up here, enjoying it this much.

Regulus likes it more than he was expecting to. He likes how much James likes it, and James *really* likes it. He likes making James feel good, and James clearly feels *really* good. He likes how James looks, too, which he should have seen coming. He's pretty like that, pinned to the bed with a dagger to his throat, so blissed out that he looks like he might cry.

Due to the fact that Regulus has issues with blood and also has no desire to properly hurt James, there's no actual cutting, but he knows that he could. He knows, now, that James would let him and would like it, even. They can work out something in the future, maybe, but for now, this will do. It does do, in fact, because Regulus knows exactly how much pressure to exert to press the blade in without breaking the skin, and he isn't shy about dragging the tip up, over James' jaw, pushing the point into meat of his cheek and then scraping the edge along James' slack mouth while he moans and asks for more.

It's probably the fastest James has ever gotten off with him. He usually lasts longer, but this appears to unravel him entirely, until he's coming apart at the seams, and then he's a puddle spilled out in their bed, slumped like all of his strings have been cut. Regulus couldn't really get off, too focused on James, but he's close enough that he can drop the dagger to the floor

now that it's exhausted its uses, then fold into James, lick the whimpers right out of his mouth, and follow swiftly behind.

Regulus has it in mind to tease James afterwards, except James is basically high, and also clingy, and sort of just…out of it. In all honesty, Regulus briefly worries that he *has* broken him.

"James, are you alright?" Regulus asks quietly.

"M'great," James rasps. "Fuckin' fantastical."

James is a mess, actually. He needs—he has needs and seems to not care about any of them in the least, so Regulus tends to them for him. Makes him drink some water. Coaxes him clean. Gets him back into clothes. They end up in bed together, once they're both settled; James is so lax and calm that Regulus is pretty sure he's going to fall asleep.

Regulus cards his fingers through James' hair, letting James lay all over him like a blanket, face tucked into his throat as he breathes deeply, steadily, easily. Regulus thinks he *has* fallen asleep until he eventually speaks up.

"Hey, Reg?"

"Hm?"

"Can we do that again?" James mumbles.

Regulus huffs a laugh and says, "Yeah, baby, we can do that again," which earns him the feeling of James grinning against his throat. Regulus feels that grin slowly soften, turning slack, and eventually James does drift asleep right there against him.

Well, that's one way to spend the night before a wedding.

~•~

James hasn't been allowed to see Regulus all day. Everyone is running around to get the final touches in place, and James has been rather rudely forced to stay away from Regulus, as well as vice versa. Tradition, or something.

"The hunger games were tradition, too," James grumbles, fidgeting restlessly with the swoop of his flared skirt down by his hip. "Fuck tradition, I say. Can't I just—"

Sirius swats his hand away. "No, you can't, and leave that be. Dorcas will kill you if you tear it."

"I just want to see him," James says, strained.

"You'll see him when he's walking down the aisle," Sirius tells him, grabbing him by the shoulders to swivel him around. He has a slight frown on his face. "You're—genuinely upset."

"Yes," James confirms. "I want to see him, Sirius."

"I—fuck, James, they're never going to let you in the room with him. Lily *and* Dorcas are guarding it," Sirius says.

James groans. "Oh, come on, between us, Remus, and Mary, we can absolutely get in there."

"Yeah, by *force,* and is that really how you want to kick off your wedding? Busted knuckles and bruises? Possible gunshots?"

"No one has a gun at my wedding."

"I'm, like, ninety-nine percent sure that Lily has a gun *everywhere*. I swear I saw her pull one out of her fucking bra one time, James, I'm not even joking. She's mental."

"Sirius."

"Hey, okay, hey," Sirius says, responding to the urgency in James' tone by bringing his hands up to James' face, cradling James between his palms. "Talk to me. What is it?"

"I want to see him."

"Yes, you keep saying. It's just—ah, why?"

James swallows and says nothing, wishing Sirius hadn't asked.

"James," Sirius murmurs, "I can't help if you won't tell me what's wrong. Whatever it is, it's what I'm here for, right?"

"Yeah, but—Regulus is your brother."

"He is that, but *I'm* your best man. I'm your best friend, James. This is literally my job, so lay it on me."

"What if—" and James stops, grimacing, feeling his stomach twist. Sirius waits, no judgment in his expression, and James still can't meet his eyes as he continues. "It's—I know it's stupid, but what if he doesn't go through with it?"

"With marrying you?" Sirius asks quietly.

"Yeah," James whispers, ridiculously ashamed. It's just. It's a fear, he thinks, one that has had a lot more time to fester than the opposing relief. All those years Regulus spent turning away from him, turning him away, claiming to hate him and ignoring him and *not wanting him.* He knows—he does know what it really was, after Regulus has said it, and shown it; just the same, that's ten years of buildup for these insecurities, compared to the three that counteract them. Regulus wanted him once, and then he stopped. He could again.

It's *so* fucking stupid, because James knows Regulus loves him, and wants him. He knows that like he knows Regulus' eyes. He knows that like he knows his home in the dark. He knows that like he knows the handle of his cane and the weight of his glasses on his face. He *knows.* He has no doubts, and yet the stupid fucking fear exists within him anyway.

"If he can't go through with marrying you," Sirius ventures cautiously, "what will seeing him before the wedding change?"

"I don't know," James admits, and it almost comes out as a whimper. "Maybe he'll remember he loves me?"

Sirius' face softens, the pads of his thumbs pressing into the bolts of James' jaw. "Trust me on this, no one forgets someone they love. We can lose our minds, lose every sense of this world, get it all mixed up until we think things are what they aren't—but we don't forget love. I promise you, he hasn't forgotten. Even if he couldn't make it down that aisle, for whatever reason, he wouldn't forget that he loves you."

"Okay, but—but what if he *can't* make it down the aisle?"

"So what if he can't? Will you forget you love him if he doesn't?"

"No," James croaks.

"Well, there you go," Sirius murmurs. "I don't really think your love for each other hinges on reaching the altar, James. I know you'll wait for him there, so just trust that he'll come to you."

That's honestly like a slap to the face. James gives a violent blink, feeling the fear reframed in his mind with six simple words. *Trust that he'll come to you.*

James does. He trusts Regulus without wavering, with everything, with himself. He trusted Regulus when all evidence suggested he shouldn't, and he'll trust him with this, too. He'll trust him to his last breath, and what's there to be afraid of, then?

All at once, instantly, James relaxes. He just—goes loose, all of his jitters fleeing in the face of hope. This leaves him with an earnest desire to see Regulus still, just for a new reason. Oh, he wants to kiss that man.

"Let me see him," James says breathlessly, surging forward for the door, caught quickly by Sirius. "Hey, no, it's fine. I'm fine, I just—I love him. I—Sirius, I really fucking love him."

"I know," Sirius replies through a grunt of laughter, hauling him back a few steps.

"I'm going to love him until I *die,"* James announces, practically bouncing on his toes, eager now. "And then beyond that, to whatever comes next. I bet he looks so beautiful. Can't I just steal a little peek? Just—"

Sirius snorts and blocks the door. "Not on your life, James. This is one tradition there's no need to break."

"I'm marrying that man. I'm marrying him," James states in a fit of wonder, then it feels like his legs are giving out; he's so excited he's shaking, so he has to find a chair. "Oh, fuck, Sirius, I'm marrying Regulus."

"Yes, that is what this whole day is about."

"This is the best day of my life."

"Thought that'd be when you met me, actually."

"Sorry, this tops it."

"As your best friend, bad answer," Sirius scolds, then pauses for dramatic effect. "As his older brother, best answer."

James gazes at him, chest pulsing with warmth. "I'm going to take such good care of him, do you know that? I'm going to be so good to him, Sirius."

"I know," Sirius whispers, slightly misty-eyed, and he clears his throat. "Yeah, I never doubted that. Not once. There's no one I could ever trust more with him than you."

"Fuck." James struggles not to cry, then holds his breath so he won't scream, full to the brim with so much emotion he can barely stand it. Again, helplessly, he springs up out of the chair and tries for the door. "Can I just—"

Sirius laughs at him fondly, but doesn't let him leave.

James never once stops trying.

~•~

Regulus and James get married on a warm day in May, under the gentle blanket of sunshine, in front of only their closest friends and families, surrounded by flowers and a lot of love.

It's a small, private wedding with every detail carefully in place, maintained, no mix-ups and no messes. Everything that could go wrong on this day doesn't; there is no surprise rain, all

the food is perfect, everyone respects the rule to not take pictures or videos, and no part of this day is leaked for anyone to see who wasn't already here to bear witness.

Effie walks James down the aisle alone, the open space on his other side where his father is meant to be a gap noticed by all, but James leans on his mother and lets the memory of his father warm him, and they're both there, every step of the way.

Sirius walks Regulus down the aisle, and no one knows this except them, but before the wedding started, Sirius gently fixed Regulus' tie and whispered to him that if, at any point, he wanted to stop or run away, Sirius would make a scene for him if that's what it came to. Regulus had laughed at him at the time, mildly appalled that Sirius would even suggest it, and then halfway up the aisle, he comes to a screeching halt.

"Regulus?" Sirius whispers, and Regulus can't breathe.

They're all looking at him. They're all watching. Effie is there in the front row, swiveled in her chair with her smile never fading. Other people are sinking down in their chairs as the secondhand embarrassment hits, because what's more embarrassing than a wedding everyone's been waiting on coming to a dead halt because one half of the couple is frozen in place and debating running in the opposite direction? Yeah, it doesn't really get much more humiliating than that, does it?

But James… He doesn't look humiliated. He's just standing there patiently, so patient, like he will stand right there for as long as it takes Regulus to reach him. Ten seconds, ten minutes, or ten years—it doesn't matter, because that's the face of a man who hasn't ever given up and won't start now. Regulus is stubborn? No, no, there's no one in this world more stubborn than James Fleamont Potter.

"Reggie?" Sirius mumbles. "What are we doing? Running? Do you need a minute? Should I faint? I can pretend to faint; just say the word, and I'll pretend to faint."

Regulus shakily jerks his head, unable to speak, but he *desperately* doesn't want Sirius to pretend to faint. He doesn't really know what he's doing, why he stopped, why he can't move. He doesn't know what he needs right now.

It's just. It's a hell of a time to remember all the things wrong with him, isn't it? To think about the scars, inside and out, and how he got them, and how they've faded as much as they're ever going to, but they'll never fully go away. To think about how he's mean and miserable and can't take a shower. To think about how one of his greatest sources of comfort is a blade, and the fact that he doesn't care about the world or most of the people in it, and the way he can still taste blood in his worst moments. To think about the pain he is responsible for and the deaths he has caused, either just by circumstances or by his own hand. To think about how he loves, and how he's never really been the best at it. It's a hell of a time to stand in front of the man he's been dreaming of marrying since he was ten and think about how, maybe, he doesn't deserve to.

James looks so, so beautiful before him. So beautiful Regulus could cry, and will cry, probably, because *how?* How can one person be that beautiful on the outside as much as they are on the inside, and how the fuck did Regulus trick him into thinking the same thing when he looks at him? How can he look at Regulus and think of anything good at all?

Regulus is not brave. He is, in fact, a coward. Any act he has committed that could be labeled as bravery was always rooted either in spite or survival, anger and fear, lashing out and simple self-preservation. He is a Black, at his core, in a way Sirius is not, in the worst way, and it doesn't matter what name he takes; he will never be able to shed that weight.

His parents, if they were alive, would not be at this wedding, and that shouldn't matter to him. That shouldn't hurt him. But it does. But it always will. He is not Sirius; it is not enough that Effie is here, lit up with approval and delight. But Sirius is Sirius, and so it is enough that he is here, clamped down on Regulus' arm like he will drag him away or drag him up the aisle, whatever Regulus asks him to do, and in the meantime, simply hold him up so he won't fall.

And James is here, at the end of the aisle, standing so bravely and with no shame in front of everyone, happy to marry a man that the whole world knows is a perpetual fuck-up, as if it does not strike him to care that Regulus is most likely going to fuck up again and again and *again* for the rest of their lives, because to him, it doesn't matter how many times Regulus fucks up as long as he continues to try.

Regulus stands in place as the seconds tick by.

One, and he remembers the day he came to the door to meet Sirius' new best friend. A lanky, knobbly-kneed boy with lopsided glasses and a smile that Regulus felt warm him, all the way

from his chest to his face. Oh, how he blushed upon meeting James Potter. Enamored instantly.

Two, and he remembers the day he tossed a snowball at the back of James Potter's head. *Look at me, look at me, please see me.* He wanted so badly for James to just notice him, and more than that, see him with no desire to ever look away again. Pay attention, James, all this juvenile love is real, and it's yours.

Three, and he remembers the day they sat in the courtyard, when Sirius was fighting on the screen. Regulus felt as if he was falling, and then James' hand was in his, and it felt, for a moment, as if he was caught before he could hit the ground. Just for a moment. Sirius killed someone that day, and the ground was cold when he landed.

"Regulus," James says from the end of the aisle, his voice soft and his eyes softer, locked on him like no one else is here.

Four, and he remembers dramatically tossing every journal with James Potter's name inside it into a fire, a burning hatred building in his bones, resentment setting him ablaze. Sirius was home, and Sirius wasn't home, and Sirius wouldn't see him. Sirius didn't want him, and neither did James. Regulus was the scorned, the unwanted, the lost and lonely watching paper turn to ash with first love's first heartbreak scalding him from the inside out. He swore never again to give James Potter the satisfaction of caring about him. He was a liar, even then.

Five, and he remembers how it felt to stand at what should have been their last reaping, hearing James' name called first. That lump that formed in his throat was all the tears he had yet to let himself shed over the bright boy the world was determined to dim. He deserved better than that. Even then, from that moment, though Regulus didn't know it, he heard James' name and hoped he would get to come home. For James, he always found it in himself to hope.

Six, and he remembers the crimson river, remembers the day he realized his feelings were all twisted from hate to love and love to hate, one-in-the-same and worth drowning for. He would die for James. Even before he ever felt the intimacy of his touch, his lovely loving hands, Regulus would have died for him. Still would. It'd be easier, for him, if there was a crimson river at the end of the aisle to toss himself into in the name of love. For him, it's easiest to show love when it's a tragedy.

"Reg," James calls quietly, speaking to him and no one else, with a deep breath in and deep breath out. *You'll always be my Reg,* he said once. Even here, on pause at their wedding they were both so eager to get to, that apparently remains true.

Seven, and he remembers each and every flower on his doorstep, left behind by a man who hadn't dimmed a bit, despite all the shadows he carried with him. A flower to get out of bed. A man through a window to give a flower to. No one was climbing then, but maybe they were both growing.

Eight, and he remembers a promise broken in the name of love. Liar, liar, he was such a liar. He meant to be; it was cruel, and to this day, he cannot regret it. But it was him, of anyone, who taught the man who hated nothing what love could feel like when hate infected it. Love and hate, hand-in-hand and at two ends of the spectrum. For each other, they've done both.

Nine, and he remembers that he loves James in every way he knows how, and would do anything for him, and hasn't done nearly enough while simultaneously doing more than anyone else ever has. James deserves the very best, and Regulus is the one he wants. To him, Regulus knows, there's no one better.

James looks at him like he can't look away, and doesn't want to, ever. He looks at him, like he sees him, and he does, and he says, softly, "You're hesitating, love."

Ten, and Regulus' breath punches out of him. He swallows, dry-mouthed and so in love that it's the most terrifying thing he's ever experienced, but fear makes us human, and Regulus has never been more human, or more alive, than he is in this moment. He is shaking, and like from hate to love and how they were always the same anyway, Regulus' desire to run away reveals itself as the desire to run right to him.

In the end, Regulus is the one urging Sirius up the aisle.

"Slow down, we're going, we're going," Sirius mutters with a chuckle, patting his arm placatingly.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," Regulus chants, nearly tripping over his own feet to get to James faster. He all but snatches away from Sirius to try and get to him, but Sirius smacks the back of his hand and grips his wrist, huffing and making a big production of passing Regulus off to James, who is beaming and grinning and dangerously close to laughing. Regulus forgets anyone else is here with James right there; they all disappear out of view, even Sirius, and Regulus clings to James' hands for dear life. "Sorry, baby. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," James murmurs.

"Had a moment."

"I saw."

"You didn't look worried."

"Mm, I knew you'd make your way to me eventually."

Regulus wheezes out a high-pitched laugh, shaking from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet, because he's never been happier and didn't know happiness like this even existed in the first place. "Are you sure you still want to do this? Marry me, I mean. It's not too late to back out, you know. I'm almost positive no one would blame you."

"And you call me stupid," James teases, eyes sparkling behind his glasses. "Love, there's nowhere else in any world I'd rather be. This is exactly what I want to do. What about you?"

"Yes," Regulus breathes out. "Yes, please."

And so, on a warm day in May, with a war in their rear view and a life of love on the horizon, they get married. You might wish to know the details, and every single second from start to finish; you might wish to know what they say in their vows and what Regulus' poem to James reads; you might wish to know what they are thinking, and how they feel when they say I do, and what that first kiss as husbands mean to them.

You might wish to know a lot of things about their wedding, and their love, but frankly, it's no one's business but theirs.

Chapter End Notes

god, i can't believe they're MARRIED 😭

okay, let's start from the top! sirius being dramatic, i love him dearly, he means so much to me.

so there's this scene from fleabag—which, again, ive never seen the show (i plan to, ive been informed i will Love it), but i have seen tiktoks about it and sort of soaked up knowledge about it like osmosis, so i know a few things. anyway, do yall know that scene where it's like, "you're the only person i would run through an airport for" and it's two sisters? yeah, that's the vibe of regulus about to run out in the rain to go see sirius :(

YOU DONT UNDERSTAND OKAY I LOVE THEM 😭 like the fact that regulus is very hyperaware of his aquaphobia, but he was really about to just launch himself into the rain is so!!! sirius is the only person he would run through the rain for!!!! sobbing, yanking at my hair, sliding down a wall about them ALWAYS

anyway, the fact that they're going into business together with the forge barty grew up in!!! im very soft about that, both because it's a homage to barty, and because it's just sirius and regulus having a family business 😭

the jegulus fight for sirius takes me OUT. they're so dramatic, it's actually ridiculous. sirius was so entertained pls 😭 remus, on the other hand, was not. i hate to say it, but cr jegulus are absolutely that couple everyone sighs when they hear are coming to a party, like oh great its THEM. pour one out for regulus who barely had any friends left to have a proper best man/best of honor 😔✊

tonks!!! narcissa!!! andromeda!!! family bonding! and then aberforth!!! he officiates the wedding!!! he also just decides regulus will inherit everything of his after he dies and handle his ashes/burial 😭 its a good show of growth for both of them, because regulus is there to say "im not responsible for my brother's choices, nor is he mine" which is GROWTH!!! and aberforth sets aside his pride to actually do something he wants because someone matters to him, past all the complications/hurt, which is also GROWTH!!! very proud of both of them <3

the bookshelf!!!! that scene is so, so sweet to me. like, just how amazed regulus is and how emotional james is :(STOP SIRIUS ALWAYS BELIEVED IN THEIR HAPPY ENDING 😭 ILL FUCKING CRY THATS SO SWEET

ah, right, the Knife Kink Scene. well. all ill say about that is: good for james, it's what he deserves 😌

JAMES' LITTLE BIT OF WEDDING JITTERS BEFORE THE WEDDING!!!! AND SIRIUS BEING THERE FOR HIM TO HELP WITH HIS ANXIETY!!! ahhhh, more growth. i remember before the first interview where they just. sort of assumed james would be a-okay, ya know? and you'd assume Mr. Romance would be a-okay before his WEDDING, except he wasn't, and sirius noticed and listened and helped :(THEY MEAN SO MUCH TO ME

the wedding!!! the fact that regulus just. Stops. no bc james is better than me, because i would have instantly perished from sheer humiliation. like imagine the person you're marrying stopping halfway down the aisle like 🧍 IM SORRY I KNOW I WROTE IT BC IT WAS VERY NECESSARY FOR THE SCENE BUT IT MAKES ME CACKLE EVERY TIME I THINK ABOUT IT 😭

but sirius is a real one for offering to faint. i love him. and regulus going from 🧍 to 🏃 on his way up the aisle. he's so real, i would also sprint to james potter if he was the one i was marrying. i can't believe they got married!!! i know i wrote it, but im giggling and kicking my feet about it anyway. i love them so much <3

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-pandora being regulus' best of honor!!!
-regulus "emotional manipulation" black being emotionally manipulated by james
-narcissa and regulus having a lovingly antagonistic relationship
-the fact that regulus literally just sharpens and maintains daggers in his free time to MEDITATE, the freak 😭 this is why he scares people (but he's so real, it's actually so calming and methodical to sharpen daggers, like the repetitive motion etc etc, try it some time if you ever get the chance)
-regulus "regrets threatening james with his daggers" black being like you have a knife kink??? but you were stabbed???? and james "i thought you were flirting when you were doing that" potter being like yeah i was, and my only complaint was that it wasn't by you 😭 HELLO??? JAMES???
-regulus and james sneaking out of their bachelor parties to go ride the train all over and fuck in each location, the heathens
-dorcas designing their wedding clothes!!!
-lily having a gun on her always 😭
-effie not doubting regulus for a second when he stops in the aisle (her smile never fades 😭)
-"you're hesitating, love" — yeah, i cracked that one out again <3

(just wanna put a little note thanking most of everyone for being so kind/gracious these last few chapters, despite how rough they've been. i appreciate all the kind words and support more than you'll ever know!)

Everything

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death/murder/violence/war/torture etc (at this point, you know)
-brief depiction of dissociative amnesia (outside pov and over in a flash)
-references to past child abuse/neglect
-blood mention
-vague/brief depictions of childbirth (like, very little details, overall, bit still)

im 99% sure that's all the warnings needed, and most of it's angst-free anyway. this is a very epilogue-y chapter and spans an unidentified length of time, which—honestly—is the whole point to it. so, enjoy 🥰

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Life's a hard thing to describe, isn't it? Everything is a concept of which there are no words to properly explain. Where does it begin, and where does it end? What about all that's in between? What parts are the most important?

It's an arduous undertaking, but maybe it's a task that's best shown like memories made along the way, a simple series of snapshots.

Here, have some:

~•~

"You have to fuck me here."

"Sirius."

"You're contractually obligated. It's written in the stars."

"Sirius."

"I mean, *really* fuck me, too. Until I cry."

"Hi, Sirius," Lyall says, from the screen that Sirius has yet to notice, his voice mild with laughter carefully covered in it.

Sirius whips around, wide-eyed and horrified.

"I'm on the phone," Remus says, "with my dad."

"Nice to hear you two are settling in," Lyall offers, amused.

"Oh *no,"* Sirius whispers, then squeezes his eyes shut, covers his face with both hands, and slides down the length of the wall like his life is officially over, because he's the most dramatic person on the planet.

"He's dying inside, isn't he?" Lyall asks.

"Slowly," Remus confirms, and Lyall snorts, pulling Styx back when he attempts to lick the screen. Remus chuckles and shakes his head. "Right, well, I have to go, Dad. Apparently the stars have demands of me. Or just one, at least."

Sirius groans.

"Sure, sure. Bye, son," Lyall says, then raises his voice as his eyes sparkle with mirth. "Bye, Sirius!"

"Bye, Lyall," Sirius replies weakly, blushing so intensely that Remus could probably strike a match off him.

Remus puts his phone down when it blinks off, then dumps his chin in his hand, gazing at Sirius fondly. "So, where am I to fuck you until you cry?"

"Nowhere," Sirius declares mournfully, deflated on the floor like a popped balloon. "You're not to touch me again, because I am a disgrace. A naughty, filthy temptress corrupting your only chance at purity. I'm a siren, Remus, singing to you and ensuring your ruin, as is my nature."

"Sweetheart, get off the floor and come here."

"No, I'm never standing again."

"Okay, then crawl to me," Remus says.

Sirius opens his mouth, closes it, then stares at him. Remus stares back. The clock on the wall ticks. Sirius keeps looking at him, and he licks his lips unconsciously; his eyes do that thing where they get all dewey and glazed, and if his blush was fading before, it sure as shit isn't now.

Remus honestly doesn't expect Sirius to *actually* do it. Not really. He's never—it's not like that's something he's sat around and thought about, some secret desire where he's wanted to see Sirius fucking *crawl* to him, hands and knees on the floor of their home they're still making their own, the red in his cheeks spilling down his throat and under his collar, gaze fixed right on him and lips parted.

Yeah, Remus never thought about it, but Sirius does it anyway, and Remus will be damned if it's not one of the most attractive things he's ever seen in his life; he's watched this man catch a spear out of midair, so that's really saying something.

Sirius stops beside his chair to rest his chin on Remus' leg, gazing up at him under his eyelashes. When he speaks, it's soft and impossibly sweet. "Hi."

"Hi," Remus says, staring down at him, fixated. His brain has sputtered to a halt. Run out of gas. Broke the fuck down.

"Didn't think I'd do it, huh?" Sirius teases, lips curling up.

"Didn't think I wanted you to, until you did," Remus admits.

"Oh?" Sirius' smile stretches, not so innocent anymore. He braces both hands on Remus' thigh and lifts himself up, a gleam in his eye. A hum of satisfaction escapes him when he sways in and Remus does as well, automatic. "Well, whatever you want, my love. You know that."

"I want," Remus states, "to take you to bed."

"Ah, except for that." Sirius deflates, grimacing a little bit as he falls back on his haunches. "Shit, sorry, I'm being a tease."

"Mm, not in the mood?" Remus asks, not upset in the least. This is how it is, sometimes, and Remus never wants anything Sirius doesn't anyway, so it's not a problem. It should never, ever be a problem for anyone.

"At the moment, no, but I'm fully capable of making plans for when I am, and some day, Remus, you absolutely have to fuck me on this table," Sirius declares, reaching up to pat it.

Remus chuckles. "You and your obsession with sex on the furniture and appliances."

"It's not an *obsession—"*

"Last week, it was the washing machine."

Sirius huffs. "Stop fucking with me."

"Never," Remus replies, his voice warm.

Like a reflex, Sirius smiles, and he sort of tips himself forward to flop down on the floor and lay his head over on Remus' leg again. It's the least graceful Remus has ever seen him; he looks like someone spilled him out of a can all over the floor. With a ruthless affection clenching in his chest, Remus reaches down to start carding his fingers through Sirius' hair. Sirius hums.

The house is quiet. Secluded. It would be, as it's an old house out past the forge on the outskirts of the district, not too terribly far from the Victor's Village, but not too close either. Sirius doesn't know who lived here before, and neither does Effie, even. They said it's been empty as long as both of them can remember. Maybe Aberforth would know, but no one's bold enough to reach out to him for trivial matters such as that. It was easy enough to buy the land, and the house, and now it's theirs.

It's *theirs.* Remus loves it, despite the fact that the first time Regulus entered, he described it as *quaint,* with no small amount of judgement in his tone. To be fair, it *is* quaint, but that's precisely what Remus and Sirius love about it.

See, their home is a bit shabby. A bit of a fixer-upper. It's a house with old bones, a big backyard wrapped in a broken fence, and rotted wood out on front steps. The house comes with *projects,* and Sirius—likes that. He likes fixing things, likes to replace the wood out front and rewire the fence out back, likes to patch the roof and add new planes of glass to the shattered windows. It's a house, but it's a home they get to build. Well, mostly Sirius. Honestly, Remus doesn't do much, but he's helped Mary and Lily repaint rooms and such, which was fun. He also still likes to wash clothes and hang them out on the line in the backyard, soothed by the repeated motion of clipping on the clothespins, usually accompanied by Sirius and Stella running about or rolling around in the grass.

It's a lot of open space, which Remus really likes, too. There are times when he steps out on their back porch and just tips his face up to feel the wind through his hair, breathing in the scent of the honeysuckle that grows along the perimeter of the fence, opening his eyes to look around and see—nature. They aren't too far from the forest, so there's a lot of meadow between here and that treeline, so much green and brown and splatterings of color from the meadow flowers in bloom.

Remus likes that he can leave doors open and come and go as he pleases. He likes that he can just randomly take a walk whenever he wants, going anywhere and as far as he wants to, hearing the birds sing and letting his new home leave a lasting imprint in his mind, taking shape, something to settle in. He likes that he has the freedom to do anything, and really, all he ever wants to do is just—exist. Just *be.*

It was different back home in district twelve, for Remus, and he didn't even realize it. There was this gap between Remus who was home, and Remus who was made into a servant. Being back in twelve almost felt like erasing the latter just to be the former, but being here is something new. Remus who is free. That's all it is. A new freedom to embrace.

Besides, it also feels…more mature, somehow. Or like the next phase of his life. Just living with Sirius, having a home with Sirius, all on their own. At the start, when they made it back to district six, they stayed with Effie until Sirius made the house livable enough that they could move in, making sure there were no hazards and such. That took some time, and while Remus didn't mind living with Effie—neither did Sirius, and she certainly didn't—he can't deny that he loves having his own home, with Sirius, something that's irrefutably *theirs.*

It's definitely different, that's for sure. Remus and Sirius don't fight very much—or they *didn't,* back when they couldn't waste time on anything such as that, seizing every second that they could get and trying so fucking hard to make the most out of it, never taking it for granted. But it's *human* to take things for granted; it's nice, even, getting to have that leisurely sort of luxury of knowing they're not on a time limit, no more than anyone else, anyway. So, sometimes, they do fight.

Well, they don't fight like most couples, Remus doesn't think. He's seen James and Regulus have a go at each other; those two are fucking mental, and you'd think they'd want to kill each other if you didn't know how much they love each other. Even Mary and Lily fight, and that consists of sharp hisses under their breaths, cold silences, and clipped agreements to talk about it later when they're alone. That's mature in its own way, just the agreement to put a pin in their issues and work them out in privacy, unlike Regulus and James, who will go in circles

right in front of anyone, which Remus finds stupid and exhausting most of the time. Sirius finds it's hilarious.

But, for Remus and Sirius, it's…different. Odd enough that Remus has gotten the question more than once if he and Sirius ever fight at all. They do, yes, because Sirius is dramatic and *very* petty sometimes, while Remus sometimes gets the itch for a bit of chaos and has a habit of being passive-aggressive.

However, it's never a conversation that closes before they've made it to the resolution. Whatever it is they're upset about, they talk about it, in the end. Sure, they go through bickering and snapping at each other from time-to-time, but it never lasts long before they're shutting that down just to *talk.*

Remus thinks it's because of something unique only they really understand, at least as deep as they do. Remus went six years neither seen, nor heard. Sirius went over a fucking decade putting on an act, never known and never actually listened to. That manifests now, where neither of them have the desire to silence each other, or shut one another out.

Strange, really, what the worst things in your life can teach you.

In any case, they have their home. Their everything, as they imagined it. Well, alright, they don't have the spiral staircase, but that's because there's no second floor. They do have a back porch with a swing they use often enough. Neither of them anticipated the dog, but Stella fits right in. She loves all the open space as well, and the doggy-door Sirius installed that lets her come and go whenever. Most of the time, she's never too far from Sirius, but sometimes she's just resting on the porch, or chasing rabbits through the yard. She's out there now, but Remus can't hear barking, so the rabbits haven't come to terrorize her today. She's probably napping.

Sometimes, it strikes Remus that he's going to live here forever, until he's old, and Sirius will be with him. They have a life here; they're going to have a life here, and they're already making it. The life will change to new freedoms to embrace, and he'll get to, over and over and over.

Remus can see it, when he really looks. Laughter in the kitchen, exchanged smiles around clothes out on a line, lazy nights under the stars in the porch-swing Sirius built them. A dog that will run and run for years, until her joints ache, until she's gone after living a life so full

of love that there's nothing to be sad about. Furniture to stumble over and press against after their wedding, when they're married, having to break in every surface as husbands. Rooms they could put kids in.

"Hey," Remus whispers, hand sliding down to cup Sirius' face, under his chin, tilting his head up.

"Hi," Sirius replies, blinking at him, bemused smile in place.

"Yeah, hi," Remus says with a breathless laugh of exhilaration, and then he's urging Sirius up, guiding him with a hand under his chin. Sirius comes willingly, hands unfurling on Remus' thigh as he braces himself there and stretches up as far as Remus wants him to, until their faces are hovering close together. Remus drinks the sight of him in, something feeling swollen and hot under his ribcage, this strange impulse to tilt his head back and howl in triumph. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Hi," Sirius whispers, scanning Remus' face. "You look happy."

"I am," Remus tells him, rocking in close to cover Sirius' mouth with his own, kissing him. "I really am."

"Do I make you happy?" Sirius mumbles into his mouth, between kisses.

"Yes, you do," Remus confirms, then kisses him again.

"Is this the everything you wanted?" Sirius whispers, hand lifting to the back of Remus' head, keeping him there to ask for another kiss, and another.

"You're the everything I wanted," Remus admits breathlessly, hands in Sirius' hair, holding him there to give him anything he wants. Another, another, another. "It was you, it was always you, that's all it ever was. You, sweetheart."

Sirius makes a noise, excited and delighted, a giddy laugh spilling from his lips and through Remus' own, and then they're both laughing, and then they're both still kissing, and then they're both just sitting here in their home, with their everything, with their freedom—and the only thing, in the end, that was ever tragically inevitable and woefully pointless about them was how long they spent thinking they'd never get here.

And yet, here they are.

~•~

On slow days, Sirius likes to go to the market with Remus in district six, holding his hand and haggling with people he's known his whole life, perhaps showing Remus off like the proudest man alive. Remus almost always knows when he's gotten the urge to go out and waste a few hours there, only occasionally buying things here or there, because Sirius drags out his old leather jacket that still miraculously fits, and that's a pretty clear signal he wants to get out of the house.

Remus likes the jacket. Sirius knows this because the first time he put it on—waiting for so long out of the habitual fear that it wouldn't fit, especially after the war—Remus nearly snapped his neck doing a double-take, and that was the day they finally had their way with each other in a closet. Very cramped, but a lot of fun, Sirius can attest to that.

Anyway, they're out and about today, hands lazily linked between them, the hustle and bustle of the market a lovely bit of background noise as they stroll along. It's a slow day, a boring one, really, and not one either of them are expecting to be significant in any way.

Doesn't take very long for that to change. It starts here:

"Molly's pregnant *again,"* Sirius announces as they move together, and Remus' eyes get wide. Sirius gets it. It's like Molly started popping out babies and didn't stop. She already has three. "Yeah, Pandora called me yesterday to tell me. Guess what? She's pregnant with *twins* this time."

"Damn, Arthur," Remus mutters, eyebrows raised.

"Pandora said she and Arthur are happy. Tired, but happy," Sirius says, rolling his shoulders in a shrug. "That's all that matters, at the end of the day."

"Mhm."

"I just—I don't know. Kids, you know…"

Remus' lips twitch. "You're fishing."

"Pfft, no I'm not." Sirius pretends to be interested in a display of homemade jewelry, stealing glances at Remus out of the corner of his eye, but Remus has far more patience than he does. Sirius cracks in approximately ten seconds, huffing as he swivels around to face Remus. "Okay, fine, what about us?"

"What about us?"

"You know, what are we doing?"

"Perusing district six's market," Remus says lightly.

Sirius stops holding his hand, like a punishment. He crosses his arms. "You *know* that's not what I meant. Kids, Remus. We've never talked about it."

"We haven't talked about a lot of things," Remus replies.

"Other things aren't as…serious as this."

"Marriage isn't?"

"I don't think so," Sirius says slowly. "We'll get married, obviously."

Remus' eyebrows fly up. "Oh, will we?"

"Won't we?" Sirius asks, eyebrows furrowed. Remus stares at him, keeps staring at him, and Sirius thinks about it, thinks about it, thinks about— "Oh! Oh, I just—I went about that the wrong way, didn't I? Wait, scratch that. Pretend I never said it. I didn't say that. Who, me? No, never. Um."

"Sirius," Remus says, watching him look around with visible amusement, gaze soft.

Sirius snatches up a half-bent spoon for sale off the table, old and chipped, though the handle is intricately carved. He holds it up and says, "Okay, will you marry me?"

"What?" Remus wheezes, cracking up laughing immediately.

"It's—it's the first thing I grabbed—"

"You can't propose to me with a *spoon—"*

"Watch me," Sirius argues stubbornly, then goes to one knee, which makes Remus' eyes bulge, his laughter cutting out all at once. "Remus Lupin—"

"Sirius!" Remus hisses, hands darting out frantically to tug at his elbows, looking around furtively as people stare at them in blatant curiosity, his cheeks stained red. "You lunatic, you can't just—fuck's sake, are you *mad?"*

"You want to choose," Sirius insists, not budging. "You want the freedom to choose, so you want to be asked, even though we both know we'll get married someday, so I'm asking."

Remus groans and rubs his hands over his face, his ears delightfully pink. "I—yes, okay, you're right. You *are* right, but sweetheart, you're meant to ask closer to *someday.* Not this far away from it."

"But we already know you're going to say yes."

"Yes, *someday."*

"Someday?" Sirius asks, meeting Remus' eyes when he drops his hands to stare at him in clear exasperation. Sirius kneels before him with a bent, chipped spoon and the sudden sensation of his heart lodged in his throat, a squirmy feeling in his stomach. He does not know how he got here. He does not know where else he'd rather be. "How far away from someday are we, Remus? I'd marry you tomorrow."

Remus' breath catches. Sirius *hears* it, and feels like he could fucking expand to outgrow the mass of earth until he can wrap his fingers around it and swallow it in one, like a giant, like a black hole out in space taking everything in, because Remus is looking at him like he is the whole universe already, and Sirius would be anything for him, even the impossible.

"I can't believe you're proposing to me with a spoon," Remus whispers.

"I, um, also can't believe I'm proposing to you with a spoon," Sirius admits sheepishly. "I may have—gotten ahead of myself. Sorry. You deserve way better, but like, I'm in this now. Sort of have to see it through, at this point."

Remus laughs, one of his hands lifting toward his mouth, fingers gently pressing against his own smile, like he wants to feel it. "You're a mess, you know that?"

"Yeah, I know," Sirius murmurs. "It's not exactly what you'd want to tie yourself to through marriage, honestly."

"And yet," Remus says, his voice soft.

Sirius' heart does something rather wild in his chest, like it's ricocheting off his ribs. His hand is trembling around the spoon and he has no idea when it began to. "And yet?"

"And yet, I'm going to," Remus tells him.

"You are?" Sirius blurts out, breathless. "You'll marry me?"

"Sirius, sweetheart," Remus says, eyes bright with a mixture of humor and love. There's love there, in his eyes, and it's making Sirius feel lightheaded. "Yes, I'll marry you. Obviously."

"Oh," Sirius chokes out, and he has no idea *why* it exhilarates him this much, because when he went into it, he was only thinking about the fact that he already knew Remus would say yes; it's not like they've never casually dropped it in the middle of conversations before, just little things like *when we're married* or *we can never let Regulus help plan our wedding.* And yet, and yet, and yet—despite *knowing* Remus would say yes, actually *hearing* him say yes is —is—it's fucking *glorious.*

"Are you going to cry?" Remus asks, lips curled up.

"No," Sirius says, and then, "maybe," and then, "shut up," and then he springs to his feet and nearly tackles Remus straight to the ground as he flings his arms around him and *immediately* sticks his tongue enthusiastically in his mouth.

Around them, there is a lot of bemused clapping.

Remus can barely kiss him for the grin on his face, but Sirius is not deterred. He kisses him harder, deeper, until that takes all of Remus' focus, and then—yes, right there, *that.* Kiss, kiss, kiss. Sirius loves kissing Remus. Loves how it's often a doorway to sex, and loves that the door can remain closed. Loves that it's not *about* sex, for all that they generally start there, because it's too busy being about love. Sirius is always kissing Remus just to kiss him.

When they break apart, Remus is grinning again, and Sirius leans in and bumps their noses together. He has never felt better than he does at this moment.

"Excuse me. Hey, excuse me," says the person working the stall they're next to. "You still have to pay for the spoon."

Sirius' expression falls flat, and Remus immediately erupts into laughter that he has to bury in Sirius' shoulder. Sirius cups the back of his head and turns a slow, deadly glare on the person daring to interrupt their moment. One look is all it takes. That look is all it takes.

They get the spoon for free.

~•~

"With a *spoon?"* Lily asks.

Remus huffs a laugh and nods. "With a damn spoon."

"Was it at least a nice spoon?"

"Worst spoon I've ever seen."

Lily purses her lips, then says, "I'll kill him."

"It was the most romantic thing that anyone's ever done for me," Remus tells her.

"Okay, resurrecting him," Lily amends. From inside the house, there's another roar of laughter, sourced from James. He's been losing his collective shit since Sirius announced that he and Remus were engaged, first with the tears of joy, because he's a big man with big emotions, and then with the laughter the second Sirius confessed when, where, and *how* the proposal took place. The moment Sirius said *so, I picked up a spoon and got on one knee,* Lily met Remus' gaze and jerked her head towards the door, leaving them to slip outside and light up smokes under the evening sky. "I'm going to need you to clarify how that's romantic, though."

"Sirius is impulsive, and spontaneous, and—a mess," Remus murmurs fondly, "so it was very *him,* if that makes sense. But it's more than that, you know? In the Hallow, he was the very first person who ever took into account what I wanted or my freedom, and that…never stopped. It *hasn't* stopped. The *second* he realized that I wanted the freedom to choose to say yes or no, even though we both knew I'd say yes, he gave me what I wanted. Literally the instant he realized, Lily."

"Okay, yeah, that is a bit sweet," Lily allows.

Remus chuckles, flicking ash and leaning back on his elbows next to her. They're perched on the steps, pressed close to one another, setting their lungs on fire. "I think the sweetest part is that he wasn't entirely sure of himself. Like, he thought he was, at first, but he has these insecurities, you know? Because it's the real him. No mask. No performance. And that's a scary thing. But he still did it anyway, for me."

"Well, as long as you're happy," Lily muses. "I, um. I have it all planned out for Mary, you know."

"Do you?" Remus asks, curious.

Lily bites down on a smile. "Yeah. With all the wedding chatter around James and Regulus, Bingley asked me when Mary and I were going to get married. I may have sat down with him and planned how I'd ask."

"So, he's cool with it?"

"Cool with it? He's *ecstatic*. I mean, we were both a bit giddy about the whole idea. Stayed up until after midnight whispering about it while Mary was lost in some art piece."

Remus hums. "What's the idea, then?"

"Well, I'm not the most artistic person, but Mary has two versions of the alphabet hanging on the wall in her classroom, each individual letter painted by her students, including Bingley, and ah, we do this thing every morning for breakfast as a family where we work on the crossword puzzle together. I reached out to Pandora, who's with the person who runs the paper, and they agreed to have all the answers spelled out telling her to go to her classroom, where Bingley and I will have rearranged the alphabet to spell out *will you marry me?"*

"Lily."

"Yeah?" Lily asks.

"You're absolutely smitten," Remus informs her.

Lily coughs, because she's in the middle of inhaling when she starts laughing. When she calms, she says, "Yeah, I know. She's the best thing that ever happened to me. She left a scar on me when we first met in more ways than one."

"You should put that in your vows."

"I should, shouldn't I?"

Remus smiles and knocks their shoulders together. "You have yourself a little family, Lily. That's lovely, you know."

"We're, um." Lily glances over at him, licking her lips, her eyes bright. "There was a pregnancy scare. A minor one. I was late, and I had forgotten to take my birth control, and—and I didn't think anything of it, but then… Well, in any case, we *thought* it was a possibility, so we talked to Bingley about it."

"Oh? How'd he take it?"

"He was alright, mostly. We thought he was uncomfortable, for a bit, then he finally 'fessed up and said he wasn't entirely sure what the dynamic would be. Would he feel like an older sibling, or an uncle, or both? Just—nerves, I guess. But we were all nervous together, so that was something. Of course, three days later, we found out I wasn't."

"Naturally," Remus agrees.

Lily clears her throat. "Bingley was a bit disappointed, actually. The idea of a baby seems sort of exciting to him. Just…the idea of something new to love. It's sweet, really. I just—I wasn't expecting *me* to be disappointed. Or Mary, for that matter. Startled us both, I think."

"Sometimes you don't realize you want something until you realize you don't have it," Remus says softly.

"Yeah, exactly," Lily murmurs. "So…it's definitely happening. Us having a baby, I mean. Not—not *now,* but sooner than we thought. In a couple years, at the latest."

Remus stops and looks at her, hearing the gravity in her tone, his heart seeming to skip a beat in his chest like she's just told him *they're* having a baby. He whispers, "Really?"

"Really," Lily whispers back, so much love there in her eyes.

Remus sits right there beside her and laughs until he cries, just as she does the same, giggling through their tears and the headrush of living through all that they have to reach a world where children are something to be excited about, instead of dreading it, instead of guilty for bringing them into it.

There they sit, two bodies inhaling the curl of smoke, and one heart beating with the steady pulse of hope.

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When James opens his door, he does not expect Alice to be on his doorstep. All he can do is blink out at them for a moment, because he hasn't seen them since—fuck, Frank's memorial? Wait, no, they went to the Casselberry's memorial, too, just as James did, and that one came after Frank's, so maybe then?

James is so shit at keeping track of the timeline.

What he does know, though, is that he hasn't seen Alice in years. He's had contact with Emmeline—and so has Regulus from time-to-time, and Sirius has, more frequently, and Sirius keeps up with Alice as well, but James doesn't get involved in any of that, outside of the quick, casual updates about them. Usually nothing more than a *yeah, they're alright.*

They—look like they're alright, from first glance. James can safely say he has certainly seen them worse, but then again, he can say that about basically everyone he knows.

"When someone shows up at your door, Potter, you usually invite them in," Alice points out dryly.

"Well, only if you want them inside," James replies, raising his eyebrows, because the truth is, he's not entirely sure he *does* want Alice in his home. Not if they're just going to be rude.

"Relax, I don't want any trouble," Alice mutters, lifting a hand like they're stopping his presumptions right in their tracks. "I promise not to make a fuss. I just want to ask you something."

James considers them for a moment, hesitating. Regulus is down at the forge with Sirius, and he won't be home for an hour or two, at the very least. James has been making him dinner, and next up is braving the oven in the name of a casserole, and he really doesn't have time to deal with his day being ruined. It's a *good* day, one he's been enjoying, and plans to keep enjoying. James narrows his eyes suspiciously at Alice, but they merely arch an eyebrow at him and wait.

"Fine," James mutters, stepping back and leading them into his house, "but I'm in the middle of cooking, so you're just going to have to tolerate me bustling around and such. Or, if you're feeling generous, you're more than welcome to give me a hand."

"I'm not feeling generous."

"Thought as much. Sit at the bar. Thirsty?"

Alice hums. "Have any lemonade? Emmeline got me hooked on that shit. Nothing like iced lemonade on a hot day, yeah?"

"We have strawberry lemonade. Close enough?" James asks, digging it out of the fridge.

"That'll do," Alice says, their chin propped in their hands as they dart their gaze around to take everything in. "You have a lovely home."

James smiles slightly as he pours them their drink. "Thanks." He passes them the drink and pauses on the other side of the bar, clearing his throat. "So, ah, how have you and Emmeline been? Doing alright?"

"Oh, we're—" Alice grimaces a bit. "We're not really an *Alice and Emmeline* anymore. I don't know if you heard, but I moved back to district five a couple of months ago…"

"Er, no, I didn't hear," James mumbles. "So, you two…?"

"Yeah, we split," Alice replies, heaving a sigh. "I know it's a shock, or it seems to be for most people, like they can't really believe that two people who made it through war together couldn't make it through peace."

"It's not really my place to judge."

"Mm, well, everyone else does. They all assumed love would be enough, you know? Doesn't work that way all the time, as it turns out. I, um. Well, I suppose it's my fault more than hers. I was still so angry after the war, for a long time."

"That," James murmurs, "I do understand."

Alice peers at him curiously. "Yeah? Suppose you would. We were all in it together, weren't we? That's—well, I think that's the real reason Emmeline and I *couldn't* make it, because we made it through that, through war and grief. We spent years after the war trying to keep clinging when the only time we managed to *was* wartime. Doesn't make much sense, does it?"

"I don't know," James says, "Regulus and I—ah, we got through our first arena together, and then afterwards we could hardly look at each other. It was fucking awful."

"We just weren't happy," Alice confesses quietly. "We clung to each other through loss and war, and then afterwards, we weren't happy. We tried, you know? We really did, because how could we go through all that and *not* last? But…we just…"

"You weren't happy," James repeats. "Nothing to be ashamed of, you know. No one's expectations should matter, not against what makes you happy. Is she happy now? Are you?"

"She is, yeah." Alice takes a deep breath. "We're—okay, if not a bit distant for now, until we adjust. I miss her a lot, but I… I am happier, now. Didn't know I could be, really."

James huffs a weak laugh. "Yeah, I get that, too."

"But you are happy." Alice leans forward on their elbows, surveying him. "You're married."

"Yes," James agrees, holding their gaze, refusing to be ashamed of it, or apologize, or feel an ounce of guilt. In Alice's story, he may be the villain, but in his? In his, there was no villain, just pain, and now peace.

"You invited me. Why?"

"Is that what you came here to ask me?"

Alice nods. "Because it doesn't make sense, James. You invited the person who essentially said you didn't deserve a happy ending *to* your happy ending. I—I can't understand why you'd do that. It's—I mean, I know why you saved me during the war. When you risked your life to save mine, I know that wasn't for me; that was for Frank and your mistake, but I'm *not* Frank, and you can't just replace him with me—"

"Wait. Alice, wait," James cuts in, blinking rapidly as he swivels to stare at them, wide-eyed. "You think—is that what you think? That I helped you because of what happened with Frank?" He shakes his head, exhaling like he's been punched in the stomach. "No, I helped you because you needed help. I wasn't even thinking of Frank."

"But I was so cruel to you," Alice whispers.

"You were grieving, Alice," James says softly. "Regardless of what you said, you needed help, so I helped. You may have hurt me, but you're not a bad person, and I wasn't going to

just stand by and let you die, if I could stop it. I wouldn't do that with anyone. You may have thought so, but I didn't do that with Frank. This may sound tactless, but it wasn't *about* Frank. It's just…who I am. There's, you know, versatility to it; good when it saves lives, like yours; not much good at all, when as good as I try to be, bad things still happen anyway."

"So, you made your peace with it, then? With what happened."

"I did, yeah. I hope that's not offensive. I don't mean for it to be, but I also don't need you to forgive me for what happened with Frank, or for you to grant me permission to continue on living. What happened—it was fucked up, and something I'll always wish I can change, but he wouldn't blame me. Frank wouldn't blame me no more than I would have blamed him, if roles were reversed. So, I don't need your forgiveness. I forgave myself, and when I think of you, it's always with the hope that you'll do the same for yourself."

"I don't know if that's offensive. I want to be angry about it, but I just…" Alice sighs and sort of tosses their hands up, shrugs, then slumps with something close to a pout. James can't help it, he snorts and shakes his head before turning around to open the oven and slip the casserole in. Only once he's shut it does he actually turn the oven on. Then, when he turns again, Alice clears their throat. "I don't know why I came here. I think I wanted to…just ask why, or explain why I didn't come, because I thought I didn't want to. Because there was a time when I didn't want to see anyone else in this world actually be happy, not in a world Frank wasn't in."

James bites his lip and raises his eyebrows. "But…?"

"But," Alice continues, lips curling up a bit, "I guess I was wrong. I wish I did see it. I want people to be happy."

"Even you?" James asks.

"Even *you,"* Alice tells him, then nods. "And yes, even me. So, I suppose the real reason I came was to…ask why I deserved to be invited at all."

"Do you want the truth?" James says, leaning in on the other side of the bar, a smile twitching at his mouth. Alice tilts their head a little, clearly curious. "Yeah, so Regulus doesn't know you were…harsh with me. I, um. I never told him. He's a bit…"

"Crazy?" Alice suggests.

James sighs fondly. "Yeah, just a tad. So, uh, I didn't mention it to him, and he didn't know; he was handling, like, *everything* to do with the wedding—"

"Was he?"

"Oh, absolutely. He's a complete control freak. It's adorable."

Alice makes a face of confusion. "Adorable? That's the word you go with to describe him? Like, of all the words…"

"He's never not adorable to me, really," James explains, chuckling at the skepticism on Alice's face. He waves a hand lazily. "Anyway, he handled the invitations, too."

"Ohhhh," Alice says, drawing the word out. "Right, okay, that makes more sense now, and also I feel like a bit of an idiot."

"Well, don't do that. I could have told him not to invite you, but I didn't." James offers them a smile. "Alice, you were more than welcome to come. I would have been happy to have you, and even though you didn't come, I'm more than happy to have you in my life now."

"You can't mean that."

"I do. And it's not…replacing Frank with you, to me. I was happy to know Frank while I could. I'd be just as happy to know you, if you'd let me. Besides, this world needs to tip the scales in sharing joy. If I could, I'd share mine with everyone."

Alice swallows. "Even me?"

"Even you," James murmurs, and they look conflicted, like there's more to say, more for them to do. Remorse is such a heavy thing sometimes, and James doesn't want Alice weighed down by it, not for him, especially when he has no ill will for them. Perhaps he was the villain in their story, but their story isn't over yet. That was act one. In act two, he'd like nothing more than to just be their friend. So, before they can be crushed under the pressure to apologize, he straightens up and lightly asks, "Hey, want to stay for dinner?"

"Oh, James, you don't have to—"

"It's a casserole. Can't go wrong with a casserole, that's what my dad always said. Only thing I'd ask is for you to take it out of the oven for me. I have pyrophobia, so I don't like intense heat and such. Usually Regulus would do it for me, but I don't look for him to be home before it's done. Help me out, yeah?"

"Alright, James," Alice says quietly, their face softening, and that's enough. This is enough. "I'll help."

Sometimes, there's no need for apologies. Sometimes, there's an understanding, a blooming friendship, and a desire to bear witness to joy all while accepting your own.

Easy as that, act two begins.

~•~

Remus *sees* Sirius slip away right in the middle of their wedding. He's there one second, staring at Remus like he's a fucking miracle, and then—just like that—he's gone.

"Wait," Remus interrupts, and the officiator falls awkwardly silent, darting looks between them, wide-eyed. "Sirius."

A blink. Nothing else.

"Sweetheart."

Another blink. That's all.

"Right," Remus says, stroking the back of Sirius' hands as he holds them. "Okay then. We'll wait."

They wait. It's likely very awkward and uncomfortable for everyone else, because they don't really know what's going on, but Remus doesn't care about them. He doesn't care if they all get up and walk away; he'll stay here and wait as long as it takes. Everything is on pause, because Sirius isn't missing this.

Sirius seems—fine. Not upset. Not rocking. Not fighting. All he's doing, really, is looking at Remus. There's no indication of why he slipped away, or if he needs anything right now, so there's just this. Just them standing hand-in-hand until, at some point, Sirius blinks and jolts a little. His eyes go wide.

"No," Sirius whispers. "No, tell me I didn't—"

"It's okay," Remus whispers back. "Sirius, it's okay. I made them wait. I waited for you."

"You did?" Sirius asks, eyes filling with tears.

"Of course," Remus tells him. "You haven't missed a thing."

Sirius surges forward to grasp the sides of his head, crashing into a kiss that Remus melts into immediately, heart soaring in his chest as he gets his arms around Sirius. Multiple people clear their throat, someone laughs—Remus is pretty sure it's his dad—and none of them matter. Nothing matters as much as this; having this, having Sirius, having everything.

"You aren't, ah, technically supposed to be kissing just yet," the officiator mutters rather bravely, Remus thinks, and Sirius breaks away with a groan, immediately frustrated.

"Well, *hurry up,"* Sirius hisses, glaring at the officiator.

"I was told to wait," is the weak reply.

Remus huffs a soft laugh. "You can continue. Carry on."

The officiator does indeed carry on, and when they're actually meant to be kissing, finally, Sirius drags Remus in eagerly and doesn't let him go for a very, very long time. It's the only place in the world Remus doesn't care for freedom, right there in the circle of Sirius' arms. That's where everything is, where it ends and where it begins and exists in between.

Right here.

~•~

"I've got an idea," Pandora says, passing out cups of tea to Regulus, Remus, and James. Sirius would be with them, except he's still banned from the Hallow, so he's staying in district one with Narcissa and Alecto today.

"For us?" James asks hopefully, and Pandora nods.

"Oh, here we go," Regulus mutters, which causes Rodolphus to snort into his own tea, then fix his face into something rather innocent when Pandora shoots him a sharp look.

"Well, personally I think any idea is better than no idea," Xenophilius announces, kicked back in their chair with their feet in Rodolphus' lap. "How else will you get anywhere?"

"Suckup," Rodolphus whispers, and Xenophilius grins.

"What if you each go with a surrogate, so there's two children, and then you adopt the other two?" Pandora asks. "You can't decide whether to have a surrogate, or adopt, right? Well, I say do both! Why shouldn't you do both?"

A pause, and then Rodolphus says, "Okay, she's right about this one. When in doubt, go with both options, if you can."

"I'm in favor," Xenophilus agrees, lifting their teacup with a tiny smile, and this time, both Rodolphus *and* Pandora snort.

"I think that's a brilliant idea," Remus muses, cocking his head at Regulus and James, who have been debating how exactly they want to introduce children into their lives.

Trust Pandora to encourage them to do it all ways.

"I—" James stops and swivels his head to look at Regulus, his eyebrows raised. "You know, I…actually like that idea."

"I don't hate it," Regulus says softly.

James brightens and grins at the others. "That means he loves it. Pandora, I think you just solved our dilemma."

"Yeah, she's good at that," Rodolphus offers, his voice warm with affection, with love, just like Xenophilius looks as they gaze at her. "Better than most, in any case."

"Phil and Phus are going to take turns trying to get me pregnant at some point," Pandora announces, and by the way Rodolphus and Xenophilius both immediately start choking and coughing on their tea, this is news to them as well. She doesn't pay them any mind. "But, you know, preferably *after* my talk show gets picked up. I mean, I could be a stay-at-home mum, except I don't *want* to, and really, Phus stays at home enough for all of us, so he can be a stay-at-home dad. Phil has the paper, and I'll have the show, and Phus can watch the kids. Or kid. I don't know how many we'll have, honestly. Not as many as Molly—she's pregnant with her sixth now, can you believe that? After Fred and George, I can't imagine how she hasn't clipped Arthur's—"

"Maybe they're trying on purpose," Remus cuts in hastily, grimacing a little bit at, presumably, the mental imagery.

"I think, for me, six is a bit much," Pandora says. "Honestly, James and Regulus are both mental to me, too. Four is pushing it for me. I like two. I think two is nice. But, again, I'll see how it goes once the talk show is in full production."

"When do you think that'll happen?" Regulus asks curiously, while James watches in interest as Rodolphus and Xenophilius seem to go back-and-forth in a silent conversation.

"I think a year or two? Production is still…" Pandora makes a face and wiggles her hand from side-to-side. "The war sort of threw a wrench into a lot of things, as you know, but I do have a guaranteed green light. It's just a matter of time."

"Yeah," James says, turning away from Rodolphus and Xenophilius, both of which have seemed to just accept their fate. "Time is usually all it takes."

This turns out to be true, because on the way back through to pick up Sirius in district one, Regulus finds out that, finally, after all these years, Narcissa is pregnant. Despite the fact that there's a very real chance she could lose this one—as she has lost every other one, usually early—she's the farthest along she's ever been and swears she knows, somehow, that this is the one that she's going to get to meet.

"It's Draco," Narcissa says, hand on her stomach, her eyes bright. "I know it is."

"Yeah, you're excited now, but watch—it's going to be the biggest brat in the world," Regulus responds, which is essentially code for *I hope this one works out for you.*

"And I'll raise them to be the biggest brat to you," Narcissa retorts sweetly, too sweetly, which is code for *if it does, you'll know about it.*

Regulus laughs. "Oh, no, I'm going to make that kid love me. I'll make sure I'm that kid's favorite person, just to spite you."

It's a threat. When has Regulus not followed through on a threat? Give it a few years, and he will on this one, too.

~•~

Sirius knows Remus is nervous, because he's cleaning *a lot.* He's cleaning things that are already clean, taking down dishes just to wash them, mopping the floor so much that it practically sparkles. The sight makes Sirius sigh.

"Moon of mine," Sirius croons, coming up behind Remus to wrap his arms around him from behind, Stella's nails clicking against the tile as she dutifully follows, "why are you fretting?"

"Dorcas will be here any minute," Remus whispers, his hands still in the soapy water.

"She will," Sirius confirms.

Remus blows out a deep breath and pulls his hands out of the water, swiveling to face him. "You know I love my dad."

"I know that."

"Okay, well, there was a time in my life that I—I sort of hated him? Or I felt like he let me down. I—I wanted to make him proud, you know? And I felt like I couldn't."

Sirius hums. "Yes, I know of your daddy issues, Remus."

"My—" Remus sputters. "I do *not* have—"

"You absolutely do," Sirius cuts in, watching Remus deflate in defeat, because he absolutely does. "Is that what you're afraid of? That you'll make any kid we're fostering feel that way?"

"It's different when I'm not just teaching them, you know? I just don't want to fuck up some kid's life," Remus says quietly, his gaze downcast.

Sirius sits on that for a long second. He gets that fear, in a way, but oddly not as starkly as Remus does. Perhaps it's because he had a hand in raising Regulus, who—despite all the bumps along the way—turned out quite well. Perhaps it's because he was taken in by Effie and Monty, so he knows firsthand what a relief it is to simply be accepted in a loving home.

The agreement to be foster parents was something Sirius was excited about, and still is. They have space and the willingness to love a child of any age stuck in limbo, needing a place to be before they end up where they're trying to go. There's also the kids that are older, almost old enough to go out on their own and build their life, often overlooked by those trying to adopt, because most people think parenthood can only begin in the roots of youth, but this isn't true. If it's not those kids, it's the troubled ones that aren't happy in the orphanages, or hopping between homes because people can't handle them; those are the ones Sirius wants, and Remus, too. All of them. They'll take all of them until it's time for them to go, giving them as much love as they can for the duration of their stay.

"You know, um, I think I fucked up Regulus' life quite a bit, multiple times," Sirius murmurs, and Remus frowns. "But do you know what he remembers? Even through all of the shit we

went through, some of the things *I* help put him through, what he remembers is the love. Take it from me, someone who has had parents fuck up their life, and parents who loved them. The love matters so much more, Remus. I'm not saying we'll get everything right; we won't, because that's impossible, but we'll try. And that's what matters. Even you, just now, what mattered to you the most about your dad? That you love him, and that he loves you. We don't have to be perfect temporary parents. We just have to love them."

"What if we don't?" Remus breathes out, like it's a sin.

"Then we'll care enough to help find people who do," Sirius says simply, because it's not a sin. No one can force love for a child, nor should they, Sirius thinks, especially not when there are people out there who will love them effortlessly. Sirius doesn't think his parents ever truly loved him, but he doesn't doubt that Effie and Monty always have. His parents weren't bad people for not loving him; they were bad people for how they treated him because of that lack of love, and Sirius knows he and Remus will never do that. "And, you know, if being foster parents just isn't for us, then we won't do it. We'll try, and if it doesn't work out, then that's okay. Simple as that."

"You want to do this," Remus protests. *"I* want to do this. I'm just—I'm worried that I won't—that I'll be—"

A knock comes at the door, and Remus goes very still, holding his breath, eyes wide. Sirius reaches up to frame his face, kissing him so gently, until he sighs against his mouth and relaxes. Sirius draws back, slowly, and smiles.

"We're going to try, and you're going to be just fine, and you'll have me with you through it all," Sirius tells him. "That's something, isn't it?"

"That's everything," Remus croaks.

"This could be, too. Come on, let's go find out," Sirius whispers, taking his hand and leading him out the room.

When they open the door, Dorcas is beaming at them, all lit up with excitement. She takes joy in her work, and her orphanage is one of the most successful across all districts and the Hallow, possibly because the children there are the most fashionably dressed. That shouldn't be a factor for people looking to be parents, but for some, it is. The world, for all that it's gotten better, will always have shitty parts.

Next to Dorcas, half-hiding behind her legs, is a very short girl that can't be older than ten. She looks nervous, uncertain, a slight tension around her mouth and in her tiny frame. Sirius doubts she realizes just how nervous they are to meet her, and she's so painfully young. There's a shyness to her, a wariness, and Sirius can't stop himself from thinking of Regulus when she meets his eyes, only for a second, and quickly looks away.

"Sirius, Remus, this is Eleanor," Dorcas murmurs, rubbing Eleanor's shoulder gently and dipping down a bit to smile at her. "Eleanor, these are my friends I was telling you about, Sirius and Remus. I promise they're nicer than they look."

"I'll have you know, I look just as nice as I am, which means I'm nicer than most." Sirius clicks his tongue at Dorcas, then smiles at Eleanor. He crouches down to get at her height and says, warmly, "Hi, Eleanor. It's nice to meet you."

Eleanor stares at him, then looks desperately at Dorcas and whispers, "I don't want to stay here."

"Eleanor, we've talked about this, darling," Dorcas says softly.

"Please don't leave me here," Eleanor begs, her voice small.

Remus makes a quiet noise, then clears his throat. "Eleanor," he says, and she darts a wary glance towards him. "Why don't you and Dorcas come in together? She doesn't have to leave yet, and if you still want to go when she does, then you can. We won't force you to be here, okay? Is that alright?"

"You'll come in with me?" Eleanor asks Dorcas.

"Was planning to, yeah," Dorcas replies, lips curling up. "I know new things seem scary, but they're just opportunities. Besides, they have a dog."

Eleanor snaps her head around. "You have a dog?"

"We do," Sirius confirms, amused. "Her name is Stella. Do you want to come meet her?"

"Can I?" Eleanor breathes out, and Sirius springs up, stepping back to open the door and welcome them all in.

By the time Dorcas is ready to go, Eleanor can barely tear herself away from Stella to tell her goodbye.

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Remus watches Lily pace from one end of the small bathroom to the other, her hands linked behind her head. She's fully just gnawing on her lip, darting glances at him before quickly looking away. It's like she's about to crawl out of her skin.

"Do you want me to look?" Remus asks.

"No. Yes. No!" Lily whirls around, eyes bulging when he quickly glances back up, his expression neutral. "You looked. Remus, you looked. What was it?"

"It's not showing up yet," Remus admits sheepishly.

Lily groans. "Hasn't it been, like, forever?"

"I don't think it's even been two minutes," Remus tells her, amused when she huffs and whips around to pace again. He shifts on the closed toilet and glances down for a peek, just as impatient as she is. Still nothing.

"Now?"

"Just checked. Nothing yet."

"Fuck." Lily blows out a deep breath and swivels to face him, swallowing. "Okay, um, distract me."

"Dorcas called yesterday," Remus says softly. "Eleanor misses us, she said, but she loves it in district four. She's doing good in school, has loads of friends, and her parents got her a dog, so she's thriving." He chuckles. "She named it Moony."

"Did she?" Lily's face softens, her bottom lip poking out like that's the most adorable thing she's ever heard. To be fair, it is very adorable. Moony is because of Remus, and they all know it, and Eleanor is utterly shameless about it. "I know it was hard for her to leave, and for you and Sirius…"

Remus nods, exhaling a deep breath. Yes, it was very hard. It was one of the hardest things Remus has ever experienced, to accept a child into his life, and love them, and then see them go. Being foster parents is—very fucking difficult, but it's also the most rewarding thing Remus thinks he's ever done. For all that it aches to give goodbyes, there's no regret in getting to know and love someone before they have to go.

"We're going to do it again," Remus murmurs. "Dorcas asked if we were still open to being a foster family, because it's not… Well, it's not something everyone can do, but we agreed. In a couple of weeks, we'll be getting Malcolm and Marcel. It's apparently been difficult for Dorcas to find a family that wants to adopt two children, and…well, these two have been kicking up a fuss at the idea of being separated."

"They're brothers?"

"Mhm."

"Yeah, that makes sense. No siblings really want to be separated," Lily says quietly.

Remus huffs a weak laugh. "Sirius said the same thing. In fact, he was genuinely upset at the thought that they *could* be separated, but Dorcas says the system is hard to navigate. She does her best, so she's been exclusively looking for a family that will take them both, but so far… nothing."

"Until she finds that, it's you and Sirius, huh?" Lily asks.

"Well, we're more than willing," Remus replies. "It's really beautiful, you know. Hard, yes, but…so special, Lily."

"I'm proud of you," Lily whispers. "Both of you. The way you two impact so many lives—that *is* special."

Remus looks down with a soft smile, then freezes. For a brief moment, he stops breathing, and then his head snaps up. Lily blinks at him, eyebrows wrinkling together.

"What?" Lily asks. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Lily," Remus breathes out, "you're pregnant."

Lily goes very still. Her voice cracks when she says, "I am?"

"You are. You're pregnant. You're going to have a baby," Remus blurts out, and there's a beat, and then he's launching off the toilet for her just as she reaches for him, the both of them

immediately dissolving into tears and laughter, wrapping their arms around each other and holding on.

Three bodies, one heart.

~•~

Regulus blinks when he opens the door to see Sirius standing on the other side of it with four year old Malcolm holding onto three year old Marcel's hand right next to him.

"I need a favor," Sirius mumbles sheepishly.

The favor, as it turns out, is babysitting. Why it falls on him, Regulus doesn't know. Possibly because Effie is visiting Lyall in district eleven—something about a card game event—and Remus is at the school, along with James, Mary, and Lily. As for Sirius, he has to go handle some emergency repair from someone in the market, of the broken bicycle variety. It shouldn't take more than a few hours, Sirius promises, but it's hot out and he's going to be fixing the bicycle under the sun, so he doesn't want to leave Marcel and Malcolm out in it to get irritable.

Regulus would do pretty much anything Sirius needed him to, regardless, and it's not like this is that big of a deal. Malcolm and Marcel have been with Sirius and Remus for less than a week, so Regulus has only met them once, but it went well enough. They're quiet kids. Shy, really. Sirius says they mostly stick to themselves, and he's hoping they'll eventually come out of their shells, so to speak. Either way, as brothers who don't want to go to separate families, they tend to tug at Regulus' heartstrings, not that he'd ever admit it.

Marcel and Malcolm are indeed quiet when Sirius drops them off, just sitting in the living room and sticking close to each other, watching Regulus with big eyes. Whenever Marcel wants something, he cups his small hand around Malcolm's ear to whisper it to him first, and then Malcolm says it.

Like so:

Marcel leans up and whispers in Malcolm's ear. Malcom nods, seems to put on a brave face, then looks at Regulus and announces, "Marcie's thirsty."

He says this in a tone that clearly suggests it's a problem and Regulus is expected to do something about it, or else. Or else what, Regulus has no idea. The kid is only four.

"Okay," Regulus says, lips twitching, "what does he want?"

Again, Marcel leans up and whispers in Malcolm's ear. Malcom nods again, tilts his chin up as he meets Regulus' eyes once more, then declares, "Milk."

"Right. Well, come on, then," Regulus says, waving them into the kitchen. Marcel wobbles when he climbs off his seat, but Malcolm steadies him and holds his hand as they follow.

Through more whispering and more brave eye contact, Malcolm informs Regulus under implied threat that Marcel wants cold, plain milk. Regulus, who does not feel the least bit threatened, makes sure Marcel gets his cold, plain milk. Marcel and Malcolm sit at the bar and wait patiently.

At one point, in the middle of drinking his milk, Marcel whispers to Malcolm again, who frowns and looks at the refrigerator. He blinks, shrugs, then mumbles, "I don't know."

"If there's something you want to know, you can ask," Regulus offers.

Marcel whispers again, and Malcolm frowns harder as he looks at Regulus suspiciously. After a beat, he lifts his hand to point at the fridge, and asks, "What's that?"

Regulus follows his gaze, then hums. "Those are ultrasound photos my husband hung up on our refrigerator."

More whispering. Again, Malcolm shrugs at his little brother, then says, "What's an ubersound?"

"Ultrasound," Regulus corrects. "It's how someone looks at a baby when they're still in the stomach."

Whispers. Pause for milk. More whispers. Malcolm purses his lips. "Who has a baby in their stomach?"

"Well, a lot of people, at the moment," Regulus admits, seeing as it's true. Molly, Narcissa, and Lily are all pregnant currently, but they're not the only ones. "Those pictures belong to two surrogates who are having mine and my husband's babies."

"What's a sir-gate?" Malcolm asks, before Marcel can even whisper in his ear.

"Surrogate," Regulus says. "It's someone who has a baby for people who can't get pregnant."

"You can't have a baby?"

"Yes, I'm going to have two soon. I just can't get pregnant."

"Why?"

"I don't have a uterus."

"Why?"

"Because I was born without one."

"Why?"

"Well, you know, I don't think anyone knows why. Sometimes that's just how it goes."

A pause. Marcel plops his drink down and shifts in his seat to whisper in Malcolm's ear. Malcolm shakes his head. "No, it's okay, I'm fine. Really, I'm fine."

With that, a stubborn look flashes across Marcel's face, and he twists to scowl at Regulus. "Give Malc milk, too."

Regulus is pretty sure he melts.

Once his silence is broken, Marcel talks without going through his brother to do it, at least all the time. He has little lisp that makes his words run together, and he's actually the more vocal of the two. It seems Malcolm is much happier to be quiet unless he's asking questions. He likes asking questions; they both do, really, and Regulus is not prepared for how much he enjoys answering them. Even silly questions that he doesn't have the answers to are entertaining when posed by them.

Two hours in, and Regulus feeds them bagels. Marcel doesn't like the cream cheese and spits it right out on the table, which Malcolm cleans up before Regulus can get to the napkin first. It takes trial and error to find how Marcel likes his bagels; not toasted, plain, and with cold butter. Very strange child, to say the least, but to each their own.

Three hours in, and Regulus takes them outside to let them run around, since they get bored. Marcel throws rocks at the targets with very bad aim, and Malcolm yells at him to stop, then pushes him down to the ground, where he cries. So, for a bit, Marcel hates Malcolm so much that he goes right to Regulus, crawling right into his lap—much to his surprise—and very dramatically sobbing all over him until Malcolm caves and comes over to apologize. Just like that, with a snap, Marcel's tears dry up, he crawls off of Regulus, and they run off to go throw rocks at the targets together.

Four hours in, and Regulus is reading in the sitting room with Marcel on one side and Malcolm on the other. It's the only book in the house they have for kids, one that was James' when he was a child. Malcolm is very invested, his fingers twisting Regulus' sleeve as he leans on his arm, inhaling in palpable excitement every time Regulus turns a page. On the other side, meanwhile, Marcel is passed the fuck out, drooling on Regulus' other arm, head resting in the crook of his elbow.

When Sirius shows back up, it's with apologies for taking so long, and gratitude for Regulus helping him out. He holds out his hands in offering, ready to go, and Marcel twists up to whisper in Malcolm's ear. Malcolm looks down at Marcel, then looks at Regulus, then looks at Sirius with his brave face on.

Malcolm says, bluntly, "We want to stay here."

Sirius blinks and drops his hands, looking at Regulus, who coughs and sheepishly mumbles, "I need a favor."

When James comes home later, it's to the update that they're going from two kids to four a lot faster than they expected to.

~•~

Lily has Harry on the last day of July, and he comes kicking and screaming into the world with so much heart to him that surely even those anxiously waiting outside the room hear him the moment he arrives. Though, maybe not, because Lily is screaming just as loud as he is, and also nearly breaking Remus' hand while he does his level best not to faint.

Dorcas and Mary are in the room with him, Mary there to cut the umbilical cord and Dorcas leaning over the bed from Lily's back to quite literally help her push. It's Dorcas that Lily falls back into, sobbing from pain and wonder and emotional release, laughing breathlessly through it and holding Remus' hand all the while. Dorcas presses her forehead to Lily's temple, and they grip each other, both of them caught up in crying through the miracle of this moment, and they all stay that way until Mary comes closer with Harry, still covered in blood and shrieking like he's angry at the world without cause. Dorcas pulls back, and Lily gasps when Harry is deposited on her chest, only calming when he feels her heartbeat.

There's not a dry eye in the room.

"Oh, look at him, Mary, we did so good," Lily chokes out, cradling him and gazing up at Mary, red hair plastered sweaty to her head, looking like she's been through hell. Mary gazes down at her like she's the most gorgeous person alive, then dips in gingerly to cup her face and kiss her.

"He's beautiful," Dorcas whispers, like she's having a revelation, genuine wonder in her voice.

"Yes," Mary gasps through tears, and a grin, her entire face lit up with joy. "He is. He's beautiful. You're both so beautiful."

"Alright, we're not quite finished just yet, we still have the afterbirth to handle and then you'll need stitches," is the calm reminder from the midwife.

And yeah, that's—that's about all Remus can handle, if he's honest. He's not sure why *that's* what pushes him over the edge, but that does the trick. He's been holding his breath for too long, and he hears the word *stitches,* and that's it.

"Oh, I—I need to sit down," Remus wheezes, wobbling a little as he takes a step back. The world tilts on his way to the chair, and the last thing he hears is the midwife saying:

"Ah, there he goes. It's okay, this happens, don't be alar—"

Remus does wake up to find that he's been put in a chair, Sirius and Regulus are fawning over Harry, who is being held by Mary, while Dorcas and James are holding Marcel and Malcolm up to let them peer curiously at the new baby. Lily is in bed, exhausted, and when she notices that he's awake, she takes one look at him and laughs.

Remus gets up and finds his way right to her, because he always does, just like he always has.

~•~

Florimel and Aster are not infants that appreciate sleep, so when James successfully puts them down for a nap upstairs, it almost feels like winning a war. He drops off the baby monitor in his pocket and takes the stairs down, using his cane to brace himself on each step. He could take the chair, but he's not risking the whirring noise waking them up.

When he reaches the bottom, James follows the general direction of *noise,* knowing it's either his husband, or the rest of his kids, or both. It turns out to be just Regulus, bustling around in the kitchen, Marcel and Malcolm suspiciously absent. Slowly, James eases into the room to sit his cane down against the bar and catches Regulus by the hand to reel him in, slipping one hand around his waist and sweeping them in a circle. This earns him a smile that makes his chest warm.

"Florimel and Aster are down. Where are Malcolm and Marcel?" James asks.

"Outside," Regulus replies. "They're making mud-pies, so prepare for the mess."

"Mm, nothing we can't handle," James assures him. "We've certainly had worse."

"Yes, that's true, but if either of those brats track mud into the kitchen, I'm shipping them off to Sirius and Remus without looking back," Regulus warns, eyes narrowing playfully.

James snorts. "You'd miss them and go get them back after three hours, don't even try it."

"At least four," Regulus counters, sliding his arms around James' shoulders, eyes sparkling with amusement. "I can entertain myself for four hours, surely."

"Oh?" James raises his eyebrows. "Don't you mean I could entertain you for four hours?"

Regulus' lips twitch. "No, because I'm shipping you off with them. I've earned the break. I'm done with you Potters."

"You're a Potter," James reminds him, amused.

"Baby, I'll always be a Black," Regulus tells him, reaching up to card his fingers through James' hair. He leans in and starts mouthing along James' jaw, which James is very pleased about, actually. "No matter my name, that doesn't change."

"Dad! Dad, look, we found a frog!" comes the abrupt shriek from outside, along with more delighted screams.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Regulus groans, letting his head thunk down on James' shoulder. "Really, can't we just send them back from whence they came?"

"And where is that?"

"Hell."

James laughs, turning his head to smack a kiss to Regulus' cheek, then down the side of his face, then the scar on the side of his neck. "It's a bit pointless to do that. You'd go through hell just to get them back, and you know it."

"Dad, it peed on me!"

"Shit, shit, shit," Regulus chants, jolting away from James to rush towards the door. "Put it down, you little demons! Step away from the frog right now!" He's still grumbling as he slips out the door. "Just like your father. Literal spawns of Satan himself. What did I say about staying out of tr…"

James sighs softly and leans back against the bar, grabbing his cane again, eyes drifting shut as he listens to the sounds of his family, lips curled up. Then, from his pocket, there's a sudden cry that makes his eyes snap open.

Ah, yes, the joys of parenthood. Frogs and squalling infants.

James wouldn't change a damn thing.

~•~

Teddy is…hm.

Well, he's not the first child Remus and Sirius have fostered, not by a long shot. The first was Eleanor, who—to this day, even after years—reaches out to them from time-to-time. Then there was Marcel and Malcolm, who now knows them as Uncle Remus and Uncle Sirius. Then they had Fatima, then Zigmund, then Atlas, then Petra. Some of them were just there for the transition from one home to their final one, and others were there because they were trouble everywhere else.

Remus and Sirius have found such pride in helping these kids, and they're especially proud that they have the highest success rate with helping the troubled ones. Dorcas adores them.

Enter Teddy, stage left.

Just to give an idea of what they're working with, this is how Teddy arrives to them:

"Sirius, Remus, this is Teddy," Dorcas states warmly, putting a hand on his shoulder that he immediately shrugs off, much to her amusement. "Teddy, this is—"

"Sirius, Remus, got it," Teddy cuts in. "Yeah, I know the drill. I'll go find my room."

"What, no bye?" Dorcas asks with a huff.

"Oh, please, I'll see you in a week," Teddy retorts, then fully just pushes in between Remus and Sirius to march right into the house without looking back.

Sirius and Remus stare after him, then look at each other for a long moment, then simultaneously turn to look at Dorcas.

Coughing, Dorcas smiles weakly and says, "Good luck."

Okay, well, they're used to troubled children, by now. Remus and Sirius are sure it's going to be fine, and they tell Dorcas as much. Teddy is here; they're happy to have him. Naturally, as with each child they all get to meet, everyone is really excited about him—and then they meet him. They meet him, and that excitement turns to alarm, because Teddy? He's the most disrespectful, chaotic child Remus has ever known in his life.

He doesn't listen, and he doesn't care about anything, and he's rude. He finds a boundary, then immediately crosses it, *on purpose.* Sirius asks him once not to slam doors, and from that point on, he slams every door he walks through. He steals from the market, gets into fights at school, and never communicates with Remus or Sirius about *anything.* His favorite things to do are roll his eyes, scoff, or flip them off and walk away.

A week into staying with them, Teddy casually and derisively asks over breakfast, "Ready to send me back yet?"

"Nope," Remus and Sirius answer at the same exact time, and that morning—that moment—is the first time Teddy looks taken aback, as well as resolved.

Teddy lasts a week, and then he turns it up to eleven. He sneaks out one night and nearly makes it all the way to board the train before Remus catches up with him and brings him

right back. He throws a rock through a window, and Sirius fixes it. He tosses all of his school supplies into a fire, so Remus and Sirius get him some more.

Teddy lasts two weeks, and then he turns on them. He digs in his heels to make them hate him like his life depends on it. He insults them, ignores them, and does everything in his power to make their lives a living hell.

Teddy lasts three weeks, and Stella starts sleeping in his room. It's a curious shift, one Remus isn't expecting, because he never thought Stella would leave Sirius' side. But, suddenly, she's up under Teddy like his personal shadow. With Stella, Teddy is an entirely different kid. He talks to her quietly, gently, and starts spending a lot of time outside with her, running around and tossing sticks for her to go fetch. It's the first time Remus ever hears Teddy laugh, really and truly laugh, with no anger or mockery in his tone.

Still, Teddy seems to hate them, and hate everything, and Remus finally just…has enough.

"Fuck off," Teddy snaps one day, when Sirius apparently offends him simply by asking how his day was at school, and then Teddy is jumping away from the table to stomp into his room, slamming the door as he goes.

Remus looks at Sirius, who looks close to tears from sheer stress, and with that, Remus stands up.

"Where are you going?" Sirius croaks.

"One second," Remus replies, pushing calmly away from the table and heading right for Teddy's room. He doesn't knock; he just walks in and slams the door behind him so hard that Teddy jolts on his bed and scrambles up to stare at him with wide eyes. "Yeah, I can slam doors, too."

"Are you going to hit me?" Teddy blurts out, and he doesn't look—scared, exactly. More like this is what he was aiming for in the first place. To be hit? What?

Remus draws up short, blinking at him, admittedly horrified by this. "No, Teddy, I'm not going to hit you. I'm—we will *never* hit you, not for any reason."

"Oh." Teddy deflates. "Well, get the fuck out, then."

"You—what?" Remus stares at him in confusion. "Do you *want* to be hit? Are you actively trying to get us to, what, beat you?"

Teddy says nothing.

"Okay, look, let's just…" Remus blows out a deep breath and moves over to sit on the edge of Teddy's bed, not looking at him, but feeling Teddy study him. "Let's ignore the fact that you're a kid under my care for a second, yeah? For right now, you're just a person, and so am I, and we're talking. That's it."

Again, Teddy doesn't respond.

"When I was a kid, I used to be…fucking awful," Remus murmurs. "I picked fights. I shouted at my dad. I punched walls and deliberately got myself into trouble, some of which ended with me tied to a post and whipped near to death. I was—very defiant, but I didn't start out that way." He glances over at Teddy, then. "No one starts out that way."

"Maybe this is just who I am," Teddy retorts, like a brat.

Remus snorts. "Actions aren't who we are. Actions are what we do. We all do things for a reason. Even me, even you."

"And why did you?" Teddy asks, eyes narrowing.

"Because I—and my family—had to deal with harassment from people in power, an imbalance we couldn't fix, and a trap we couldn't get out of. We were…bullied, essentially,"

Remus explains. "And then my mum died. And then my dad and I could never really see eye-to-eye on…anything."

Teddy is silent again, lips tipped down.

"So," Remus continues, "what's going on with you? Bullies? Your dead parents? You just don't like me and Sirius?"

"Did Dorcas tell you who my parents were?" Teddy mumbles.

"No," Remus admits.

Teddy sits up, jaw clenched. "They were on the board. Riddle killed them on live broadcast, pretending they were—"

"Me," Remus whispers, eyes sinking shut. "My friends, too."

"I saw it," Teddy tells him bluntly, and Remus' eyes snap open. Teddy is glaring at him. "I watched it happen. I mean, I was just a baby, really, but I remember it."

"Teddy—"

"And no one cares. *No one* cares, because they were the bad people, right? It doesn't matter that they weren't bad to me, because they were bad to everyone else, so now no one even cares that they're dead. When people talk about the losses during the war, it's *never* them."

Remus swallows. "That's—"

"And," Teddy interrupts in a rush, like it's spilling out of him, all at once, "when people find out who my parents were, no one cares about me either. I'm just a *Hallow."* He spits the word out like it's poison. "The worst kind of Hallow, too, one born to people that everyone else felt relieved to hear that it was them that died instead. They find out, and then they blame me—they blame me for what they did, and they blame me for loving them, and maybe they're right, maybe I shouldn't miss my parents, maybe I'm wrong for wishing there was never a war, or wishing that the people Riddle shot was the people he meant to. I *know* I'm a bad person, okay? Everyone thinks it. They say it. I know, but I—I—"

Teddy can't keep going, his voice thick with more emotion than Remus has ever heard in it, tears in his eyes. It strikes Remus then why Teddy seemed to want to be hit; a form of punishment from trickle-down guilt and, presumably, relentless bullying from his peers. He feels as if he deserves it.

There were times when Remus was strapped to the whipping post, suffering lashes across his back, that he thought he deserved it. When people tell you often enough that you're a bad person, some part of you can't help but believe it.

It's here, right here, that Remus finds the care that he lacked before, during, and after the war for those on the opposing side that died, and even those he helped kill. He feels it now, an odd sense of peaceful remorse for all that happened, and how it has affected everyone.

"You're not a bad person," Remus rasps, and Teddy scoffs, curled up in on himself. "No, Teddy, you're not a bad person."

"I wish they were alive," Teddy informs him defiantly. "I know the world's better now, but I wish it'd go back to the way it was, just to have them back. You don't know what that's like."

"Yes, I do. My mum died long before the war ever came along, and some days, I still want to go back to when she was here," Remus tells him gently. "Teddy, I'm not going to tell you that your parents were good people, and I'm not going to argue when you say they were good parents. I care, okay? Sirius and I care—we'll care, if you give us the chance to. Because, the truth is, we haven't always been good people either, but we could—we really could be good to you. We want to be."

"Why?" Teddy asks, and his voice cracks. "Even though you know? No one wants me when they know."

"We do," Remus whispers. "I do."

"I think it was my dad who was shot when Riddle said it was you," Teddy announces, then promptly bursts into tears, and Remus is pretty sure his heart rips right in half.

"I'm sorry it wasn't," Remus croaks, because for this kid, he is sorry—and he meant to come in here and put his foot down, but here he is, listening to a horror story he lived from the other side of it, wishing for no horror story to haunt any of them at all. Especially not this kid. He's just a kid.

Teddy is still crying, very hard and all at once, which leaves Remus feeling rather useless. He doesn't know what to do, and without thinking, he reaches out to touch his arm. Only once he makes contact does he think it's a terrible idea, but Teddy surprises him by leaning into the touch, still weeping, and pressing in further until he's practically crawling across the bed to fold into Remus' side, hide there, and sob.

Remus holds him.

Teddy lasts four weeks, and he's quieter, spending most of his time with Stella. He doesn't kick up a fuss in class, but he doesn't really participate either. He doesn't insult anyone anymore, but he's not very kind either. He doesn't slam doors these days, but he's not leaving his room very much either.

Remus is the first person he latches onto, after their conversation, which honestly shocks the hell out of Remus, considering what he learned. But maybe it's because Remus lets him say what he thinks, and feels, without judging him for it. Maybe it's because Teddy is angry, and Remus tells him it's okay to be, and tries to help him feel better past that anger.

Teddy is bullied at school, because he's loud and defiant about who his parents were, and when Sirius finds out, he…goes to the school. Remus has no idea what happens, *no fucking clue,* because he's teaching his own class of kids younger than Teddy, but everyone that so

much as tossed Teddy a dirty look offers him the sincerest of apologies and seem keen to be his friend. Teddy is gobsmacked by this and gazes at Sirius like he's his fucking hero, just because he made his life a bit easier.

Teddy lasts five weeks, and he goes on walks with Remus, bouncing around excitedly as he tells him all about school. He runs around in the yard with Sirius and Stella, shrieking with laughter when Sirius will pick him up and take off running with him as Stella gives chase. He whispers to Remus about his parents, and listens when Remus whispers back about his own. He builds model ships with Sirius, and gets excited when Sirius teaches him things in the forge. He sits outside on the steps from the back porch, just relaxing under the stars while Remus and Sirius swing from behind him, utterly calm.

Six weeks, and then Dorcas finds him a family that might want to adopt him. Six weeks, and it's time to say goodbye.

Teddy, unpredictability, does not want to go.

Well.

"Shit," Sirius says, staring after Teddy, who has run off after flatout stating that they couldn't make him leave to go meet a family that might want him, not when he has a family here. He intends to stay forever, apparently.

It's not the first time a child they've taken in has been wary to leave, but every kid they've taken in has known that they *would* go, so despite trepidation and tears and swearing they'd miss them, they did say goodbye. Teddy is the first who outright refuses to, because he has everything he wants right here.

Dorcas clears her throat. "I…didn't see that coming, I won't lie."

"Believe me," Remus mutters, "we didn't either."

"It was touch-and-go there for a bit," Sirius murmurs, then heaves a sigh. "Right, well, that's that, then."

"What's what?" Dorcas asks, blinking.

Remus stares at her. "He's staying."

"He…can't," Dorcas says slowly. "That's not how the process works, Remus. You're only fostering him."

"Yeah, uh, Dorcas, I love you—I do, I really do, but you're not taking our kid," Sirius tells her. Remus feels his stomach flip over, his heart swelling in his chest. He wants to kiss Sirius so badly right now, but it has to wait. This first, kiss later.

"We have you recorded as a foster family," Dorcas explains carefully. "That means you, ah, have to give the kid back."

"We won't be doing that," Remus informs her.

"You can't just—not do that," Dorcas says gently.

Sirius straightens up, holding her gaze. "I just want to reiterate that I love you before I make it very clear that anyone who tries to take Teddy away from us won't make it very far, and that includes you."

"Sirius, this is technically kidnapping."

"Not if he's our kid."

Dorcas stares at them, and then her lips curl up. "Well, that's true. No one else can adopt him if he's already adopted. Is that what you want to do?"

Remus and Sirius exchange a look, eyes locked for a long moment, and then Remus faces her and says, "Yeah, that's what we want to do."

And so, that's exactly what they do.

~•~

Sirius plops down in a lawn chair with a gusty sigh, mindlessly reaching out to stroke his hand over Stella's head. She's most definitely enjoying the day, tongue hanging out of her mouth, canine grin firmly in place. Her tail wags every time one of the kids dart past her, and when it's Teddy, she gets up and does a little dance on her paws where she's almost trembling, like all she wants to do is go run around after him.

"You can go play, you know," Sirius tells her, amused. Stella tips her head and nearly smacks herself in the eye with her tongue from the angle, then just pants at him. "Honestly, I'm *fine*. You fret more than Remus does, and he's my husband."

Stella does not budge.

"You're so fucking smart, you know that?" Sirius mutters, dipping in to smack a kiss to the top of her head, pulling on her ear, gently and affectionately. "I know that, historically, this is a shit day for me, and it's one I usually need you on, but I'm really okay this time. Go on. Go, Stella, where's Teddy? Go find Teddy! Go get Teddy!"

This, Stella knows well. They've made it into a game at the house, one where Sirius and Remus can pitch their voices up and tell Stella to go find Teddy, and she'll do just that. It's a good way to play a lazy game of hide and seek; Teddy's a bit old for it, but he loves that shit. Stella does, too.

Despite her earlier reluctance, Stella has the attention span of a gnat, so she falls for it. Gets really excited and takes off the moment he holds his hand out and snaps his fingers, telling her to go. Moments later, Teddy is shrieking with laughter, along with the other children. Sapphirina as well, which is uplifting to hear; she's been with them a couple of months, and Dorcas has found her a family that's ready to adopt her, but she's rather sad about going, after spending so much time here with not only Sirius and Remus, but also Teddy.

It's hard for Teddy as well, in a way. He's old enough to get the whole process, and the point, but kids usually want things to be simple. He does, that's for sure. If he's treating the other kids who live with them like his siblings, then he's upset to see them go, simple as that. But, in the same breath, he knows it's a good thing for these kids to be adopted, just like it was good for him. He plans to stay in touch with Sapphirina, though, and likely most of his foster siblings—but that's good, Sirius thinks. Nothing wrong with having a lot of love in your life.

"Was Stella coddling you?" Remus asks, murmuring in his ear and laughing when Sirius jolts, startled.

"Yeah, trying to. Where have you been?" Sirius asks, swiveling his head to raise his eyebrows. Remus' eyes are drooping. He gives Sirius a lazy, lopsided grin. "Nevermind, I know exactly where you've been. Is Lily high, too?"

"As a kite," Remus confirms, grinning harder. "She's eating Harry's snacks. Mary's gonna yell at her, and I told her that, but she said it's okay because they'll kiss about it, probably."

"You two…" Sirius feels his lips twitch, and he shakes his head fondly, so helplessly adoring of them both.

Remus shrugs. "It's tradition, sweetheart."

"Better this tradition than the other one," Sirius says, wrinkling his nose and tipping his head back against the chair while Remus looks down at him, frowning now.

Sirius doesn't have to elaborate on what he's talking about. It's hard to miss, seeing as they do this every year, almost like a new tradition, just in different districts. Last year, they did it in

nine on Emmeline's farm, and Teddy wanted to go push over the cows before Remus firmly vetoed all cow-tipping related activities, which made Teddy sulk for a bit, until he found out that Emmeline would teach him how to 'milk a moo-moo', as she called it. He went into it morbidly fascinated and returned mildly scarred. Ah, adolescence. How fun.

In any case, the point is, every year on what used to be reaping day, there's something of a get-together in which everyone—or most of everyone, at least—comes together for a day. Most of the time, it's so cold that they keep it indoors, a potluck and funny stories around a table, children laughing as they run through the house, and babies being passed around until they've all been held by everyone.

Today is a rare day, during winter. Warm for some reason. No snow, and only the faintest nip in the air that keeps everyone in at least one jacket. So, naturally, they're all embracing it by spending the day outside, easy finger-foods to pick over splayed on a fold-out table on the porch and plenty of wide space for the kids to run around in. Sirius and Remus' house is the best place for outside parties, no contest.

This day is generally—and historically, as previously established—not a great one for Sirius. Just the anniversary of it would be enough, but it has to do with memories, too. Some he will never be able to get rid of, and some he'll never be able to get back. It has to do with the fact that some part of his brain that's still stuck in mentor mode, and maybe always will be, sometimes looks at these kids—his own kid—and wonders how he's going to help them survive the arena. He can't always turn it off, even with the arena long gone.

So, yeah, it's a rough day for him. It's a rough day for quite a few people, in fact. A lot of them are here, of those that could make it. Something about the day ensures that they make it in, everyone from the Hallow to all the districts. People who have fought in a war together, all meeting up on a day to remember at least part of what they fought for. It's reaping day, and that means nothing anymore. No dread. No names called. It's just a day that they use to celebrate, instead.

"Well, some traditions we get rid of, and some we keep, and some we create," Remus muses, giving a lazy shrug. "I mean, I know none of us can forget what it was before, but… Sirius, look around. I mean it, look around."

Sirius does, because he does whatever Remus tells him to. He lifts his head and peers around. Finds the kids running with Stella. Finds the various other groups littered all over, some

sticking out to him as they always do. Lily and Mary off to the side, kissing like Lily suspected they would. Dorcas chatting with Emmeline with big gestures, eyes lit up with excitement, grinning every time Emmeline laughs at her. Cordelia and Riker not standing too far away, talking with Minerva and Poppy. Effie and Lyall on the porch, both of them playing cards, Styx dozing with his head in Lyall's lap. Narcissa smoothing a hand down Draco's hair while Tonks waits for her to get it neat and orderly before darting in to mess it up again, then they roar with laughter when Narcissa yelps and dives forward to try and fix it once more. Alecto standing in a group talking to Pandora, Rodolphus, and Xenophilius. Andromeda sitting off to the side with Asher, both of them reading a book and seeming to enjoy the weather. Alice helping Stella chase the kids around. James and Regulus loitering along the fence, plucking at honeysuckle and leaning in to whisper in each other's ears, still carrying on like the novelty of being in love hasn't faded in the least.

There's more, of course, some that Sirius isn't particularly close with. There are some who didn't come, and never do, and likely never will—Kingsley and Aberforth, as examples, but they have their own lives to live and their own happiness to chase; they're not going to find it here, and so they don't show up. No one begrudges them that. No one here, now, wants anything other than peace. They're here to find it, for today.

"We can't forget what came before, but look at what we've got now," Remus says softly. "This, right here, is something."

Sirius exhales gently, quietly, and raises his hands to cup Remus' face from upside down, tugging on him to get him to bend over the back of his chair and kiss him. They linger there like that for some time, admittedly getting lost in it, as they can't help but do. Sirius can't help it; he curls his fingers in Remus' hair and never, ever wants him to leave.

Eventually, though, naturally, they break apart, and Sirius hums, pleased. "Something can be everything. You taught me that, Remus, and this can be, too."

Remus smiles against his cheek, forehead to his temple, staying right here with him. He nods as laughter and warmth drifts all around them, and he says, "Everything, then."

Anything can be everything, if only one lets it.

They decide, and so it is.

~•~

Life goes on, as it tends to do, and here are the snapshots. The homes, and little families, and bright spots of laughter. The moments that vary between the peak of joy and the hot-flash of pain, the gentle ease of peace and the low ache of grief, all of it intertwined in the cost and gain of having a life at all.

There are, of course, the things that aren't shown, all of which draws the curious in and leaves the hopeful to believe it's even better than anyone can ever accurately describe. In reality, it's that and so much more. The hard days, the boring ones, and the best. Tears and fears, embraces and embracing hope, a lost person to miss and a new person to love. Friends, family, and lovers living their tangled little web of lives in a world that will never be a utopia, but will be filled with those always hoping and trying to make it one.

Death isn't out of reach, nor is fear. The lack of hunger games can't erase the worst parts of the world; there is still violence, trauma, loss, and those who would see the world untouched by the warmth of humanity—and maybe there always will be. Maybe there is no right answer to fix all the wrongs, and make everything right; maybe there are only the opportunities taken to try, try, try making things better.

And so, life goes on, and here are the glimpses. So much not shown, so much to fill in, but that's the thing, isn't it? Every single snapshot of life becomes a memory, just as these will, too. What's easiest to remember? What changes the most?

The people lost, or the people found? The agony, or the joy? The fear, or the hope? The ending, or the beginning?

The question is, does it really matter?

No, not really, because throughout all of it, every bit known and unknown alike, at the heart of it is love.

Chapter End Notes

i cannot believe we're so close to the end. it's absolutely mind-blowing to me, like i genuinely wasn't sure we'd ever make it here 😭

we start off with a bang of sirius and remus having their own little home <3 gahhhhh i love this for them. like, they never thought they'd get there, and then they did :(they mean so much to me.

and the wolfstar proposal! yes, sirius proposed to remus with a spoon. this is the same man who accidentally told lyall he was fucking his son. the same man who slipped up and told remus he loved him by explaining how he told someone else first. like, sirius is and has always been and always will be a mess about remus lupin. i do think, like, they're very much to be the type of couple who would SWEAR that grand gestures (such as public proposals) are something they think is weird/stupid, and then turn right around and LOVE it if the other is doing it. anyway, they love each other very much, and sirius melted down the spoon to make their wedding rings <3

the alice and james reconciliation! it shows a different sort of healing following the war —mainly to do with anger and unfair blame etc etc. i thought it was very important for it to be this thing of james not waiting for alice's approval and/or forgiveness to live his life and be happy, because i do think that in similar situations there are a lot of times when approval/forgiveness isn't granted, despite rationality, like kingsley with lily for instance. and this kind of comes from, like, people with grief/fury etc directed at doctors/firefighters who couldn't save someone, and like, those in that field have to just. carry on. keep going. so i was really interested in capturing that, and kind of giving it this wholesome spin, where like. yeah, okay, if james is the villain in alice's story, it's not impossible for there to be redemption for either of them. so, that was really fun to explore.

wolfstar wedding!!! so brief, but so poignant. sirius didn't miss any of it 😭😭😭 IM GONNA SOB

the sudden influx of Children. it's a special thing in a story like this—the source material as well—because this is a world that's never been good for children, plain and simple, and so now you've got this clear juxtaposition between what it was and what it now is. like, it's safe now. that's the thick of it, the world is safe now, and it's going to be in these children's hands, and the people who knew what it was like when it wasn't safe are raising them, and loving them etc etc. and it's not for everyone, but for those that want to, it's possible, and not only that, but it's OKAY. like, they're all in a place where this is okay, after all this time.

i will say that i got unreasonably (and predictably) attached to malcolm and marcel 😭 LISTEN. BROTHERS FUCK ME UP OKAY. i love them so much, actually, and i find it fucking hilarious that regulus is still just updating james on shit about their life lmaooo. james comes home and regulus is like: hi, honey, meet your kids! 😭

harry my beloved <3 harry is actually one of my favorite characters (literally right after sirius lmaooo), so i take almost every available opportunity to include him as a baby in fics, just getting to have a loving family/home. im genuinely never fussed who he ends up with as long as he's gonna have a happy life, and he definitely is in this one!!!! but also, remus fainting 😭 he's so real for that.

james and regulus decided to have four kids, and then said goodbye to all privacy and moments of peace. idk what they were expecting, honestly 😭 however, they're very happy, so more power to them, i guess. regulus saying their kids came from hell HE'S SO FUNNY TO ME PLS

teddy!!! him being absolute HELL to put up with, and remus and sirius adopting him anyway 😭 YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT THEM AS A FAMILY MEANS TO ME!!!! god i absolutely adore them so, so much!!!

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

-pandora doing life with rodolphus and xenophilius and having a talk show!!!!
-sirius literally crawling to remus 😭
-stella being a star (lol) in every scene she was in
-effie and lyall always playing cards lmaooo
-regulus and narcissa's lovingly antagonistic relationship
-dorcas "please don't kidnap children, please just adopt them" meadowes 😭
-sirius going to teddy's school and making all of his bullies be nice to him
-teddy flatout just being like "nah im good" when he's supposed to leave 😭
-regulus seeing two kids who are brothers and being like Oh No I Must Adopt Them
-remus and lily getting high on reaping day as a tradition!!!!
-most of everyone coming together on a rough day to find some shared peace <3

so!!! the last chapter will be posted on valentine's day, dedicated obviously to jude, who the fic actually is gifted to in the first place. but still, i love them, and so that's how it's going to go.

Fortune

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone! here it is, the final chapter....

warnings:

-references to past death/child death
-mentions of blood

yeah, that's it, pretty much. enjoy 🥰

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius gets the idea—from the way Remus has him pressed against the wall—that Remus likes the dress. This is because he's a man who has *taste,* and he'd be an idiot if he *didn't* like the dress, and Remus Lupin is no idiot.

There's a clatter, both of them crashing sideways into the stand, a few picture frames rattling and falling to the floor, along with an empty cup and a set of keys to the forge. It doesn't matter, can't matter, because Sirius is sure he's on fire and five seconds away from crawling right out of his skin. His hands eat up any stretch of skin Remus' body grants him, wanting to touch him everywhere, wanting everything.

"Why—" Remus groans into the bend of his neck, fingers bunching up the fabric of Sirius' skirt down by his hip. The dress stops modestly a bit above mid-thigh, but Remus is dragging it up one inch at a time. "Why haven't I seen you in this one? Why haven't you worn it?"

"It's new," Sirius gasps out. "Got it just for you."

There's another resounding clatter, more things falling to the floor, and Remus kisses him like he wants to open him up and crawl inside. They move—they have to, as fucking up against the wall isn't quite as feasible the older you get, and also it's less enticing when you know your child could be on the other side of the wall. Teddy is a pretty traumatized boy as it is; no need to make it worse.

They do manage to finally, thankfully make it to bed where Sirius gets to delight in sprawling out and watching Remus fight with the complicated fabric of the dress. He clearly wants to rip it off, but Sirius will be *pissed,* and Remus knows it, so he shows commendable restraint by refraining.

"Can you—" Remus grunts as he folds the fabric around, then huffs and starts pushing it up mindlessly. "Sweetheart, if you're not going to help, I'm not taking it off."

"That's fine. That's okay, so okay, you should definitely fuck me while I'm in it," Sirius declares breathlessly, because he didn't know he wanted that until *just now,* but after all these years with Remus, he's unafraid to vocalize his desires. It still makes him blush, though, even now.

"I—yes, I would like—yes," Remus says, strained, "but I should tell you, I'll probably make a mess of your dress."

"I can clean up the dress later. I want this now," Sirius replies, reaching out to draw Remus down on him. "Besides, who doesn't love a good mess?"

Remus hums, low and gravelly in his chest, and then he folds down to kiss him, hands wrenching the dress up higher. Sirius makes a pleased noise and settles in to get exactly what he wants. Remus is so good at making sure he gets it; oh, Sirius loves him so much. So, so fucking much.

The dress thing—well, Sirius told him he looks killer in a dress, especially with heels and his makeup done. One day, he got around to proving it. Sirius thinks Remus glitched, or briefly malfunctioned, and it was probably the most heady, powerful feeling Sirius had ever experienced. He was pretty sure he could have killed god, just from the rush it gave him to hear Remus make that little whimpering noise like he couldn't help it, like it was involuntary. Needless to say, it emboldened Sirius quite a bit, and now when he wants the extra boost of confidence—particularly in bed—he invests in a dress.

Works out for him now, in any case, because it gets him precisely what he wanted, all while making him feel like he's on top of the world as he gets it.

"Oh, there was a zipper," Remus says later—much later—when he's lazily carding his fingers through Sirius' hair with one hand and touching him distractedly with the other. A touch just to touch, really. To hold him. To keep Sirius close. It's through this that he locates the zipper, of which he couldn't find before, but Sirius definitely isn't complaining.

"Yeah, there was."

"Sorry. I could have probably found that if I wasn't…"

"Too caught up in mauling me?"

"Precisely that, yes."

Sirius laughs and presses his face into Remus' bare shoulder, grinning helplessly against his skin. It bares his neck, a naked opening Remus doesn't need convincing to take. His mouth is lazy and hot as it roams over the curve of Sirius' throat, not trying to leave marks, but paying tribute to the ones already there. Sirius hums, eyes drifting shut, feeling warm and floaty and taken care of and loved and—

"That's yours," says Remus, head lifting as they both swivel to glance at their phones.

It is indeed Sirius' that's going off, so he swipes it up and answers it through a yawn, sort of just lethargic and cozy now. He and Remus should have a nap. "Hello?"

"Sirius," James greets, his voice tight, and immediately Sirius is wide awake, sitting up. "Listen, uh, I don't know it's quite made it over to you yet, but there's this huge fucking storm rolling in right now. Regulus hasn't made it back from the forge, and I'd go look for him, but Aster isn't feeling well—"

"Hey, it's fine, I've got it," Sirius replies quickly, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. James sounds stressed. "How's Aster doing? Should I send Remus over with soup?"

"Lily was here earlier, and she said they just have a fever and it'll break, eventually. Still, Aster hates being sick; they're so miserable right now, Sirius, and I can't do anything to make them feel better, and all the kids are asking if Regulus is going to be okay since he didn't take an umbrella, but I can't go check, and he's not answering his phone—"

"James. *Breathe."*

James does. They do it at the same time, in fact, then James exhales heavily. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. I'm pretty sure Regulus' phone is just dead; he always forgets to charge it at the forge. He is fine, no doubt, but I'll go find him."

"I don't mean to put you out if you're busy—"

"Nah, you have good timing, actually. You called *after* Remus and I had sex," Sirius tells him, hopping to his feet. "Also, Regulus is my brother, James. I'd *like* to go check on him."

"Thank you, I love you, what would I do without you?"

"Crash and burn?"

"No, that's what I'd do without *Remus."*

"Ha ha."

James snorts. "Text me when you find him, yeah?"

"Will do," Sirius says warmly.

"Want me to come?" Remus asks as he watches Sirius stroll around to get out of his dress and in something not…stained.

"No, it's okay," Sirius murmurs, stooping down over the bed to drop off a kiss. "I'll be back soon enough. Love you."

"Mm, love you, too, sweetheart," Remus replies, turning his head up for one more kiss, just one more.

Sirius gives him three.

Teddy is sprawled out on the sofa in the sitting room, headphones in his ears as he watches the screen of his phone, eyebrows furrowed. Sirius lazily ruffles his hair as he goes by, and Teddy swats distractedly at his hand before shifting up to pull an earbud out.

"Where are you going?"

"Storm's rolling in. Regulus got caught in it, so I'm going to go check on him."

Teddy frowns, slightly. "Is Uncle Regulus going to be alright? Do you want me to come with you?"

"He'll be fine, and thank you, but no," Sirius says, and Teddy nods before slumping back down and going right back to what he was watching. Sirius grabs the umbrella by the front door and heads out to go meet the storm halfway.

The rain is coming down hard, and Regulus is sure to be desperate to be out of it, wherever he is. It's not the biggest district, but there's a lot of space to cover. Realistically, it shouldn't be easy for Sirius to find Regulus, especially not in the middle of a really bad storm. The thing is, though, Sirius knows his brother, so he knows all the places he'd be.

"Stopped by the phoenix tree, huh?" Sirius murmurs as he closes the umbrella and leans it by the broken-open doorway.

"Yeah," Regulus mutters with a heavy sigh, sitting on the floor in the empty house he took shelter in, likely from the very first raindrop he felt, because he's mostly dry. Just alone, waiting out the rain. "Didn't expect a storm to roll in."

"Comes out of nowhere, sometimes," Sirius agrees, leaving the door hanging open as he moves across the room and backs up against the wall next to Regulus, sliding down and plopping on the floor with legs bent. He bumps Regulus' knee with his own, and Regulus bumps him back. *You okay? Yeah, I'm okay.*

For a while, they just watch the rain together in silence. Sirius sends off a text to James, then Remus, and then Teddy to let them all know he and Regulus are fine. After that, Sirius puts his phone down and glances around.

The house is eerily quiet, a bit decrepit and abandoned now, a perpetual sort of loneliness seeping through the walls and floors like a sad story that never got an ending.

Sirius is pretty sure that he's not really welcome here, seeing as he killed the man who lived here once, and the brother of that man would not appreciate his presence if he was here to be aware of it. But he's not here; he's a sad story without his ending, trying to embrace his happy before he makes it there. Right now, the only person here is Sirius' little brother, so welcome or not, this is where Sirius will be.

"Sometimes it scares me how easily we could have been them," Regulus announces quietly, glancing around the dust-covered mausoleum of tragedy like he's reading Sirius' mind. "We came so close to being them so many times, you know."

"I know," Sirius says softly, because after years of examining all they've ever been through, he really does.

"Thank you," Regulus murmurs.

Sirius blinks and looks over at him. "For what?"

"For volunteering for me," Regulus says, which is the last thing Sirius would have ever expected to hear. It ensnares him instantly, a sharp pang in his chest from aged sorrow that has long since passed, but will always exist at the epicenter of himself. A lump forms in Sirius' throat, and Regulus looks right at him. "Thank you for that, and for making sure we weren't them, even though you did."

"Come on, we did that together," Sirius croaks. "Me and you."

"So, thank me back," Regulus tells him.

"Ha, yeah, okay. Thanks," Sirius says with a weak huff of laughter, and Regulus' lips twitch before he looks away.

"You want to know something?"

"What?"

Regulus watches the rain come down, his lips still curled up as he murmurs, "I would have volunteered for you, too."

"You—" Sirius stares at him for a beat, then snakes his arm out around Regulus' neck to snatch him over and begin rubbing his knuckles forcefully over Regulus' head, ignoring him as he yelps and swats at him, struggling to squirm away, but Sirius doesn't let go. "You little shit!"

"Sirius, fucking stop it, you idiot!"

"All that shit you gave me, and you would have done the same thing!"

"Let me go!" Regulus snaps, smacking his hand up to Sirius' face to shove at it harshly.

Sirius leans his head away and doesn't stop until he's satisfied, finally letting go and immediately getting pinched ruthlessly on the arm in retaliation. There's a brief scuffle, full of nails and slaps and the occasional shove, and then they come to an unspoken and simultaneous truce. There's a shared huff, a swapped glare, and then two hidden smiles.

Grown men, now, and they always bring the little kid out in each other. Brother and brother, something that goes beyond age, beyond all the years that pass.

In silence, in peace, they go back to watching the rain. It doesn't let up, just keeps coming down too hard to even bother with considering the umbrella for use. They'll just have to wait out the storm together. Sirius could leave, but he won't, and Regulus seems to know it.

Sirius leans his head back against the wall and closes his eyes, his shoulder pressing into Regulus' as the storm comes down all around them, except for in here. Quietly, Sirius says, "Tell me a memory from before. Something real, before all of it."

"Anything?" Regulus asks.

"Something about us," Sirius mumbles. "A happy memory."

The rain continues to pour down, a muffled onslaught that drowns everything out, but Regulus' voice breaks through, soft as a storm passing. Sirius sits right there and listens to Regulus tell him of the day they went picking pecans. It's not a memory he knows, but he knows who's telling it.

His little brother.

Always his little brother.

~•~

James is very careful when navigating through the woods blanketed in snow, braced on his cane with each step. It's cold and crisp out there, a wash of slate grey, brown, and white. The only thing green in the forest during mid-winter is the glow from the jar tucked under his arm.

Florimel scolded him today, about the Horcrux Hornet. It's not out of concern for what it could do, because children born to those immune to the venom carry that same immunity, and for those that weren't immune—Hallows, primarily—it's free and accessible to get immunity, as well as a requirement for all children. There's not one person in this world that could ever come across a Horcrux Hornet and be killed by fearing them. These days, most don't even know they're something to be afraid of, anyway. But that's not what the scolding was about.

No, Florimel seemed to find it cruel that the poor thing was stuck in a jar and had been all these years. She looks nothing like Vanity, but James was reminded of her so vividly in that moment that it was almost like a message directly from her.

So, James plucked up the jar, and he finally found it in him to let it go. It would have probably been better to do in the summer, but he's not waiting for the snow to fade.

Besides, the walk is nice.

James doesn't go too far, not so far he can't find his way back, but the forest envelops him at all sides. He finds a tree clean of snow up on the bark above the roots, and he crouches down with a slight wince. His leg is always worse when it's cold.

"Alright, you," James mumbles, leaning on his cane with it tucked in between his side and shoulder, both hands busy with holding the jar out in front of him. He used to take the Horcrux Hornet out of the jar a lot, back when they all got home after war, just as a reminder that it couldn't hurt him anymore. Anything to feel safe from pain. He hasn't done that in years, so the Horcrux Hornet has remained in there. "I suppose letting you go is long overdue, isn't it? Sorry. I think I was holding onto you because of Vanity, and so I would feel less afraid, somehow. But I think you'll like it here better."

The Horcrux Hornet doesn't so much as flutter its wings, and James is struck with the realization that he's talking to a bug. After a beat, he snorts and shakes his head. From somewhere, wherever she is, Vanity is laughing with him.

James screws the lid off and dips his hand in gently, nudging his fingers under the Horcrux Hornet until it crawls into his palm. He lifts it out, watching as the sheer wings seem to shiver a little, like it's stretching. It doesn't fly towards him, or away, and it continues to glow.

Rocking forward, James deposits the Horcrux Hornet on the tree with care, and it settles there, easy. After a few moments, it crawls along the bark, wings shivering as it goes. James' gaze trails after it, and for a moment, he goes in and out of time to the first encounter he had with one of these.

"James, look!"

"What's that?"

"Horcrux Hornet. Hallow-made. They're so cool, James. They're basically indestructible, and their venom replenishes at an unnaturally rapid rate. I have to get it."

"I feel like you do not have to do that. An immortal bug sounds like bad news, Vanity."

"Oh, yeah, it's lethal. One sting causes excruciating pain, but death comes quickly. Less than a minute."

"Right. We're going."

"No, no, it's okay. I promise it's okay, James. Horcrux Hornets only respond to fear. They won't attack unless you're scared. So, you know, don't be scared, alright? They're harmless as long as you're not afraid, really."

James looks over, fully expecting Vanity to be right there, beaming at a bug, even after all these years. Right. All these years. James closes his eyes, exhales, then opens them and turns his head to look at the Horcrux Hornet again.

"You got a bad rep, didn't you?" James whispers, his face softening as it crawls around the curve of the tree.

That's the thing. Even James couldn't see past the symbol of fear they were made into to ever expect them to become a symbol of hope, but Vanity would have. Vanity did. All it took to survive them was not being afraid, but it's human to be, so it poses this fun little thought experiment. Does something that's entirely harmless without the presence of fear not represent hope? All humans are afraid, but what's more human than that, if not the hope to have nothing to fear?

Maybe a symbol is only what someone makes it. Some will never see a Horcrux Hornet and think of anything other than fear. Left up to James, he's going to go with hope.

The Horcrux Hornet scuttles around the other side of the tree, disappearing from view, and James exhales as he pushes to his feet. Slowly, James takes the arduous journey home.

It's a long trek, and James is admittedly lost in his own little world, so he's not really paying attention when heading to his porch. That's why a yelp tumbles out of his mouth as he reaches for the door and, instead, feels a cold clump of snow collide directly into the back of his head.

Immediately, from behind him, there's a roar of laughter James would know in his sleep, all belonging to his children. He swivels on the spot, swiping the snow out of his hair, and

Regulus stands there with a smug little smile as he wipes his snow-dusted gloves together, surrounded by their kids that, apparently, find this to be absolutely hilarious.

"You walked by like we weren't even here," Regulus calls out, eyebrows raised. "Don't ignore us."

James just stares at him for a long moment, his breath caught in his chest, knowing the same thing he's known since the day Regulus turned fifteen—that he's absolutely, unequivocally beautiful. Helplessly, James breaks out into a grin, and he makes his way back to them, because apparently it's the perfect day to build a snowman.

Well, James can't argue that one.

Florimel and Malcolm take excitement in getting to build the body. Marcel wants to do the head by himself, because for some reason, he wants it to be more triangular. Aster is the one that gathers the sticks for the arms and a tiny twig for the nose, and they want to give it a necklace made out of rocks, which James can't fault them for, as it turns out to be quite pretty. Regulus keeps them on their toes by throwing snowballs at everyone, flushed and happy when they run and shriek with laughter, begging James to stop him.

James does, by kissing him, and ignores all the groans and complaints of their children to keep doing it like he didn't get to the day he discovered he wanted to. Two days later, life fell apart. Two days from now, life will carry on.

"You know what it's missing, right?" James whispers in Regulus' ear when the admittedly eclectic snowman is planted and grown right in their front yard.

"James, I haven't taken that out in years," Regulus mutters.

"Don't make me go get it." James pokes his bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout. "My leg hurts."

"You big baby," Regulus says, laughing into his mouth, kissing him before he peels away to go into the house.

"Thank you, I love you!" James calls after him, gleeful, and before he slips inside, James catches Regulus' muffled response:

"Yes, I know, I love you, too."

When he comes back a few minutes later, the snowman gets a knitted hat with a frayed ball slumped on the top, flopped over to the side. The bell inside it still doesn't ring, but James listens to Regulus and their children laugh at the sight of it, and really, that's the same thing.

~•~

In the middle of a cold night in winter, Regulus curls up with James close behind him, hand tucked up under the hem of his shirt to rub gentle circles on his hip, nosing at his hair and dropping soft, mindless kisses on his throat. Touch for the sake of touch. Warm, warm, warm. Home.

Regulus closes his eyes and basks in it.

Seconds pass. A heartbeat. The world falls away and lifts him up on a tidal wave, submerging him until he's crashing into a river that runs crimson, yanked in all directions. A scream clogs his throat, trying to claw its way out as he falls, falls, falls deeper—and then he's snatched up and granted air. He gasps on it, feeling the breeze stir his hair and dry his skin, brushing across his cheeks like fingers wiping away tears.

The first thing Regulus sees are leaves. The scent of them fills his nose, along with bark, sweet like sap and green like life. He blinks and looks down first to see his feet dangling into empty air, nothing visible below, and then he looks up. He looks up because he always thinks to look up, and he's there.

Evan's there.

"Not tonight, lover boy," Evan says softly. "No nightmares tonight, okay? Too good of a day to have nightmares now."

"I—didn't mean to," Regulus murmurs, staring, studying Evan hard for some reason. He can't really work out why it feels so imperative to look at him, to take him in, to memorize him like he's something that could ever be forgotten.

"Feeling out of sorts with life?" Evan asks, propped up on the tree branch casually, one leg hanging down and the other bent in front of him. "No shame in it, if you are. You can tell me."

"It just feels like a surprise sometimes, how good my life is," Regulus whispers. "It's stupid."

"Knowing you? Probably," Evan agrees, then grins when Regulus glares at him. "Well, whatever it is, you'll figure it out. You always do."

"That's it?" Regulus asks. "No grand advice? No talk of the view? No stupid climbing metaphors to throw my way?"

Evan clicks his tongue. "Hey, fuck you, those climbing metaphors saved your life on *multiple* occasions."

"You *are* a climbing metaphor," Regulus grumbles.

"That works, actually. You'd be dead without me."

"Shut up."

"It's true, and you know it," Evan teases.

Regulus sighs and flaps a hand. "So, what, you've been watching, then? Is this your little afterlife?"

"I know everything you know, Regulus," Evan murmurs.

"Right." Regulus swallows thickly and squeezes his eyes shut, releasing a shuddering breath. "Because you're not some sort of guardian looking after me, are you? You're just a dream."

"Could I be both?" Evan asks.

"I suppose if I knew the answer to that," Regulus whispers as his eyes flutter open, "you wouldn't be asking."

Evan hums. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's how it works."

"So, through sheer force of will, I decided I didn't want to have nightmares tonight and conjured you to come save me," Regulus surmises, his heart panging in his chest.

"Well, I'm a good choice. I've saved you plenty, dead and alive," Evan points out.

"I'm just talking to myself, aren't I?" Regulus croaks, his eyes starting to prickle as he stares at the blots of green in the form of leaves obscuring the view in front of him. They're high up in the tree, higher than they've ever been, yet still right there in the thicket of branches, not quite at the top.

"I suppose if I knew the answer to that," Evan tells him gently, "you wouldn't be asking."

Regulus chokes out a harsh laugh, a brittle breath, and nods sharply. "Yeah." He sniffs. "Yeah, okay."

"Is it that bad, if that is what this is?" Evan asks. "If all I am is you, and no part of me is here, think about how long you've had hope for yourself. Think about how long you've believed in yourself. Think about how long you've been urging yourself to climb. Think about how far you've gotten, just as you."

"Maybe," Regulus rasps, "but I really wish it was you."

Evan sighs. "I'm dead, Regulus."

"I know, Evan," Regulus says, and his voice cracks. "I know."

"Everyone else, and you let them go," Evan whispers. "You learned to let them go, and learned to keep them even though you had. But not me."

"You—you're—" Regulus shakes his head, feeling his face twitch and twist, trying so hard not to cry. *You're the first person I learned to trust again,* he doesn't say. *You're the first person I really, truly lost; the first person I could never get back,* he doesn't say. What he says, instead, makes his voice crack. "You're my best friend."

And it's true. Even now, it's true, and Regulus knows it, so Evan does, too. "You were mine, too," Evan says, and then he tilts his head a bit. "After the arena, you dreamed of me because you couldn't let me go."

"I know."

"Why did you stop?"

"Because I knew I needed to," Regulus chokes out.

"And you knew you would, if you ever got to tell me you were sorry," Evan finishes quietly. "You couldn't let me go, not even to learn how to keep me."

Regulus fights against the surge of emotion in his chest, sniffling hard and reaching away from the branch to scrub roughly at his face. "Yeah, I know that, too."

"Regulus, you couldn't let go before," Evan whispers, "so why are you dreaming of me now?"

"Because—" Regulus gets stuck, interrupted by the harsh sound that rips out of his mouth, his face crumbling as the heat in his eyes finally erupts. He feels his chest expand, stuttering, and bites back a whine that burns in his throat. Evan waits, and Regulus nods, keeps nodding. Choking. Breathing. He tries again. "Because now I have to."

"It's about time, you know," Evan says, and Regulus releases a choked up laugh. "As much as I love climbing, I'm so fucking tired of being stuck in this tree. Let me go climb a new one."

"Okay." Regulus exhales shakily, swiping at his face again, taking a deep breath in, and slowly letting it out. "Okay, yeah, but—you were right. Or I was. *We* were right, it is worth it."

"Climbing?"

"No, I still hate that. I can do it, but I'd rather not. I can do both, but if it was left up to me, I'd prefer to grow."

"Well, they both work. Either way, you're going somewhere."

"The view," Regulus says. "That's what's worth it. The view is worth all of it."

Evan smiles at him, eyes sparkling. "I know."

Regulus looks at him some more, just to do it, and he's hazy around the edges, not quite the clearest picture. With every blink, his features are slightly different, because Regulus can't remember them well enough to get them right. It's like he's fading, or like he's the smudge between life and death, the collapse of night and the break of dawn. He's a view all on his own, and every second with him was worth it.

This moment, this dream, teaches Regulus a lot of things. The tender sort of things about why life is so important, and how special it is to know people before they're gone, and how growing isn't something that stops. It makes him realize how long something in him has been fighting and clawing to simply *live,* to have hope, to embrace a happiness he dared to think was out of reach. All those dreams—it was just him finding a way to make himself keep going, using the shape of his best friend to do it; he's been believing in himself for a long, long time.

There's something miraculous about that.

"It's not sorry, is it? What I need to say." Regulus waits, and Evan shakes his head, still smiling. Regulus blows out a deep breath, then says what he needs to. "Thank you."

Thank you for being you. Thank you for being me.

Thank you for teaching me to trust again.

Thank you for believing in me.

Thank you for the view.

The view is something to reach, but it's not singular. It's just one view among many. So many trees to climb, so many views to see. A best friend to meet, a best friend to never really have,

a best friend to lose, and a best friend to keep. A brother, a husband, children, friends, and home.

"There are a lot more views waiting for you, so go see them. You don't need me to climb," Evan murmurs. "You never did."

"I know," Regulus whispers.

"Yeah, lover boy," Evan whispers back, "I know you do."

Evan's lips curl up, and he swings his other leg down over the side of the branch. It dips under them, shaking, and neither of them are afraid. It won't break. It already did, long ago, and this is just a dream. Evan tilts his head back with a grin, breathing in deep, then laughs. He doesn't flinch when the spear drives through him, and Regulus doesn't either.

Easy as that, Evan tips himself back and lets himself fall, and Regulus doesn't try to catch him. Regulus watches and never, ever sees him hit the ground.

When there's nothing else to see, Regulus shifts to get his feet under him on the branch, and then he begins to climb.

It takes forever to reach the top. It takes only seconds to reach the top. The highest branch bursts through the leaves, and Regulus balances on it, arms held out as he puts one foot in front of the other. He sways from side-to-side in the wind, feeling the familiar swoop in his stomach that comes from the fear of falling, but he doesn't stop. He follows that branch as high as it'll go, climbing to the peak, and then he's there.

What a fucking view. What a beautiful, harrowing view. He sees it and cannot fathom what he's seeing, only how it makes him feel, and it makes him feel everything. He would move mountains to see this. He would climb the tallest trees to see this. James' smile stretches along the horizon, Sirius winks from the stars, and beyond that, there's more. So much more. Somewhere in there, in the rain, Regulus is laughing.

Regulus takes in the view until he's full of it, until it's all in him, until he has seen all there is to see of it and seeks to see more elsewhere. Then, with that, he closes his eyes, lets himself tip, and sinks into the freefall.

Before he ever hits the ground, Regulus opens his eyes to a new day and the feeling of the sun on his face. It's a good life to wake up to, and the first thought Regulus has when it greets him is how fortunate it is that he gets to live it.

Chapter End Notes

im so??? like, i can't believe it's actually over. jesus, okay, let me talk about this last chapter a bit.

wolfstar>>>

james and sirius best friend goals!!! also not james joking about his trauma HELP HE'S COME SO FAR

sirius and regulus 😭 the return of the pecan story, which was so long ago many of you might not remember, but the important bit about it was that regulus ended up thinking that happy memory was ruined by the hallow, but he clearly considers it a happy memory again, IM GONNA CRY.

the fact that regulus has reached a place where he can actually THANK sirius for volunteering for him—like hello???? THAT'S WHAT WE CALL GROWTH.

speaking of growth! james finally releasing the horcrux hornet. and also regulus still hitting him in the back of his head with a snowball 😭 some things really never do change. i thought a lot about having the bell in the hat finally ring after years and years, like a little symbol of healing (kind of like i did in agbt), but i think, like, one of the big things in this story is finding reasons to love/hope/try, and if you can't find them, then you make them—and i just thought it was more fitting for the bell to remain never ringing, but james likens it to the laughter of those he loves anyway. something kind of innocent and sweet about that, honestly.

so ive said this before, but i have known the ending to this story for a long time, and by that, i meant that i knew what it would be called, the order of the povs, and that it would end with regulus waking up thinking about how fortunate it is that he has.

evan.... yeah, god, that final dream with him was always going to happen. i think it's an examination of grief and how it manifests and how we respond to it and how we grow around it etc etc. like, evan really was The First Of Everything for regulus, as far as loss and pain—like, sure, he thought it was sirius and james, but evan was someone he lost that he had no chances of getting back, and that's different. and like, accepting that was

kind of like, accepting all that happened and that he survived it, and just making peace with it, honestly.

i think a big thing was the realization that evan was just a dream, because for those of you who have read agbt, the afterlife is kind of a thing, and evan and regulus hang out in a tree together. but like, they're both dead in that, so it's a whole different scenario. in this, regulus had no more interaction with evan after he died than james did with fleamont or alice did with frank or dorcas did with marlene etc etc. like, that's the brutality of death; absence and grief, and how we cope with it, or—in regulus' case—how we don't. so like, this dream is actually really healthy and good for him and an amazing show of growth etc etc, DESPITE the fact that it was kinda sad as hell 😭

but there is something uplifting about the fact that regulus has subconsciously believed in himself and had hope long before he ever realized it—which i think is a very human thing, and something we do in our lives rather often, where we think we're struggling and failing, and then years later we look back and realize how hard we were trying and how far we actually managed to get. it's beautiful, ya know?

all that's left to say is... god i don't even know, if im honest. this is a ridiculously long story, much closer to a million words than it should be, which reminds me that i should definitely be in therapy.

but, overall, ive actually ended up really proud of this story. there was a time when i really hated it and just couldn't wait for it to be over, but now that it is? idk, i really am proud of it, and i have a lot of my love for this story again. im really fucking grateful that i got to go on this journey and share it with all of you, most of which have been so kind and supportive and remind me WHY i love this story so much when others have started to make me hate it. at the end of the day, it was my silly little fanfic that grew into a huge labor of love, and im really fucking proud of that.

i want to thank you all for all the kind comments and support, all the people who have been here, enjoying this as much as i enjoyed writing. genuinely, the comments and interactions with all of you are so wonderful, and i can't thank you enough.

the person i have to thank the most, though, is jude (aka moonymoment). this fic is already gifted to jude, but im posting this final chapter on valentine's day just for them. jude has been here on this journey quite literally since the very beginning and been there every step of the way to put up with me and give me constant love and support and advice etc etc, so i sincerely doubt we'd be here without jude right now. i cannot even express how much love i have for them, and how much they mean to me, so here's an 860k+ fanfiction as a symbol of my affection <3

and yeah. guess that's it. see you in the next one :)

End Notes

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